The Decline of Religious Life in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: The decline in numbers of religious in the West is discussed in numerous studies. While there is a consensus about the statistical reality of decreasing numbers, scholars disagree about the alleged reasons for this decline. This article maps the field and presents a survey of four categories of answers to the question of why religious life declined during the twentieth century. A distinction is made between theories that ascribe the decline to (1) historical, (2) societal, (3) ecclesial, and (4) theological reasons. The first category views the decline as part of a historical-cyclical pattern of growth and decline. The second encompasses explanations that focus on secularization, professionalization, or new societal opportunities for women. Thirdly, post-conciliar church-organizational reasons will be discussed. Finally, pre-conciliar theology is investigated as a potential reason for the decline. While none of the reasons discussed here can be excluded from at least contributing to the decline, we demonstrate that some authors are mistaken in their conclusions due to misinterpreting data in a way that obscures the possibility of an emerging decline before the statistics peak in 1965 (which marks the end of the Council). We also demonstrate how theology has been an underestimated but significant influence on the statistics of religious life.

Keywords: religious life; decline; theology; vatican II

1. Introduction

The decline in numbers of religious worldwide and especially in the West is discussed in numerous studies. While there is a consensus about the statistical reality that the numbers of the religious are decreasing, scholars disagree about the alleged reasons for this decline and about whether or not the church should worry about it.

Definition of terms. By 'religious life', we mean the consecrated life within the Catholic church, sometimes also understood as 'monastic life'. While there are instances of religious life in other religions (Buddhism, Jainism) and other Christian denominations (mostly in Eastern Orthodoxy), this article will focus only on religious life in Catholic Christianity. The members of Catholic religious life profess vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and are called 'religious' in this article. They are commonly understood as nuns, monks, brothers, and sisters and are organized in religious orders and congregations. Religious are distinguished from non-religious members of the Catholic church by the vows they profess. Nonetheless, both ordained and non-ordained Catholics can profess vows, which leads to a distinction that is sometimes made between religious priests (ordained men religious) and religious brothers (non-ordained men religious). Due to the fact that ordination of women is at present not possible, this distinction does not apply to the women religious. In contrast to what is sometimes thought, the religious are not a distinct rank in the hierarchy between the laity and the clergy. Instead, the members of religious life belong to either the laity or the clergy.

During the twentieth century, religious life started to decline very steeply. Worldwide, the number of religious decreased by 33% between 1970 and 2020. In the West, the decline is more severe. In the United States, the numbers dropped by 71% between 1970 and 2018, and in Europe by 59% between 1973 and 2018.[1] Since theologians, historians, sociologists, and religious themselves noticed this decline, they have been interpreting the numbers

and have proposed various theories to explain this phenomenon. The *purpose* of this article is therefore first to map the field and present a survey of the various answers to the question of why religious life started to decline so heavily during the twentieth century. Secondly, the purpose is also to identify the role of theology in this decline.[2] The *Data* used are provided by different institutes on the number of religious in certain places over a period of time.[3] There are several issues with the available data. First, it is not possible to verify whether they are correct. It is probable that the data approximate reality, but there is no guarantee of their precision. It is moreover possible that ideological interests have influenced the presentation of the data provided by offices within the Catholic Church.[4] The second problem is that it is not always straightforward to compare data between different continents (e.g., some sources provide data for some continents until 2019, while others stop at 2017). A third problem is the consistency of the methods of measurement.[5]

The *Method* consisted of careful analysis of literature that deals with the decline of religious life. This included both academic works and non-academic material, such as journal articles, books, testimonies by religious, and even pseudo-academic opinions. The latter are included because they are common and their effects are powerful. The influence of unfounded opinions about this topic should not be underestimated.[6] After analysis, the material was distinguished into four categories based on how they explain the decline of religious life. These four groups attribute the decline respectively to (1) historical, (2) societal, (3) ecclesial, and (4) theological reasons. Many authors, however, combine elements from several categories, so these reasons should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive. The explanations were compared and evaluated, and conclusions were drawn.

The *conclusions* that are defended in this article are the following. First, counting together the numbers of deaths, departures, and vocations obscures the possibility that the decline started earlier than is usually assumed. Second, most studies on this topic are oblivious to the effect of theology on the success and decline of religious life.[7] Third, it is not possible to exclude any of the four main categories of explanation as invalid. In principle, this can already be deduced by pointing to the incontestable possibility that there has been at least one person in the world who either left the monastery or chose not to pursue a vocation because of any of the reasons claimed by an author. Proof or disproof of this would require supra-historical omniscience. Still, it remains possible to estimate the most probable or most influential cause by demonstrating how influential one factor is by examining probable causes (such as the Second Vatican Council or societal developments). This is what most of the researchers on this topic try to achieve.

The *structure* is based on the distinction of the categories: we discuss the categories of historical, societal, ecclesial, and theological explanations in four respective sections. Each section is organized as follows. First, a distinction is made between authors who explicitly defend a theory that falls under the specific category and others who implicitly agree to it or make similar suggestions. Second, in the main body of each section, we explain the general line of argumentation of the theories and the nuances between various proponents. Finally, each section will include an evaluation of the theories in question. After the four sections, which form the bulk of the argumentation, the article concludes with a final report in which the aforementioned conclusions will be presented.

Finally, something must be said about the *ethics* of interpreting statistics. Theorizing about numbers and comparing the past to the present leads to predictions about the future. Such predictions are never innocent. They can and will influence the hopes and fears of those who read and believe these theories. This is enhanced if the emphasis is put on the severity of the decline in numbers. Indeed, since the 1960s the decrease has remained steep and steady up until today. Speculation about this trend leads some to assume that the eventual extinction of religious life is inevitable. The risk of dealing with statistics is indeed to arrive at deterministic conclusions. Extinction may be a possibility, but it remains a prediction and is therefore uncertain. The literature provides differing opinions in this regard.

