

Catholics and Gender

A Historical Approach

Anthony FAVIER

The criticism of “gender theory” that is expressed in some Catholic circles is not just a travesty of gender studies: it detracts from the development of a feminist theology and current efforts at establishing a dialogue within the Catholic Church.

The Catholic reception of feminist studies and then, since the 1990s, of gender studies, could be the subject of a cultural history¹. This article questions the idea that Catholicism’s response to feminist studies, and to their offshoot in the form of gender studies, is exclusively negative. While the Catholic magisterium, whose positions are relayed by some intellectuals, tends overall to condemn both the concept of gender and its uses in the social sciences, and while its bishops, through episcopal conferences or apostolic nuncios to the UN and European authorities, fight against its applications in international law and its transcriptions into national law, there are also, at the grassroots level, some unique, original and often little-known experiences of dialogue and acceptance of the concept of gender. These illustrate the internal pluralism, the adaptability and the relative flexibility of contemporary Catholicism.

The Forgotten Landmark of Feminist Theology

Historically, there has been little contact between Christian women and feminists in France since the end of the 19th century, even if some encounters did take place and have been documented². From the 1890s, a magazine such as *La Femme contemporaine* [The Contemporary Woman] edited by Abbot Lagardère, was able to defend the right to vote as well as its loyalty to the Catholic magisterium³. Studies of the *Ligue Patriotique des Françaises* [The Frenchwomen’s Patriotic League] have however clearly shown how certain female Catholic activists rejected secular, republican universalism in the early 20th century. They favoured instead a political identity that refused neutrality, through strong involvement in the health and welfare sector⁴. Perhaps more originally, in the interwar period, a branch of the Alliance Jeanne d’Arc [the Joan of Arc Alliance] was set up in France, campaigning for the priesthood to be opened up to women. However, this type of experience was marginal. It only involved a limited number of avant-garde Catholic intellectuals, like Cécile de Corlieu, Cécile Brunschwig, or Pauline Archambault.

¹ It is in fact at present one of the most dynamic fields in the sociology and history of Catholicism, as is demonstrated by the large number of workshops and conferences on this specific issue that have been held recently or are currently

² C. BARD, *Les Filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes, 1914-1940*, Paris, Fayard, 1995.

³ F. ROCHEFORT, “La Revue La Femme contemporaine, quel féminisme catholique?”, in *Femmes, Genre et catholicisme*, Lyon, Chrétiens et Sociétés, 2012.

⁴ M. DELLA SUDDA, *Une activité politique féminine conservatrice avant le droit de suffrage en France et en Italie. Socio-histoire de la politisation des femmes catholiques au sein de la Ligue patriotique des Françaises (1902-1933) et de l’Unione fra le donne cattoliche*, history PhD thesis, Paris, EHESS, 2007.

Does this explain the relative withdrawal of Catholic women from post-war feminist movements? This may be a question of perspective. Female theoreticians who also criticised the idea that gender is a self-evident category determined by nature may have used the religious discourses of exegesis or theology as intellectual resources to justify and think about their emancipation. We can observe an intellectual dialogue between feminism and Catholicism as early as the 1960s, even though little is known about it. Few may now recall the 1967 book by Catholic Yvonne Pellé-Douël, *Être femme*, which hailed Simone de Beauvoir's work as "the first and perhaps the only work that deals frankly with women's issues and which, on many fundamental points, has opened up paths which we can no longer ignore". A Professor of philosophy and activist for academic cooperation in Cameroon, Yvonne Pellé-Douël, wanted Christian women to carry out Simone de Beauvoir's work "based on their existence as women committed to their faith in Christ"⁵.

