

# Call for Papers

## Educating a Catholic elite

Religious institutes, faith, and gender in Catholic secondary education  
in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century

International workshop of the European Forum on the History of Religious Institutes  
in the 19th and 20th Centuries (RELINS-Europe)

Study Centre Soeterbeeck, Ravenstein, the Netherlands, 5-7 February 2009

### 1. Introduction

Catholic religious orders and congregations have been instrumental in the process of re-confessionalization of European society in the 19th and 20th century. For many of them, founding schools and supplying teaching personnel to Catholic secondary schools – both day schools and boarding schools – was their core business. Although there is a respectable body of literature on the history of individual orders and congregations and their educational establishments, the majority of these publications lean heavily toward the institutional side of their development. So far, little attention has been paid to secondary schools and boarding schools as breeding places of confessional intellectual (lay) elites – founded, funded and led by female and male religious. Over the past decade, international scholarship on the history of Catholicism, confessional (sub)cultures and modernity has started to shift attention to the formation and function of elites. This workshop will therefore focus on the role of religious as secondary teachers and educators, and on the various ways in which their educational goals were received and appropriated by the pupils in their care.

### 2. Three perspectives

In the nineteenth century religious orders and congregations set to work in education on an unprecedented scale. Self-assured, they set about creating a Catholic intellectual elite, which they tried to imbue with their own religious beliefs, social views, and gender concepts. For many decades they were very successful in this field, both quantitatively and qualitatively, turning out a crop of well-educated Catholic men and women every year. Not until after the Second World War did they feel the need to change their educational strategy. The RELINS-workshop offers a forum to explore their endeavours from three perspectives:

- Strategies and problems of Catholic elite formation
- Faith and knowledge in Catholic secondary education
- Gender in Catholic secondary education

All proposals for contributions to the RELINS-workshop will be judged by their pertinence to one or several of these aspects.

The proposed perspectives are chosen to ensure that the research into the involvement of religious orders and congregations in Catholic secondary education will be raised above the level of factual description and become more problem-oriented and differentiated. Any approach – institutional, biographical, social, cultural, or political – will be favourably considered as long as the analysis relates to one or more of the proposed perspectives.

Moreover, since the involvement of sisters, brothers and regular priests in Catholic secondary education was a European phenomenon, the organizers of the workshop hope that the interchange of ideas and results between European researchers will raise the scope of their research beyond the level of exclusively national developments by elucidating similarities and differences between the Catholic communities in various European countries.

### *Perspective 1: Strategies of Catholic elite formation*

By investing money and personnel in all forms of secondary education, religious orders and congregations intended to make a substantial contribution towards the formation of an intellectual and cultural Catholic (lay) elite. This intention was most obvious in countries where Catholics had for a long time been a minority of second-class citizens, but even in countries where Catholics had always been a majority, the need for a militant, religiously sound elite was felt. Catholic leaders were needed to guide their co-religionists through a world which was perceived as increasingly immoral, unstable, and hostile toward the Church and the faith. In order to foster the creation of such an elite, religious orders and congregations tried to educate their pupils in isolation from 'the world'. This model of school organization mirrored the conventual life of the religious educators themselves. In the course of the twentieth century, changing social and cultural conditions made this organization a target of criticism. Parents and pupils started to question its isolationist nature, in word and action, whereas the religious teachers and educators themselves became increasingly aware of the drawbacks of their pedagogical approach. At the same time, their authority was slowly eroded by the increasing number of lay teachers, who had a very different outlook on life. More specific research is needed to shed light on what caused the gradual acknowledgement that pupils should be exposed to the social realities they would encounter later in life. The resulting change of strategy merits further research as it seems to reflect shifts in Catholicism itself, as well as in the position of the Catholic church in its various national contexts.