Another important factor to take into account is the evolution of the numbers in the non-Western world. Because of the enormous number of religious in Europe and North America during the 1950s, the drops in these continents have been so steep that they exert a negative influence on the global number. This obscures the rise of religious life in Africa and Asia. Theorists that assume similar predictions to those of the Classical Theory of Secularization predict that these continents will soon follow Europe and North America regarding religious life, but these predictions are uncertain. Today, almost thirty years have passed since this prediction was made and Asia and Africa are still not showing signs of a decrease. Instances of this prediction can be found in an article by Noel Barber SJ (Barber 1996) and in an article by Helen Rose Ebaugh (1993). Barber claimed that the signs of the times seem to be "pointing to the coming of the age of the laity and to the demise of the religious" and that it is "likely that within a generation or two the religious orders will experience in Asia, Africa, and Latin America what they are now experiencing in the West" (Barber 1996, pp. 249–50). Ebaugh claimed that it is "highly unlikely" that religious orders and congregations would "thrive and flourish in these [African and Asian] countries" in the future, (1) because these countries "become increasingly industrial" and "educational and occupational opportunities for women will slowly expand", and (2) because the proportion of Catholics in these regions is very low in percentage (resp. 13% and 3%), which limits the recruitment pool (Ebaugh 1993, pp. 73–74).

2. Historical Explanations: The Repeating Cycle of Growth and Decline

This category encompasses theories that explain the decline of religious life as part of a natural process: a recurring cycle of growth and decline. It is the only theory that serves as a meta-explanation, covering the entire history of the church. Authors who explicitly defend theories that fall under this category are Hostie (1972), Lawrence Cada et al. (1979), Wittberg (1994), and Barber (1996). Implicit agreement with this explanation or suggestions toward it can be found in several more (Wynne 1988, pp. 62–64, 205; Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, pp. xx–xxiii; Hoogbergen 2002, pp. 233–35). Other studies isolate one or several periods in monastic history and observe a decline and recovery within these limitations and therefore indirectly support the cycle theory (Alkemade 1966; Bergin 2009).

2.1. The Cycle of Growth and Decline

The intention of the advocates of this explanation may be to explain the twentieth century decline, but their method is by analyzing the entire history of religious life in the church. Doing so, they have identified patterns of growth and decline. They use these patterns to interpret the current situation in relation to previous crises. By analyzing the history of religious life, the authors find that several external factors have been detrimental to certain forms of religious life and have, as such, caused the death of many orders. Desert asceticism, for instance, was made impossible by the Vandals and the Islamic conquests in the early middle ages. In the 14th century, a papal decree abolished the Templars and the plague of 1348 killed many mendicants. Those who survived had to deal with the protestant reformation, resulting in phenomena such as the thirty years' war and Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. In the 18th century, the new apostolic orders had to deal with the French revolution (Wittberg 1994, pp. 32, 35–38; Hostie 1972, p. 314).

However, Hostie observed another, rather surprising phenomenon. Even when the orders were safeguarded from external factors, they nevertheless faced a period of decline after being in existence for about two centuries. This led to the idea of a "built in obsolescence" (Barber 1996, p. 250): A dynamic within the institutions themselves that pushes the orders to decline from the inside out. This was one of the most important conclusions of Hostie's psycho-sociological, historical study. He warned that it may be tempting to ascribe the decline of orders to external factors only since these factors are often sensational enough to obscure inner dynamics (Hostie 1972, pp. 10, 314–17). Hostie, instead, identifies several stages in the life of religious institutions. After a prenatal phase of ten to twenty years, the institution consolidates over twenty to forty years and then grows and expands during ca.

one century, after which it stabilizes during the century after that. During this stabilizing century, the community stops attracting energetic and spiritually zealous individuals. Thus follows the process of decline, which usually lasts between fifty and one hundred years and is accompanied by alternating between acceptance and denial of its own obsolescence until it is finally abolished, usually by the Church hierarchy (Hostie 1972, pp. 291–317, esp. 315). Similar to Hostie is the work by Cada, et al., who also identify a cyclical pattern in the life of congregations (Cada et al. 1979).

One may ask how this theory is consistent with the observation that the Dominicans celebrated their eight-century jubilee in 2016 and that in 2029 the Benedictines will celebrate the 1500th anniversary of their order. According to the researchers, this is because these examples are exceptional cases. Of the 105 orders that were founded before 1600, only 25 remained by 1972 (Hostie 1972, p. 316), of the religious orders founded before 1800, "64 percent are now extinct" (Wittberg 1994, p. 31), and of "the more than 300,000 monks, friars, and members of men's apostolic orders in Europe in 1773, fewer than 70,000 remained by 1825" (Wittberg 1994, p. 38). Of those that did survive, many have undergone reforms. The Cistercians and Trappists are surviving examples of Benedictine reform. Hostie states that, in some cases, orders are able to stabilize and survive by finding a balanced momentum without excesses of growth or decline. Because these are remarkable exceptions, Hostie writes that they cannot teach us anything about the future of other orders (Hostie 1972, pp. 317–18).

2.2. The Historical Explanation as Either a Cause for Alarm or for Acceptance

Wittberg's argumentation is similar to that of Hostie, but her focus is slightly different. She builds her theory on basis of the Weberian concept of "religious virtuosi" as the force behind the cycle. These virtuosi embody the tension between the ever-recurring need of the church for expressions of radical and newfound zeal and the continuously stabilizing organization of the church (Wittberg 1994, pp. 13–14). Throughout history, particular times evoke particular societal and spiritual needs, to which certain persons or groups are able to respond perfectly. This led to the sudden popularity and often explosive expansion of these groups, which in many cases overcame the initial suspicion and reservation of the hierarchy. Indeed, many young, not yet officially acknowledged, religious communities rise fast and attract fanatic followers. Moreover, the boundaries between orthodox virtuosity and heresy are not always clearly demarcated in the early years. The mendicant order of the Franciscans, for instance, is said to have been partly inspired by simultaneously rising communities that either were heretics, such as Cathars, or were declared as such, such as the Waldensians (Bisschops 2008, pp. 117–41).

According to Wittberg, the once vibrant and passionate communities were eventually "lulled by their institutionalized commitment mechanism", and thus failed to meet new challenges that history evoked. This is followed by a decline and, in many cases, by the end of the religious community (Wittberg 1994, p. 40). Like, Hostie, Wittberg concludes that the future of the many religious congregations that were founded before the 1960s is grim (Wittberg 1994, p. 266). Unlike him, however, she adds that the current decline is disastrous for the Catholic Church in general, because these virtuosi are, according to her, the engines of religious virtuosity (Wittberg 1994, p. 268). Whereas religious virtuosi are apparently absent in the Catholic world, they do appear in evangelical Protestantism, which, according to Wittberg, is one of the reasons why there are circa 100,000 converts from Catholicism to Protestantism every year. She warns that it is crucial to the survival of the church to formulate a new ideology that facilitates religious virtuosity, while she does recognize opportunities in some of the new (lay and/or religious) communities that arose in the 20th century, such as *Emmanuel*, *Focolare*, and *San Egidio* (Wittberg 1994, pp. 269–70).