Her philosophy was however connected to a very specific context, that of 1960s Catholicism, a period marked by the Vatican II Council (1962-1965), which hailed "the promotion of women". This opening up led to the reconfiguration of Catholic feminism, as symbolised in France and Belgium by the foundation of the Femmes et Hommes dans l'Église [Women and Men in the Church] association in 1969-1970. This provided an original, association-based and non-academic hub, around which women such as Marie-Thérèse van Lunen Chenu, Renée Dufour, Alice Gombault, Suzanne Tunc and Françoise Vandermeersch gravitated, their various publications embodying a genuine intellectual link between Christian heritage and certain aspects of second wave feminism. Several of the issues they investigated chimed with the concerns of feminist research as it developed over the following decades, namely their interest in the historic construction of male/female categories within Christianity and the church, as well as their nuanced criticism of essentialism, whether it imprisons women inside motherhood or other specific social stereotypes.

But the difficulties that this movement encountered were more of a structural than an intellectual nature. Unlike what happened in English-speaking countries, Catholic institutions prevented its legitimation, by refusing to award theology chairs to its authors in spite of their PhDs – a move which would have formalised their work within a visible strand of religious science. This Christian branch of second wave feminism, far from being merely anecdotal, has nevertheless endured to this day, and drives the "unité de recherche et de documentation Genre en Christianisme" ("Gender in Christianity Research and Documentation Unit") founded in 2003. "Genre en Christianisme" is housed in the Parisian Dominican Library of Saulchoir, houses a collection of almost 2,000 publications (including books, specialised journals and academic works) and organises conferences on gender studies in a religious context. This is one of the rare places where the term "gender" is used positively in the contemporary French Catholic world.

But while "Genre en Christianisme" continues to organise seminars, publications and conferences, it remains a very marginal organisation, while gender studies have progressively come into the crosshairs of the Catholic magisterium and certain intellectuals connected to it⁶. Catholic feminist circles are no longer influential enough on a global scale, since they have no institutional support to relay their ideas, and are too few and marginalised within their denominational group to enable a positive reading of gender and feminism to emerge. At the international level, and

⁵ Y. PELLÉ-DOUËL, *Être femme*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 16.

⁶ T. ANATRELLA, *Gender: la controverse*, Paris, Pierre Téqui, 2011.

particularly in the Holy See, a doctrine that is extremely critical of both contemporary feminism and its theoretical framework has emerged.

The Holy See's Campaign against the Concept of Gender

Indeed, a very different narrative has developed in Rome in the wake of the Vatican II Council. While John XXIII (1958-1963) broke with his predecessors' repeated condemnations of the feminist movement's will to emancipation, this period was an exception. For Paul VI (1963-1978) and his successors, John Paul II (1978-2005) and Benedict XVI (2005-2013), the acknowledgement of the "essential equality of man and woman from the point of view of their humanity"⁷ was only accepted insofar as it did not affect the monopoly of men on certain social roles (priesthood) or on conjugal and sexual morality⁸.

Admittedly, Paul VI did actually commit the Church to the struggle for women's emancipation, for example by proclaiming 1975 as the "Year of the Woman", in tune with the UN's position on the matter. However, this apparent political convergence quickly gave way to fault lines that have only grown deeper since then. The *Inter Insigniores* declaration (1976), which ruled out the possibility of changing the Catholic organisation of instituted ministries, clashed above all with a school of thought that had developed considerably since the Council through the development, mainly in the United States, of a feminist theology⁹.

Since then, the Roman magisterium has stuck to the same line of argument. Women do indeed have equal dignity to men. They are neither inferior nor impure, as clerics may have unfortunately and mistakenly taught in the past. It is right to fight against the discriminations experienced by women. And this fight may be led by Catholics. However, the Church does not have the right to change Christ's choice to be incarnated as a man, and to choose men as his apostles. Some social roles are induced by biology, as are sexual orientations. Any deviation from the "natural" heterosexual norm is the product of a disorder, whose origin is mysterious, and which should awaken compassion and mercy in Churches, but never be legitimised or acknowledged by States (*Persona Humana*, 1975).

John Paul II's papacy, which started in 1978, confirmed these positions through its prolific and ambitious discourse about women which, while making allowances for the issue of a just equality, criticised a "radical" form of feminism that pushed too far its requirements of equality, in particular where contraception and abortion were concerned. Due to their capacity to give life, women were viewed as possessing intrinsic qualities (care for others, listening, humility) that are requisite for the domestic life that should be their main concern. The diversity of functions was viewed as being grounded in nature, in particular within the ecclesial institution¹⁰.

