

FEMINIZATION THESIS: A SURVEY OF INTERNATIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND A PROBING OF BELGIAN GROUNDS*

Introduction

The importance of *sex* or *gender* for the power, impact or even the very existence of Christianity has evolved within the historical research of the last decades from a barely examined factor to an essential basis for the construction of different theories. The main representative for this attention is the *master narrative* of the *feminization of Christianity*.

It embodies a shift in vision within historical research. The image of the 19th century evolved from a secular era to a period characterized by a flourishing religious life, with women as its main cornerstones. However, the secularization thesis was not always completely relegated to the background and *the feminization of Christianity* was perceived as an aspect of the *secularization*, as an addition to this thesis. The argument goes that, even though men were seduced by the *secularization*, Christian culture by no means disappeared completely as women ensured its continued existence and development. (1) Opinions differ as to whether this is a positive

(*) This article was written within the context of *In search of the good Catholic m/f. Feminization and masculinity in Belgian Catholicism (c1750-1950)*, a research project supported by the FWO (Research Foundation Flanders). We would like to thank the members of the scientific committee of our research project, Jan Art, Jan De Maeyer, Patrick Pasture, Leen Van Molle and Vincent Viaene for their suggestions and the proofreading of the several editions of this text.

(1) H. McLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit-männlicher Unglaube? Religion und Kirchen im bürgerlichen 19. Jahrhundert*, in: *Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Geschlechterverhältnisse im 19. Jahrhundert*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988, p. 141; ID., *New Perspectives on the religious history of Western and Northern Europe 1815-1960*, in: *Kyrkhistorisk Årsskrift*, 1.100 (2000), p. 137-138; ID., *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, in: *Journal of Modern European History*, 3 (2005), p. 209; M. RUFF, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Secularization Thesis*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religion- und Kulturgeschichte*, 99 (2005), p. 398; C. FORD,