Barber is a third explicit defender of the theory, even though he does little more than summarize Wittberg. He differs from her in his aim, however. While Wittberg ends with a warning, Barber uses this same theory to calm. He implies that the recurring cycle of growth and decline makes it likely that the current decline will be followed by a period of

growth, albeit not for traditional forms of religious life, but for new forms of lay spirituality (Barber 1996, p. 249). Following Hostie (albeit without reference), Barber states that the life expectancy of religious communities is on average 200 years. He assures that the steep decline of the twentieth century "should not surprise us", since the religious orders, "like all social groups", are naturally inclined to die after some time (Barber 1996, p. 243). Like Wittberg, he also observes several external factors that further the decline of the active congregations, such as the professionalization of the specific task for which a congregation was established and the equalization of the religious and the laity in the ecclesiology of Vatican II and secularization (Barber 1996, pp. 246–48). Barber identifies the decline as a sign of the times that the age of the laity has dawned and that this is a situation that needs to be accepted rather than combatted (Barber 1996, p. 249).

2.3. Other Instances of the Cycle Theory

Apart from these three explicit advocates, the theory has many who implicitly agree or, perhaps coincidentally, have come to similar ideas. Edward Wynne, for instance, wrote a book on Catholic orders throughout Christian history. While his aim was not to explain religious decline, he observes a recurring tension in church history between institutionalizing, diluting tendencies on the one hand and radical, renewing, and resourcing tendencies on the other (Wynne 1988, pp. 62–64, 205). Similar to Wittberg and Hostie, Wynne observes that the communities that originally belonged to the religious *avant garde* of the church inevitably lose their radical novelty and become prone to dilution themselves. The cyclical theory resembles Max Weber's understanding of the "routinization of Charisma" (Weber 1947, pp. 363–86) and is also foundational to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's model of cheap versus costly grace (Bonhoeffer 1989, 29ff). David Nygren and Myriam Ukeritis, in reference to John Padberg SJ, assume a model of growth and decline in more economic terms, according to needs and responses in society and the church (Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, pp. xx–xxiii).

Sandra Schneiders IHM hints at the cycle theory, even though she never intends to explain the decline or even to give too much thought to it and does not seem very fond of the "fixation on numbers" in the congregations. Her focus is, in the first place, on providing a new theology for contemporary religious life (Schneiders 2000, pp. 78–79, 154). In *Finding the Treasure*, she presents the contemporary situation as a choice between three options: evolution (continuous development), mutation (discontinuous reform), and dissolution (death), which all in their own way can be reasonable choices depending on the situation. The bad choice would be to not decide anything (Schneiders 2000, pp. 62–67). She refers to Wittberg and partly agrees with the cycle theory, but observes that while the numbers do not lie, the typical attitudes of institutes in decline (despair, cynicism, self-interest, etc.) are not to be found in most of the (American women) congregations, who, instead, exhibit the attitudes that one would expect of expanding communities (Schneiders 2000, pp. 154–55).[8] One year later, in *Selling All*, she argues that religious life "has entered a new period of stabilization", for the withdrawals were declining while new candidates were rising. Religious life is much smaller than it used to be, but the threat of eminent extinction has passed (Schneiders 2001, pp. 35–36). In this book, she also refers in an affirmative sense to Hostie, Cada, et al., and, especially, Wittberg with respect to their historical and sociological analysis (Schneiders 2001, p. 356). In the third volume, *Buying the Field*, the historical cycle pattern is presupposed, but rarely explicitly spoken of. She does emphasize the extraordinary rise of the congregations during the 19th century (Schneiders 2013, p. 273), which, on its own, is a remarkable phenomenon. In a recent interview Simon Evers, secretary general of the *Konferentie Nederlandse Religieuzen*, explained that the expanse of active religious congregations in previous centuries was a remarkable exception in the history of the Church, which relativizes the current decline (Vanneuville 2020, pp. 2–3).

A further interesting point, made by Hostie, Schneiders, and Theo Hoogbergen, is that the great contemplative orders have greater chances of survival than the younger active congregations. According to Hostie, the reason for this has to do with the specificity of the

apostolate that triggered the founding of a congregation. Congregations with a very specific apostolate seem less able to adapt to new situations (Hostie 1972, p. 322). Hoogbergen states that the resilience of certain orders to withstand their natural extinction has to do with the ability to reinterpret the original intentions of the founders. For the 19th century sister congregations, however, this resourcing is more difficult, since they were founded to respond to concrete needs in society (Hoogbergen 2002, pp. 233–35). A similar argument is made by Joos van Vucht (2008, pp. 61–65). Schneiders then affirms that orders are more stable than congregations, but ascribes it to another cause: an economic foundation. The old monasteries, on the one hand, have a tradition of economic self-sufficiency. The active congregations, on the other hand, focused on work for the outside world and therefore relied upon external resources: donations, salaries, fees, and novices. Both the decrease in numbers and the increase in the median age caused a lack of resources. This decline "makes it nonfeasible for congregations even to maintain their own institutions at precisely the time when large numbers of retirees are making major financial demands" (Schneiders 2000, p. 80, also pp. 88–91).

2.4. Evaluation and Critique

The historical explanation has the indispensable benefit of enabling us to see the larger scope. It helps us understand the current decline by comparing it to previous periods in which religious life declined too, albeit for different reasons. The idea of 'internal obsolescence' is something that many writers on the topic of the decline of religious life are either not aware of or choose to neglect in order to stress the severity of the contemporary situation. After all, the cycle theory comprises the risk of resignation. Barber could be interpreted as an encouragement of resignation, while Wittberg, instead, strongly tries to avoid this by warning about the necessity of virtuosi for the Church. The questions of whether she is right about the absence of virtuosi in contemporary Catholicism and whether this is the reason for conversions from Catholicism to evangelical Protestantism are, however, in dispute. Wittberg intensified her warning in 2014 together with Mary Gautier and Mary Johnson SNDdeN (Johnson et al. 2014, pp. 134–37). This shows that this explanation does not necessarily lead toward an attitude of acquiescence and therefore is not vulnerable to criticism based on that argument. Indeed, the fact that something has occurred several times does not make it a law in the sense that its occurrence is necessary.