⁷ Jean-Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Mulieris dignitatem*, 15 August 1988.

⁸ R. CARNAC, "L'Argument naturaliste dans le discours du Vatican sur la différence entre les sexes (Jean-Paul II — Benoît XVI)", in L. BERTINA, R. CARNAC, A. FAUCHES and M. GERVAIS, *Nature et religions*, Paris, CNRS, 2013.

⁹ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, 15 October 1976:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html (page accessed on 21 December 2013). See also: the commentary regarding the Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, *La Documentation catholique*, 1714, 1977, pp. 165-173.

¹⁰ Regarding the compromise, in the documents of the Magisterium, between a conversion to male-female equality and the upholding of a differentialist register, it is worth referring to C. BÉRAUD, "Quand les questions de genre travaillent le catholicisme", *Études*, 2/2011, tome 414, p. 211-221.

Unsurprisingly, when the term “gender” emerged in public debate within feminist movements, university departments and international organisations from the 1990s onwards, it failed to make it over the difficult hurdle of the magisterium. In 1995, the UN Conference on Women in Beijing agreed to acknowledge that the subordinate position imposed on women in many societies is the result of several interacting factors. It is not just a product of legal factors (such as access to civil rights), socio-economic factors (access to paid work), nor even of population policies (reproductive rights), but also of more cultural and symbolic aspects. To advance equality between women and men, it was now recommended that any public policy take into account gender relations (an approach known as “gender mainstreaming”), tackling cultural stereotypes and the social roles assigned to men and women.

In the final text of the conference, the observer from the Holy See worried about the development of “world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes”¹¹.

The spirit of that time played against gender. In the previous year, the Cairo UN Conference on population policy and development had outlined the concept of “reproductive rights” at the international level, in order to promote free access to contraception and abortion. The UN’s position cooled the Holy See’s desire to cooperate with international authorities. At the religious level, roughly at the same time, the Lambeth Conference - the Anglican Church’s instrument of communion - approved the ordination of women priests. This somewhat validated the interpretation of feminist theology, according to which Christ’s incarnation as a man was the outcome of a historical contingency in Jewish society at the time.

Going against the modern aspiration to define gender and sexual identities separately from biologically assigned sex, Rome has since then been tirelessly condemning gender studies through various channels. In 2003, the Pontifical Council for the Family published a *Lexicon of Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*¹². The book aims at explaining to Catholics the meaning of expressions that have become “problematic” in the modern age. The term “gender”, as put forward by the UN in its final report on the 1995 Conference, is seen as the smokescreen of a subversive ideology produced by radical American feminists. One article is devoted to “verbal engineering”. It claims that a minority of players are trying to impose their views within international authorities in order to promote social change through language. These “coded words” include “gender” of course, defined as “a substitute for the word sex” that is used by “many feminists”¹³. No less than three articles are in fact devoted to criticising this term¹⁴. Overall, the text rules out any possibility of a positive use of the concept of gender¹⁵. Gender is presented in the

¹¹ United Nations, *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women: Beijing, 4-15 September 1995*, New York: United Nations, in particular p. 159-162.

¹² Available in an English translation as *Pontifical Council for the Family Lexicon of Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*, Front Royal, Human Life International, 2006. Quotes in the present article are however taken from the French version: Conseil pontifical pour la Famille, *Lexique des termes ambigus et controversés sur la vie, la famille et les questions éthiques*, Paris, Pierre Téqui, 2005.

¹³ I. BARREIRO, “Ingénierie verbale”, Conseil pontifical pour la famille (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 647-655.

¹⁴ O. ALZAMORA REVOREDO, “‘Genre’ : danger et portée de cette idéologie”, J. BURGRAFF “‘Genre’”, and B. VOLLMER de COLES “‘Genre’ : nouvelles définitions”, in Conseil pontifical pour la famille (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 559-574, p. 575-583, and p. 585-594.