### *Perspective 2: Faith and knowledge*

By their educational efforts religious orders and congregations aimed at creating a milieu in which Catholic youth could be educated according to Catholic traditions. In everyday practice, however, it proved difficult to find a practical and proper way to shape the religious character of their educational institutions. Religious teachers had to find a compromise between Catholic faith on the one hand, and the intellectual, rationalistic training they provided to their pupils on the other hand. In other words: how did their religious beliefs relate to or interfere with current standards of knowledge? Such interrelation and interference became more acute as schools became eligible for state funding. In return for funding, the school staff had to meet state requirements in their annual curriculum. The more discerning among religious teachers became aware of a gap between 'knowledge' and 'faith' where, ideally, there should be harmony and integration. To what extent their own (academic) training prepared them for dealing with tensions between faith and knowledge, also merits further investigation on a biographical level. The boundaries between faith and knowledge touched upon the very core of traditional Catholic notions of intellectuality. They therefore need to be explored more fully.

### *Perspective 3: Gender and Catholic education*

In the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the idea that men and women lived in separate social and cultural worlds was commonplace. Separate schools for boys and girls were a customary practice. Within the Catholic subculture, however, the separation of the sexes was made into something of an article of faith. It was felt that the continuity of social order depended upon a strictly gender-specific education for Catholic boys and girls. As a

result, wherever possible the Catholic educational system was divided in a male and a female sector, in which dominant gender notions were transmitted. The massive involvement of religious orders and congregations, segregated themselves in female and male communities, made the division seem self-evident. Under pressure, some religious educators and teachers started to re-evaluate their approach to gender-specific education, in the perspective of social change and progress. Early pleas for co-education were very often silenced – sometimes under the guise of accusations of ‘modernism’ – but around the middle of the twentieth century the separation of the sexes lost much of its appeal and self-evidence for the majority of Catholics. Catholic education underwent a major reorganisation towards co-education. A gradual moderation of strict gender roles preceded this process. The beliefs and attitudes of religious teachers on the issue of gender separation and co-education need to be explored further, especially with reference to their (changing) gendered self-conceptions as well as to their identity as conventuals. Moreover, it should be noted that the gender separation in Catholic education reflected gender hierarchy within the formation of a Catholic intellectual elite and therefore deserves further attention.

### **3. Proposals and programme**

Proposals of at least 500 words in French or English can be submitted before 15 October 2008 to ms. Patricia Quaghebeur, KADOC, Vlamingenstraat 39, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium; ++32 16 323503; [patricia.quaghebeur@kadoc.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:patricia.quaghebeur@kadoc.kuleuven.ac.be).

The organization of the RELINS-workshop 2009 is in the hands of the Dutch participants of RELINS-Europe: *Stichting Echo* (Echo Foundation) and the research group History of Dutch Catholicism, History Department at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Proposals will be evaluated by the board of RELINS-Europe and the Dutch participants. The programme will be determined in October. The RELINS-workshop will take place from 5-7 February 2009 at Study Centre Soeterbeeck, Ravenstein, the Netherlands. The proceedings of the workshop will be published.

The programme will consist of two and a half days and will entail between 10 and 20 lectures in English or French, interspersed with ample time for discussion. One afternoon will be reserved for a working visit to the *Erfgoedcentrum Sint Aegten* (Heritage Centre Sint Aegten) in nearby Sint Agatha. This centre, which opened its doors in 2006, was founded by a number of Dutch orders and congregations in order to receive and preserve their archives for future historical research. The centre will also offer facilities to visiting researchers. One brief evening session will be dedicated to the presentation of the

### **4. Information**

For more information, please contact Patricia Quaghebeur (KADOC, Leuven, [patricia.quaghebeur@kadoc.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:patricia.quaghebeur@kadoc.kuleuven.ac.be)), Joos van Vugt (Echo Foundation, [j.v.vugt@soeterbeeck.ru.nl](mailto:j.v.vugt@soeterbeeck.ru.nl)), or Marieke Smulders (research group History of Dutch Catholicism, Radboud University Nijmegen, [m.smulders@let.ru.nl](mailto:m.smulders@let.ru.nl)).