A risk of this theory (but also of all the others) is to accept it as a sufficient explanation on its own. Later on in the article, it will be demonstrated how part of this theory functions to support the theological explanation of Section 5, which is largely built on the writings of Annelies van Heijst. However, Heijst has also criticized Hostie's theory for being too general and too "time independent", therefore not doing justice to the exceptional situation of the 19th and 20th century congregations (van Heijst 2008, p. 161). The theory is helpful to understand, but insufficient to explain adequately, the specificities of the latest cycle. While Hostie does mention the increasing influence of positive sciences, the decline in supernaturalism, and decreasing belief in miracles as specific characteristics of the monastic decline in the 20th century, these phenomena could easily become coincidental within the overall cyclical framework (Hostie 1972, pp. 255, 264).

3. Societal Explanations: Secularization, Professionalization, and Increasing Secular Opportunities for Women

This category encompasses theories that explain the decline of religious life as the result of societal processes such as secularization and professionalization of areas of the religious apostolate, as well as the increase in opportunities for women to make a career outside of the monastery. In contrast to the previous category, these theories are focused specifically on the present decline, not on previous periods of decline. Most authors would not disagree with the fact that secularization is at least partly responsible for the monastic decline in the 20th century. That is why references to secularization are often haphazardly mentioned in prefaces and introductions. However, secularization does not explain why religious life has decreased more severely than other areas of the church.[9]

It makes more sense that the professionalization of the apostolate and the rise of secular opportunities for women in society caused the specific decline of religious life. Authors in whose writings such thoughts can be found include Leo Josef Cardinal Suenens (1963), Allegonda Alkemade (1966), van Heijst (1985), Jo McNamara (1996), Barbra Mann Wall (2011), Edward Brett (2012), and Schneiders (2000, 2001, 2013). Further elaboration of the societal and professional impact on religious life is the 'secular opportunities' thesis. This is explicitly defended by Ebaugh (1993), but related ideas have been expressed by McNamara (1996, pp. 629, 637), Mary J. Oates CSJ (Oates 1995, p. 163), Charles R. Morris (Morris 1997, p. 318), Peter Steinfels (2003, p. 327), van Heijst (1985, p. 21), and Alkemade (1966, pp. 260–61).

3.1. Secularisation

It is impossible to determine the precise influence of this—in itself already confusing[10]—concept on the decline of religious life, but it likely has some influence on it, albeit not sufficient to explain why the decline of religious life is steeper than that of general church practice. Still, many authors refer to it. Wynne, for instance, identifies egalitarianism, civil liberties, individualism, technical novelties, and other typically twentieth century developments as detrimental to religious life (Wynne 1988, p. 267). Moreover, the increasing use of technical and rational modes of operation in the religious apostolate has secularized it from the inside out (Wynne 1988, p. 262).

Heijst notes that the 'secular causes' in the Netherlands were the sudden growth of cities, education and jobs for women, individual freedoms and rights, and the dwindling size of the average family household (van Heijst 1985, p. 21). Together with Marjet Derks and Marit Monteiro (van Heijst et al. 2010), she adds that societal ideals shifted to the detriment of monastic life, such as the ideal of freedom that emerged from the increasing separation between professional and private life (734). Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier mention consumerism, materialism, tolerance of difference and diversity, and higher self-esteem in the millennial cohort as being of a negative influence on the number of vocations (Johnson et al. 2014, pp. 132–34).[11] Nygren and Ukeritis mention individualism, authority defiance, and materialism (among other reasons that are integral to congregations) as societal factors affecting religious life (Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, pp. 244–51). They also argued that 96% of religious orders in the United States is white and that this percentage remained relatively stable, at least up until 1993, due to unconscious structures of racism (Nygren and Ukeritis 1993, p. 249). If ethnically distinct populations find it difficult to be accepted in religious communities, this will most likely also affect the numbers in some regard and prevent many potential recruits from entering the religious life.

Wall addresses the decrease in the household size, the decreasing number of religious teachers that can exert influence on the youth, new conceptions of freedom, and the increased availability of ministerial positions for women (Wall 2011, pp. 4–5). Schneiders mentions that the group of candidates for religious life transformed from one class (young adults, born in the same year, who just graduated high school and who enter the monastery) to a more diverse, humanely mature and experienced group, who demanded a very different kind of formation and perhaps were more challenging to mould (Schneiders 2001, pp. 35–39). Later, she also mentioned the difficulty of dealing with the postmodern situation, the plurality in society (Schneiders 2013, pp. 74–79), and the challenges that the modern economy poses to the vow of poverty (Schneiders 2013, pp. 149–51).

Ton Baeten, O. Praem testifies that secularization seeped into monasteries during the 1950s and 1960s and that this was an unavoidable occurrence (Baeten 2002, pp. 267–70). The research of Maria van der Leeuw suggests that the situation in many monasteries was so untenable that, from the moment societal conventions about loyalty to the vocation and the church changed, many sisters finally felt free to leave the monastery without the risk of being shamed by society, disappointing their parents, and bringing embarrassment to their family (van der Leeuw 1968, pp. 68–71). Starting from the 1950s onwards, secularizing society cared less about withdrawing sisters and was happy to welcome them back.[12]

According to van Heijst et al. (2010), withdrawing from the monastery was, especially since the 1970s, no longer seen as betrayal, but instead as "a respectable reorientation" of one's life (799).[13]

Luchesius Smits OFM Cap blames new electronics, such as television, mobile phones, and the internet, birth control, individualism, and egoism (Smits 2002, p. 234). Richard Gribble CSC targets individualism and relativism (Gribble 2011a, p. 11). The effects of secularization on the decline of religious life can be put in such a manner that it appears to be a matter of choice. Wynne, Smits, and especially Gribble tend to present it as such. The problem with this is that it shifts attention from points of self-criticism (and thus opportunities) in the church to external factors that are easy to blame and that no longer seem to be reversible. This comprises the risk of sectarianizing. Even though many aspects of secular society can justifiably be criticized, it is more promising to analyze the secular context as a given in order to discover how religious life should respond. Examples of such an approach are the already-mentioned studies by Nygren and Ukeritis and those by Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier.