¹⁵ The first is a reprint of an article entitled “Dangers et portée de l’idéologie du genre” (“Dangers and Scope of the Ideology of Gender”). It was written by a Peruvian priest, Oscar Alzamora Revoredo, archbishop of Lima, who died in 1999. Revoredo actually bases most of his argument on the document “Gender: the deconstruction of Women”

dictionary on three levels, as a “concept”, an “ideology” and a “theory”, as the product of a radical feminist movement which Catholics must defend themselves against.

In France, gender was mentioned much later in official Catholic documents, almost ten years after the Beijing Conference. In 2005, during its plenary assembly, the Conference of Catholic Bishops presented gender as a “priority area”, and tasked a commission with drawing up a reference document. The work was coordinated by Jacques Arènes, a psychoanalyst. It led to the publication of a document entitled “La problématique du genre” (“The Issue of Gender”)¹⁶. While less virulent than the Roman declarations, this text nevertheless asserts that what it refers to as “gender theory” goes further than “gender studies”, and “constitutes the ideological body of work used by gay lobbies to defend the ideas they submit to legislative authorities, in particular so-called gay marriage”(p. 3).

After being appointed as Pope in 2005 under the name Benedict XVI, Josef Ratzinger made this condemnation more stringent. He explicitly referred to gender while presenting his Christmas wishes to the Curia in 2008. According to him, the criticism of “gender” was now part of a general criticism of modernity, which was engaged in a vain race towards a type of autonomy that had forgotten about nature: “What is often expressed and understood by the term ‘gender’ ultimately ends up being man’s attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator”. According to this much-publicised speech, the safeguard of creation and ecology must involve defending heterosexual marriage. If social norms tend to be nothing more than pure conventions that forget Creation, then nature is in danger. Benoît XVI renewed his condemnation in Christmas 2012. Commenting Simone de Beauvoir’s sentence: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, the pope saw in it the “foundation for what is put forward today under the term “gender” as a new philosophy of sexuality”¹⁷.

Catholic Experts vs. the Gender Conspiracy

In France, the expression “gender theory” entered public consciousness in 2011, at the time when a new Biology curriculum was introduced for *première* students.¹⁸ While the official bulletin of the French Ministry for Education did not explicitly mention the term “gender”, the “masculine-feminine” chapter has been interpreted by some French political and religious figures (like Christine Boutin and 80 MPs from the right-wing UMP party) as an introduction of “gender theory” into school curricula. Their activism is firmly in line with the intensive lobbying that has been carried out since 1995 by Catholic diplomats and Christian European MEPs against the spread of the term “gender” in international texts. As far as France is concerned, it is worth mentioning that in 2011,

produced by the American Catholic essayist and journalist Dale O’Leary, who was present in Beijing in 1995. This text, which circulated at the time of the conference, violently attacked the concept of gender, whose intellectual roots in contemporary feminism O’Leary wanted to analyse. The second article in the *Lexique des termes ambigus...* was produced by a German Catholic intellectual working at the University of Navarre in dogmatic and ecumenical theology, Jutta Burgraff. She discussed both the concept of gender and the “ideology of gender” or “feminist ideology of gender”, of which she reconstructed an intellectual genealogy, starting with Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, and ending with Judith Butler and her *Gender Trouble*, which is referred to as one of the “key works”. The third article, which retraces the history of the “concept” of gender, highlights the “mistake” of a branch of feminism that endangers “the human integrity of body and soul”.

¹⁶ J. ARÈNES, “La problématique du genre”, *Documents Épiscopales*, 12, 4, 2006.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI (21 December 2012), “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the Occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia”: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia_en.html (page viewed on 20 October 2014).

¹⁸ “Première” is the next-to-last year of secondary school, equivalent to lower sixth form in the UK or eleventh grade in the US.

the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted the Andreas Gross report on “Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity”. In the letter from UMP MPs to Minister for Education Luc Chatel, the concept of gender is mentioned as a “philosophical and sociological theory that is not scientific [and] that claims that sexual identity is a cultural construct”¹⁹. The expression then spread to circles beyond religious ones to become a rallying call for political movements opposed to legislation in favour of sexual minorities.