3.2. Professionalization

A societal change, connected to secularization, but more specifically relevant to religious life, is that of the professionalization of the apostolate. The active congregations may have been pioneers on many fronts, and while their work was gradually taken over by the welfare state, the state had no apostolic purposes. It just wanted to provide efficient healthcare and education. The demands grew and the congregations had difficulty keeping up. Furthermore, society became critical of the understanding of charity that focuses on the obligations of the provider rather than on the rights of the one who receives.[14] These changes were accompanied by increasing bureaucracy and rapidly expanding medical sciences. All this gradually pushed the sisters into leader positions on the board, into pastoral care, or to trade the traditional forms of apostolate in for political activism or academic careers (Wall 2011, pp. 4–5; Heffernan 2017, p. 28; McNamara 1996, pp. 627–29; Wynne 1988, pp. 262–64).

Highly educated religious, in effect, are less inclined to be obedient to a non-educated superior and in many cases are also part of an academic peer-group outside of the congregation. This in turn brings about new difficulties for religious life (Wynne 1988, p. 265). Numerous attempts to update the religious apostolate were held, but they never really had any substantial effect. The reason for this will be discussed in more detail in the fifth section of this article.

In 1979, Karel Dobbelaere investigated the role of secularization and professionalization in the "Belgium Catholic Pillar" and argued that the lay professionals were inevitably the bringers of the "secular tendency", while professionalization further diminished the importance of religious values and ethics (Dobbelaere 1979, p. 39). Dobbelaere observed professionalization and specialization within Catholic organizations to cause these to secularize from the inside out, even if certain catholic ethical and sacramental customs (for instance the rejection of euthanasia) remain obligated by virtue of the Catholic identity. The "Christian spirit", however, cannot be organized and became more and more privatized, also in Catholic hospitals, as something "beyond the possibilities of formal organization" (Dobbelaere 1979, pp. 46–49). Similar processes occurred in schools (Dobbelaere 1979, pp. 49–55). Professionalization, according to Dobbelaere, was caused by democracy, the drop in vocations, and the rise in withdrawals. The latter two gave rise to a lack of nurses and teachers and required the recruitment of lay professionals. This increasing professionalism in turn stimulated the secularization of these sectors (Dobbelaere 1979, pp. 59–60).

Indeed, by the 1950s, the demands to professionalize were high. Meanwhile, the church struggled with the tension between the work and the spiritual purpose of the work, which was no ordinary job, but *apostolate*. The updates remained superficial. An example: Pius XII urged sisters to be educated and to wear habits that were fit to the work (Brett 2012, pp. 66–67) It was far more difficult to reconcile the more foundational theological structure

of the religious apostolate with the new demands, and this is also reflected in warnings by the hierarchy, for instance to not let professionalism occupy them and to remember that the priorities of the apostolate were to bring honor to God and to sanctify the self. Sanctification was prioritized over the service itself. According to Alkemade, the rule of the sisters of Mother Elisabeth van Maastricht explicitly prioritized self-sanctification as the first purpose over the second purpose to perform charity works to those in need (Alkemade 1966, p. 230). van Heijst (2008, p. 161) also made this point. According to Suenens, activities that do not have the intention to proselytize are not apostolate, but mere "dedication" (Suenens 1963, pp. 36–44). A more recent and theologically well-founded discussion about the distinction between normal labor, benevolent action, and the apostolate can be found in the chapter *Naming the Task* (Schneiders 2013, pp. 109–44) and earlier in the book (99–101).

3.3. Secular Opportunities for Women

A more specific societal explanation is that the emancipation of women and the accompanying opportunities for them to study and to pursue careers caused monasteries to deflate. The most renowned theory is the one developed by Ebaugh in 1993, and it has been taken seriously by researchers. Her theory depends on the positive correlation between the growth of opportunities for women in society and the decrease in numbers of women religious (Ebaugh 1993, p. 68). During the 19th and early 20th century, women religious usually were better educated than lay women and were professionally active in public life, which was unavailable to lay women. The congregations were "avenues of social mobility for Catholic girls". In addition, they "brought status to the family", since religious were respected in society, which could explain the attraction (Ebaugh 1993, p. 69). This changed when social opportunities for women outside of the convent grew. From the 1960s onwards, these opportunities outweighed those provided by monastic life (Ebaugh 1993, p. 70). She measures the number of secular opportunities for women by the GNP of a country[15] and shows that countries with a high GNP have a higher decrease in religious (Ebaugh 1993, pp. 71–73). Ebaugh predicts that the numbers will continue to decrease in the West, and that Africa and Asia will eventually follow, since it is likely that social opportunities for women will increase in these continents in the future (Ebaugh 1993, p. 73). She wrote this in 1993 and based her argument on numbers from the statistical yearbook of the church 1975–1985. Today, nearly thirty years later (based on the statistics by the Secretaria status rationarium generale ecclesiae, covering a five-year evolution from 2010 to 2015) Asia and Africa are still experiencing an increase in religious, albeit at a somewhat slower rate than in 1975–1985 (Secretaria Status Rationarium Generale Ecclesiae 2017).

Ebaugh is not alone. Before her article appeared, Heijst argued in 1985 that girls were increasingly employed from the 1900s to the 1930s (putting them in contact with city life and its freedoms), and increasingly educated from the 1930s to the 1940s (causing women religious to lose their educational advantage). After WWII, more and more women became economically independent of their family or convent (van Heijst 1985, p. 21). Ebaugh is also joined in 2000 by Schneiders, who mentions that it is likely that many young women who entered religious life did so out of "a combination of motives that were not clear to themselves", among which is also the attraction to teaching, nursing, or social work. However, Schneiders importantly argues that "genuine spiritual motivation" probably played a major role in the decision-making process of young entrants (Schneiders 2000, p. 82).

Besides Schneiders, Heijst, and Ebaugh, the argument was also made by Oates, who speaks about the American context only, and writes that, among other factors, "women's widening professional opportunities [. . .] certainly played a role", but, according to her, Ebaugh neglects another critical factor: the transfer of many American Catholics to a middle-class status during the 1940s (Oates 1995, 163; cf. Johnson et al. 2014, p. 10). McNamara also implicitly accepts Ebaugh's thesis when she refers to Mexico as a society "with fewer alternatives for women", which led to the finding that religious life there "still presents a meaningful opportunity" (McNamara 1996, p. 637). The idea that the growth

of opportunities for women has a large impact also circulates in non-academic circles and popular media. Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier gathered some of these utterances in their introduction (Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier, *New Generations*, 8–10). They refer to Morris, who wrote that the decline of religious life is mostly due to the feminist movement: "Nuns filled executive positions in Catholic circles long before similar jobs were opened to women in secular organizations. As lay women's professional horizons broadened, the convent lost much of its comparative recruitment advantage" (Morris 1997, p. 31). They also refer to Steinfels, who wrote that the social attitudes and practices of society, transformed by the women's movement, affected religious life (Steinfels 2003, p. 327).

3.4. Evaluation and Critique

Regarding the theses of secularization and professionalization, critique is difficult because it concerns phenomena that cannot be denied. One can criticize the sometimes-occurring tendency to overemphasize them and to blame the decline of religious life exclusively on societal factors, because it can make one blind to the other historical, ecclesial, and theological explanations. According to Alkemade (1966, pp. 260–61), women religious even played a crucial role in the emancipation of women by means of education and the apostolate. This would mean that this societal factor is not exclusively external but may have causes from within religious life. The thoughts on professionalization will be revisited in the last section of this article, where they will appear to be relevant in the context of the theological foundations of 19th and 20th century religious life. Ebaugh's theory can be criticized on entirely different grounds. First, implied in Ebaugh's theory is that the success of religious institutions depends on whether they are unique in providing social mobility for women in a society where there are a small number of or no alternatives. This obscures any spiritual or theological value of religious life. While it may be delusional to think that the enormous number of religious vocations during the 19th and early 20th century was caused by spiritual virtue alone, Ebaugh does the opposite and mistakenly neglects the relevance of theology and spirituality entirely. This critique is supported by the work of Schneiders (2000, p. 82) and can be further supported by the conclusions we will draw from Section 5.

Ebaugh's thesis was also challenged by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke in 2000. They sought to substantiate Wittberg's suggestion that the Second Vatican Council might have had something to do with the decline of religious life (Wittberg 1994, pp. 216–14; Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 169–90). According to them, Ebaugh's explanation fails because: (1) her data are inaccurate; (2) the effect of the per capita GNP on the decline in numbers is more significant than the effect of the gender empowerment measure (GEM), which suggests that economic development is more likely a cause than secular opportunities are; and (3) the correlation between GNP and GEM identically affect the number of male religious (Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 171–74).

The final point is devastating to the secular opportunity theory and we found it supported by the statistics. Indeed, if one compares the numbers of religious worldwide from 1970 to 2018, one notices that women religious underwent by far the most drastic decline in absolute numbers (from 1,004,304 in 1970 to 641,661 in 2018); this is a decline of 36%. Likewise, men religious (non-ordained brothers) decreased by 36% (from 79,408 in 1970 to 50,941 in 2018). In contrast, religious priests decreased by only 11% (148,804 in 1970 to 132,191 in 2018). The decline in women religious and non-ordained brothers is almost exactly the same in percentage (36%), while the number of religious priests decreases three times more slowly (11%) (CARA 2021). In the Netherlands, between 1961 and 1985, the percentage of retreating sisters (8.40%) is significantly less than that of either the brothers (22.38%) or religious priests (14.25%) according to van Heijst et al. (2010, p. 743). In response to Ebaugh, Stark and Finke provided an alternative theory, which will be discussed in the next section.

4. Ecclesial Explanations: Vatican II and the Post-Conciliar Conflict

This category encompasses explanations that trace the decline of religious life to the Second Vatican Council, in terms of either an organizational decision of the council itself or to the post-conciliar conflict that arose in its wake. The first focuses on the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, and more specifically on the new ecclesiology of a universal call to holiness as is presented in LG 40, which leads some scholars to believe that this deprived the religious of their elite place within the ranks of the Church.

Some decades after the Council, a conflict emerged between some traditionalist members of the hierarchy, supported by the respective pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), who sought renewal in religious life. This conflict is mostly an American conflict—albeit not exclusively since it exists also in the Dutch context (van Heijst et al. 2010, pp. 738, 936–44)—but above all it is a delicate and sensitive matter, so that the arguments used are often ideologically suspect or limit the cause of religious decline to one explanation only. Moreover, the issue has somewhat decreased in intensity since the pontificate of Francis—although it has not yet been resolved. Therefore, we will pay only marginal attention to it in this article.

4.1. The Universal Call to Holiness

In *Lumen Gentium* 40, the Council declares that "all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity". The point made initially by Wittberg about this sentence, but further supported with arguments by Stark and Finke, and accepted by several scholars, is that "*In one stroke, it nullified the basic ideological foundation for eighteen centuries of Roman Catholic religious life*" (Wittberg 1994, p. 214; Stark and Finke 2000, p. 177).[16] Theologically, this sentence is problematic. Before Wittberg, Wynne had already observed in the 1980s that some church members "argue that if the council had not been called, or if it had taken different positions, church and order life would have gone on as before", but adds that this contention is "highly problematic" (Wynne 1988, p. 282). Schneiders, who appears to agree to some extent with the fact that Vatican II discouraged religious elitism (Schneiders 1986; 1996–1997, pp. 516–517; 2014, pp. 2–3), also revealed a fundamental critique of Wittberg's argument in a footnote of *Finding the Treasure*, where she says: "Whether or not this statement is true sociologically, it is definitely not true theologically. If the real justification of Religious life is superiority to other Christians, then it has no justification for existing in the Church" (Schneiders 2000, p. 375). To a lesser extent, McNamara also makes suggestions towards the idea expressed by Wittberg, but her focus is more on the frustration about the exclusion of women from any clerical status in the church (McNamara 1996, p. 632). van Heijst et al. (2010) put emphasis on the positive effect of the new ecclesiology. Among the reasons for sisters to enter the monastery, the feeling of superiority over the laity became less prominent after the Council than before, while genuine spiritual reasons and ideals for entering the monastery increased (730). On the traditionalist side of the church, the statement of Wittberg also finds resonance, for instance with Sara Butler MSBT, who wrote that "the emphasis on the universal call to holiness diminished the value of their [the religious'] vocation" (Butler 2011, p. 45).