In reality, the expression “gender theory” has been developing since the 1990s in Catholic circles, at a remove from the stances adopted by nuncios before international authorities. Since the 1990s, Catholic intellectuals have in fact been interpreting the Roman condemnation of the concept of gender quite widely, highlighting specific aspects of it and putting forward theories for its intellectual and political genesis in order to condemn its development. The first of these Catholic thinkers is Belgian priest Michel Schooyans, who works in Rome for the Pontifical Council for the Family. In his book *The Hidden Face of the United Nations* (2001), he accuses the UN and its agencies of wanting to destroy the family by promoting “the ideology of gender”. Said ideology is viewed, based on Marx and Engels, as a tool for driving conflict between men and women. By viewing the roles that are assigned in traditional cultures as relative, the “ideology of gender” furthermore “denies that the genital differentiation of men and women has any relevance”²⁰, thus promoting abortion and homosexuality.

American academic Marguerite A. Peeters is another popular expert in gender studies. She popularised the notion of “gender theory” while Michel Schooyans was content with talking about a concept or ideology. Peeters, who originally trained as a journalist, closely followed the UN conferences on development and the rights of women in the 1990s. She has taught in several Catholic universities (Urbana in Rome, the Catholic University of Congo). Like Michel Schooyans, she fears the spread of an “ideology” that is just as deleterious as Marxism within international authorities. Since 2003, in order to draw attention to this development, she has been running a lobbying agency based in Brussels, called “Dialogue Dynamics on human identity and global governance”. Marguerite A. Peeters also runs numerous conferences and training courses, for example for African Catholic Bishops’ 2011 synod in Rome. In her presentations, gender is viewed as the last stage of Western liberal thinking. She does indeed talk about it as a “theory”. But this term refers to a school of thought taking on varied, shifting and composite shapes, and whose progress is more or less hidden. In her view, it has developed in two stages, with the philosophy of the Enlightenment in the 18th century and Existentialism in the 1950s – the second movement being an outcome of the ideological premises of the first. In this vision of “gender theory”, the anti-liberal and anti-revolutionary Catholic tradition is reborn. By defining the individual in political and secular terms, Enlightenment-based liberalism is viewed as having eliminated the Christian, and later on gendered, dimension of the human person:

The starting point of gender theory is a view of the political, equal citizen that is hostile to fatherhood, to motherhood, to filiality, in other words to the person [...] the lay view of citizen

¹⁹ “Orientation sexuelle : 80 députés UMP réclament le retrait de manuels scolaires”, *Libération*, 30 August 2011.

²⁰ Translated into English as M. SCHOOPYANS, *The Hidden Face of the United Nations*, St Louis: Central Bureau, 2001. The reference in this article is taken from the original French text: M. SCHOOPYANS, *La Face cachée de l'ONU*, Paris: Sarmant, Fayard, 2001, p. 203.

equality is asexual. [...] This secular construct has banished the person and love from culture and from the social contract.²¹

Tony Anatrella is a psychology graduate, a psychoanalyst and a member of the Salesian congregation. He has widely popularised the term “gender theory” in accordance with the views held by his colleagues in the Pontifical Council for the Family. He is the person most easily identifiable in the Francophone world due to his role as an official “consultor” within this body²². A French priest of Italian descent, his work mainly focused, during the 1970s and 1980s, on publishing books in France about education. In the 1990s, Tony Anatrella gained a media profile due to his “expert reports” on homosexuality, particularly in the Paris Diocese. At the time, public debate was centred on the issue of the PACS,²³ (1999). The priest intervened to defend the clergy’s opinion, meaning opposition to the draft bill. He was also vigorously opposed to the legal battle against homophobia. Indeed there was, at the heart of “gender theory”, what he referred to as the “homosexual lobby”. The psychoanalyst priest was opposed to the removal of homosexuality from the list of mental disorders within psychiatry societies and the WHO. He continued to expound these views after moving to Rome in the early 2000s, in particular through the French version of the Catholic press agency “Zenit”. His latest book, published in Italian, even explicitly connects homosexuality and “gender theory” in its title²⁴. According to Anatrella, gender studies are as deleterious as those that inspired the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century:

Marxism, through Communism and Socialism, promised us a new man with the depressive idea of “changing life” instead of accepting it. Nazism called upon a superior race. We know how much these false ideas were deadly in so many ways. And now the theory of gender wants to free us from the condition of our gendered body and of sexual difference.²⁵

In his view, “gender theory”, by spreading through international authorities, supposedly leads to legislative changes such as the fight against homophobia and the civil recognition of homosexual unions, which makes it the harbinger of a new totalitarianism. These Catholic gender experts are not recognised at all in the academic world, and particularly not in that of gender studies. They do not publish in academic journals and are often unknown to academics.

In France, this literature continues to develop today, and has even gained a new lease of life since the debates surrounding the new biology curricula in 2011, with the essays of psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Christian de Flavigny²⁶, politician Elizabeth Montfort²⁷, legal expert Aude

²¹ M. PEETERS, “La théorie du genre”, paper given at the symposium entitled “Une nouvelle identité sexuelle : libéraliser pour asservir”, organised by the Observatoire socio-politique du Diocèse de Toulon-Fréjus, 17-18 September 2011.

²² The Pontifical Council for the Family is made up of 20 married Catholic couples, but it is presided over by 18 cardinals and 7 archbishops or bishops. They are assisted in performing this task by 40 “consultors” and 15 “officials”. The Council also calls on the help of “advisors” whose role and number are not statutory.

²³ “Pacte civil de solidarité”: the French “civil solidarity pact” aimed at offering an alternative civil union to marriage for mixed and same sex couples alike.

²⁴ T. ANATRELLA, *La Teoria del « gender » e l’origine dell’omosessualità — una sfida culturale*, Turin: San Paolo Edizioni, 2012.

²⁵ T. ANATRELLA, [“La Théorie du genre et l’origine de l’homosexualité”, an interview with A. BOURDIN](#), 5 June 2012, on the Zenit press agency website.

²⁶ C. FLAVIGNY, *La Querelle du genre : faut-il enseigner le gender à l’école ?*, Paris, PUF, 2012.

²⁷ E. MONTFORT, *Le Genre démasqué : homme ou femme ? Le choix impossible*, Valence, Édition du Peuple libre, 2011.

Mirkovic²⁸, or philosophers Michel Boyancé and Thibaut Colin²⁹. The most virulent among these commentators still talk of “gender theory” in the singular (Mirkovic, Montfort).

Has the concept of gender acculturated to Catholicism?

In parallel to this condemnatory discourse, there are however also links between gender studies and the intellectual heritage of French Catholicism. This acculturation does exist, even if it is marginal. On this basis, it is possible to envisage the possibility of a dialogue, although it may not conceal some irreducible differences of opinion.

In fact, some traditionally more intellectual sectors of Catholicism seem to be worried about the speed with which some Church leaders have dismissed gender studies. This is a very recent concern. In the French-speaking world, it only appeared at the start of the present decade. The Jesuits’ humanities and social sciences journal, *Études*, has published several articles or columns that try to identify what aspects of gender studies could be integrated to Catholicism. In September 2011, in a post that was published on the journal’s website, Nathalie Sarthou-Lajus sounded the alarm:

While the more radical strands of gender studies deserve critical analysis when they go as far as to deny the biological component of sexual identity or its anchoring in a physical anatomy, or when they deny there being any difference between a man and a woman as expressed in the body, it would be absolutely harmful for the teaching of knowledge to demonise these theories of gender.³⁰

In this same journal, we can find an article from February 2011 by sociologist Céline Béraud that shows how “the issues surrounding gender are worrying Catholicism”³¹. The example of choir service being reserved or not to boys depending on the parish shows how the concept can throw an inside light on Catholicism.