It is mostly Stark and Finke who build further upon Wittberg's statement. Their argument begins with the deconstruction of Ebaugh's thesis (as presented in the previous section). They follow this up by showing that in most Western countries the numbers of religious started to decline both suddenly and drastically in 1966, while during the whole period from 1948 to 1965, when opportunities for women increased, the numbers were still rising (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 175). This means that, in most Western countries, the decline of religious life began during or immediately after the Second Vatican Council, and that because the decline is so sudden, the cause is likely to be a clearly identified event (Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 177–80). This event is Vatican II and more specifically the universal call to holiness (see previous paragraph). This is said to have stripped the

religious of their assumed more perfect status. The authors interpret this as an imbalance in the cost–benefit ratio of religious life. The benefits (the more perfect status, respect for women in habit, the assumption that they were somewhere in between clergy and laity) were reduced and the costs (celibacy, poverty, obedience) remained largely the same (Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 177–78).

In short, Stark and Finke argue that those practices and convictions that were "crucial for generating and sustaining vocations" were "abandoned by the Council"; instead, the Council "adopted a 'worst of both worlds' position". Therefore, according to them, Vatican II is the cause of the decline (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 179). This is further supported with an additional argument. One may not be convinced of their claim because of the exceptions in the West: while the numbers in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and the Netherlands immediately decline in 1965 or 1966, the numbers in Spain rise until the 1970s and in Portugal until 1980. Stark and Finke explain this by claiming that in both countries: "an extremely conservative hierarchy refused to endorse or even publicize many decrees of Vatican II, particularly those concerning the religious". Under the dictatorships of Franco in Spain and the republic of the Estado Novo in Portugal, the states maintained the power to veto the appointment of bishops by the Vatican (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 181).

4.2. The Post-Conciliar Conflict

It is important to note that, while this theory could be used to support the traditionalist claim, Stark and Finke resist the suggestion to return to pre-conciliar understandings of religious life (Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 182, 189–90). Indeed, several scholars claim that the more traditional communities associated with the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) have more recruits than the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) communities (Gribble 2011b, p. 43; Rodé 2011, pp. 22–23). George Weigel wrote in 2012 that "the 'renewal' of women's religious life led by the LCWR and its affiliated orders has utterly failed to attract new vocations. The LCWR orders are dying, while several religious orders that disaffiliated from the LCWR are growing" (Weigel 2012a; cf. Weigel 2012b). This was contested by Wittberg, who responded that "the church and the U.S. public deserve an accurate picture, devoid of distortions, ideology and fatalism". Instead, the numbers of women religious entering the congregations that belong respectively to the LCWR and the CMSWR are almost identical: "As of 2009, L.C.W.R. institutes reported 73 candidates/postulants, 117 novices and 317 sisters in temporary vows/commitment. C.M.S.W.R. institutes reported 73 candidates/postulants, 158 novices and 304 sisters in temporary vows/commitment" (Johnson and Wittberg 2012, p. 21).

There are a number of characteristics that are proper to the traditionalist perspective. It tends to stress the importance of wearing the habit, the continuity of interpretation between Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II, obedience to the magisterium, the importance of identity, and the faulty incorporation of secular values such as individualism, professionalism, relativism, tolerance, and political correctness (Gribble 2011b; Rodé 2011; Butler 2011; Droste 2019).[17] According to them, it was not so much Vatican II, but rather the post-conciliar attempts at renewal in their wrong interpretation of the Council that are the main cause of the decline of religious life.[18] Most of the advocates are American, but they felt supported by the Hierarchy, especially during the respective pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In 1992, the CMSWR was erected by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL); according to the LCWR, this was intended by Rome to counteract the progressive directions of the LCWR and replace it with a more conservative organization (Wittberg 1994, p. 225). In 2008, the CICSLAL— under Franc Cardinal Rodé CM, who was the prefect—launched an investigation of the LCWR communities, and in 2012 a second investigation was started by the CDF regarding accusations of "radical feminism" and "dissent" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2012). In 2015, this was abruptly halted. According to Schneiders, this was because of an intervention of Francis (Schneiders 2016).

On the other side, there are those who accuse the hierarchy of causing the decline, which is a popular opinion in secular media. According to Stark and Finke, it is even "the most popular explanation" (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 169). Indeed, it is an explanation that is frequently heard in secular media. Journalist Kenneth Briggs, for example, is of the opinion that the hierarchy "caused the decline, by imposing rigid and unreasonable restrictions on women's institutes" (Johnson et al. 2014, p. 8; cf. Briggs 2006), and that they made the religious leave the monastery "in record numbers" (Flanagan 2006).

4.3. Evaluation and Critique

It is probable that the claims of both opposing sides of the post-conciliar conflict contain some truth, for instance, that restoring the traditional benefits of religious life may attract some members. It is also beyond doubt that the magisterial actions of the last three decades may have frustrated many religious, but it would be a severe exaggeration to claim that this is the exclusive cause for the decline of religious life. The issue is that both lines of argumentation quickly become ideologically tainted and unnuanced. Most of all, they distort and polarize the debate. More than any other explanation, they tend to neglect the possibility that there may have been other factors at stake too. More nuanced and academically viable views on the tensions between the hierarchy and the women religious are McNamara (1996) and Schneiders (2016).

More interesting than the post-conciliar conflict is the theory of Stark and Finke, whose arguments may even seem convincing. However, there are several issues with their claim. First, the theory operates on absolute numbers. The statistics they use indeed show a steep decline starting in 1966, but these numbers are oblivious to the more sensitive data that distinguish between vocations, withdrawals, and deaths. Heijst showed in 1985 that, in the Netherlands, the vocations started to decline in the 1930s and that the withdrawals started to increase in the 1950s (van Heijst 1985, pp. 37–38; cf. van Heijst et al. 2010, p. 725). These evolutions are not felt in the absolute number of religious, which in the Netherlands reached its peak in 1964. By obscuring the difference between these three factors, Stark and Finke ignore the possibility that there were unfolding signs in the years before the council that a decline might occur soon and therefore may be wrongly overestimating a single cause of the decline at the expense of a more comprehensive understanding of it due to a complex of factors.