This willingness to promote a dialogue on the issue can be seen in the initiative that led to the debate between sociologist Éric Fassin and Véronique Margron, a Dominican nun specialised in moral theology, held in May 2011 in Rouen Cathedral³². The project, entitled “Man, Woman, What Difference?” was launched by a Catholic association that wanted to rehabilitate the practice of medieval disputation. During the debate, the sociologist saw the intellectual passage “from gender to sex” as a “sign of the times”³³, while the moralist referred back to the Biblical foundations of the difference between the sexes. Another example of this desire for dialogue can be seen in the Confrontations association, the heir to the Centre Catholique des Intellectuels Français (CCIF – Catholic Centre for French Intellectuals). Confrontations tries to hold its position between its claim

²⁸ B. BOURGES, A. MIRKOVIC, MONTFORT, E., *De la Théorie du genre au mariage de même sexe : l’effet dominos, théorie du genre, mariage du même sexe, multiparenté, procréation médicalement assistée, gestation pour autrui*, Valence, Édition du Peuple Libre, 2013.

²⁹ M. BOYANCÉ et al., *L’Éducation à l’âge du « gender » : construire ou déconstruire l’homme*, Paris: Salvator, 2013.

³⁰ N. SARTHOU-LAIUS, “Ne diabolisons pas les théories du genre”, *Études*, 26 September 2011: http://www.revue-etudes.com/Societe/Ne_diabolisons_pas_les_theories_du_genre/45/14058 (page viewed on 24 September 2012)

³¹ C. BÉRAUD, “Quand les questions de genre travaillent le catholicisme”, *op. cit.*

³² E. FASSIN, V. MARGRON, *Homme, femme, quelle différence ?*, Paris, Salvator, 2011.

³³ John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963) defines certain secular social struggles as being “signs of the times” that are compatible with Christian Revelation and that can be driven by Catholics. Among them, the “promotion of women” is mentioned.

of loyalty to the Catholic institution and its desire to enter into a dialogue using the tools produced by contemporary gender studies. An initial conference entitled “Gender - Towards a Dispassionate Approach to the Debate” was held in Lille in September 2012, and a second one was held at the Catholic University of Lyon in January 2014 on the theme “Through the Prism of Gender: Body, Filiation, Christianity”.

The Catholic press also seized on the issue from 2011 onwards. In France, it resolutely played a driving role in the emergence of a more positive response to gender among Catholics. In March 2012, the weekly *Témoignage Chrétien* (no. 3483), which is traditionally perceived as “left-wing” within the Catholic publishing landscape, published a special report entitled “Man and Woman, They Were Created”, which adopted a sympathetic stance towards gender studies. In September 2013, *La Vie*, another liberal Catholic monthly magazine, in turn asked the following question: “The Confusion of Gender, Should We Be Worrying About Our Children?” (no. 3351). In the wake of the “Manif pour tous” (the demonstrations against homosexual marriage that took place in France from 2012), its tone is more measured than that of *Témoignage Chrétien*. The report seriously attempts to clear up misunderstandings and shortcuts. In its edition of 12 November 2013, daily newspaper *La Croix* devoted its front page to “Understanding the Issues Surrounding ‘Gender’”. Given this newspaper’s more “centrist” character in the French Catholic landscape, this article may be the most significant evidence of a shift currently taking place towards an intellectual understanding of gender studies.

Indeed, the concept of gender is less and less often rejected *en masse* by French Catholics who wish to preserve a connection to intellectual modernity. The aim here may be to avoid giving too many intellectual endorsements to the various political groups that emerged out of the opposition to gay marriage, and who use the term “gender” for controversial and partisan purposes. Of course, these Catholics do not completely withdraw their condemnation, especially when gender studies provide arguments for the political demands of the LGBT movement. According to this middle-ground, the expression of a “gender theory” can be rejected, even if many ambiguities remain in terms of the way things are formulated. *La Croix*, in its edition of 12 November 2013, thus stressed that “the idea that there is a supposed ‘theory of gender’ does not allow us to grasp the reach of the concept”. But the journalist immediately made a distinction between gender studies and “positions arising out of more or less radical ideologies”. And the article ended on “the upholders of the gender ideology”, who were presented, *en bloc*, as being favourable to assisted reproductive technology and to surrogacy. Was this an isolated evaluation? In the *Cahiers Croire* (an educational Catholic magazine) from July-August 2013, Jean-Pierre Rosa thus developed the thesis according to which “the Church has no specific point of view on gender studies in general” but rather defends “an anthropology”. He even allowed:

Some contributions of gender studies are very useful in terms of allowing men and women to become aware, together, of their respective prejudices [...] but we must admit that, outside of quite specialised academic circles, it is the more extremist theory – which has been, wrongly, called “gender theory” – that has mainly been put forward in France by the media. The

promoters of same-sex marriage have found, in this extreme theory, an ideological support or a form of confirmation.³⁴

In reality, since the summer of 2013, the group of French Catholic intellectuals who are eager to try and understand gender has been experiencing change. The first generation, which was defined by its intransigence (Tony Anatrella, Elizabeth Montfort), has been succeeded by intellectuals with better tools and more information, and who have left behind the outrageous comments of yesteryear. The French Catholic Church has thus been putting forward the Jesuit faculty of the Centre Sèvres, the cultural centre of the Collège des Bernardins in Paris, with figures such as the Jesuits Bruno Saintôt or Antoine Guggenheim. Their writings do, admittedly, sophisticate the condemnation, but they also concede that there are good questions to be asked about gender³⁵.

At any rate, this understanding operates on two levels, as valuable academic gender studies on the one hand, and reprehensible militant ideology on the other. As such, it marks the most significant development in the understanding of gender studies among the French-speaking Catholic world. Such reading is evident in the latest document produced by the French bishops' "Family Council" (February 2014):

[W]e must make a distinction between gender studies and so-called "gender theory", which is actually an ideology, the "gender ideology". Gender studies are academic ventures, often of a sociological nature. They examine the social roles of men and women, in particular from the perspective of inequalities and power relationships [...] These studies are common sense, as is the distinction between sex and gender. [...] But when we move from distinction to dissociation, we enter into the realm of ideology. While it is wrong to talk of gender theory, we can talk about ideology. The ideology of gender exists, the "theory" does not.³⁶

Ultimately, many questions remain open. After having popularised the expression "gender theory" by allowing Catholic figures to spread it, the Church, at least in France, now seems to be distancing itself from this position. Is this an attempt to gently start a transition? Will this possibly strategic reorientation allow the Church to move away from blindly condemning an academic field that is becoming increasingly established and recognised? Or do these texts reflect on the contrary a desire of the Catholic institution to regain hold of the issue on a more intellectual rather than controversial level? Up until now, only a few isolated contributions have attempted to import concepts taken from gender studies into the actual field of Christian theology and morality. This may be the most crucial field at present. This is where an acculturation of the concept of gender might take place, without it becoming yet another debate about the compatibility of gender with Christian anthropology, but rather with it involving the use of the concept in Scripture studies and the religious sciences.

³⁴ J.-P. ROSA, "La Question du genre", *Les Cahiers Croire*, 288, July-August 2013.

³⁵ A. GUGGENHEIM, "Et si l'on réfléchissait au genre", Paris Notre-Dame Diocesan Bulletin, 28 November 2013. B. SAINTÔT, "Que faut-il savoir sur la question du genre?", video available on the *La Croix* website: <http://www.la-croix.com/Ethique/Actualite/Que-faut-il-savoir-sur-la-question-du-genre-2013-11-13-1059947> (video viewed on 20 October 2014).

³⁶ Service national Famille et Société, "À propos de la « gender theory »: distinguer, dissocier ou conjuguer", Conférence des Évêques de France, February 2014.

Books&Ideas.net, 16 March 2015.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, on 25 March 2014. Translated by Kate McNaughton with the support of the Institut français.

© **books&ideas.net**