In this context, it is fair to mention Sonja Bezjak, who has criticized Stark and Finke by zooming in on the 'Slovenian case'. Her conclusion supports the suspicion that the decline must be traced back to earlier factors than the Second Vatican Council. Bezjak has criticized the thesis for its inability to explain the decline of religious life in Slovenia, which had already started after World War II. Religious life then *increased* during and after Vatican II. After the council, the number of women religious decreased again (but less severely) in the 1980s, while the number of men religious remained relatively steady (Bezjak 2012, p. 160).

Notwithstanding, Bezjak's argumentation is weak on its own. Slovenia and Croatia are such exceptional cases that it complicates comparison with countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, or the United States. Slovenia and Croatia are traditionally Catholic countries that have long coexisted with Eastern Orthodox and Islamic countries in the nation of Yugoslavia. The religion policy in Yugoslavia was milder than in Soviet Russia (Yugoslavia broke ties with Stalin shortly after the end of WWII, becoming a third-world country).[19] Freedom of religion as a private affair was guaranteed by the government, but initially the religion policy of Yugoslavia was influenced by Leninist secularism (Mojzes 1986, p. 25).

Bezjak indicates that, because the "major decline in Slovenia occurred before Vatican Council II had even started, it is not possible to test the Council's influence by observing the numerical trend over time as Stark and Finke did for Western Countries" (Bezjak 2012, p. 166). While she acknowledges that the Slovenian case must not be generalized, she concludes that to better understand the monastic decline in the second half of the twentieth century, "more data and discussion on the growth of the first half of the century are needed"

(172). It is obvious that the Slovenian case is too unique to (purely on basis of its particular context) challenge the finding that ceteris paribus the numbers of religious declined in European and North American countries immediately after Vatican II.

A second major weakness in the argumentation of Stark and Finke is that they overestimate the effect of a single sentence on an entire socio-theological reality that was already in crisis and overlook that the Council did more than just change its organizational structure. Instead, this change is embedded in a vast theological framework and an effect of (to put it simply) a change from supernaturalist dualism to a historically justified theology of the world. While the effects of *Perfectae caritatis* (PC 2019) may indeed have been limited[20], *Lumen Gentium* 40 was not the only important part of the council. The foundations of *Dei verbum* abolished the metaphysical dualism, which was one of the crucial foundations of 19th and early 20th century religious life, in favor of a historical and incarnational theology. Moreover, *Gaudium et spes* abolished the world-renouncing attitude by opting radically for the world.

A final critique is similar to our previous critique on Ebaugh, which is that the theological poverty of Stark and Finke's understanding of the situation is detrimental to their argument. By reducing the attraction of religious life to a question of material costs versus material benefits (social recognition versus celibacy), they secularize the very intention of religious life. They fail to see that the material costs are preferably as high as possible and must always be more than any material benefits (which were practically none since the sisters were explicitly forbidden to enjoy any admiration by the laity). This imbalance between costs and benefits is not simply a coincidence but is a core intention of the understanding of religious life in the 19th and early 20th century, which was fixed on the achievement of the ultimate, eschatological benefit. Infinite benefits may require any finite cost as long as it is supported by a convincing system of beliefs and theology. The next section will provide further insights into the details of this system of beliefs, the pre-conciliar causes of decline, and the change from dualist supernaturalism to the theology of Vatican II. This will also provide further proof against the theory of Stark and Finke.

5. Theological Explanations: The Disadvantageous Lead of Dualist Supernaturalism as Cause for the Decline

These explanations situate the cause of the decline in pre-conciliar theology and the customs related to the 'cloister mentality'. This theory is uncommon and is found almost exclusively in the Dutch literature on the topic. It is explicitly worked out by van Heijst (2008), but the writings of Hostie (1972), Alkemade (1966), and van der Leeuw (1968) can be used to support her arguments.[21] Additionally, the three volumes—and especially the third—written by Schneiders (2000, 2001, 2013) are clear examples of a theological approach and also support the arguments made here. However, as previously mentioned, Schneiders does not occupy herself with discussing the decline of religious life, which is why this section is mainly concerned with the Dutch approach.

5.1. The Cloister Mentality in Short

Heijst's argument is developed as follows. In reaction to Hostie, she highlights the remarkable success of the 19th century active women congregations (van Heijst 2008, 161). She finds that this success depends in large part on a certain pre-conciliar ascetic mentality, which she calls the 'cloister mentality'—"*kloostermentaliteit*" (van Heijst 2008)—or *Claustrum*-spirit (van Heijst et al. 2010, p. 935) because this encourages world-renouncement and self-sacrifice.[22] This provided the religious with the necessary frame to become a workforce that was willing to do everything that is required of the apostolate. The theological foundations of this mentality and the apostolate (more specifically supernaturalism and dualism) became increasingly untenable to society and theology, but since they belonged to the core foundation of religious congregations and were indispensable to them, the congregations found themselves in an irreconcilable tension that the Council was unable to overcome (van Heijst 2008, pp. 161–67). The important (but equally surprising) element of this theory is that the very reason for the success is also the reason for the decline.

This phenomenon is called "the law of disadvantageous lead", first developed by Dutch historian Jan Romein in 1935 (Romein 1935). In what follows, we will explain Heijst's argument in more detail and elaborate on it.

The cloister mentality is described by Heijst as a *dualist ascetic* mentality. This comprises a set of beliefs about God and the world that are marked by a dualism between two opposing worlds: the natural versus the supernatural, the sacred versus the secular, the spiritual versus the material. A consequence of this conviction is the encouragement of mortification, detachment, and sacrifice and the embrace of suffering as being ascetically virtuous. With Anthony Fahey, she argues that this mentality caused the success of the 19th century congregations (van Heijst 2008, p. 153; Fahey 1982; van Heijst et al. 2010, pp. 382–685). The congregations combined the original mentality of religious life as a contemplative world-renouncing asceticism with an active apostolate in the world (van Heijst 2008, p. 161; Fahey 1982, pp. 77–78). The active religious are manifested "*in* the world, but were not allowed to be *from* the world". They were trained to distrust the world, to renounce it while doing the caritative works of the apostolate, a tension which made many feel internally split (van Heijst 2008, p. 161). However, "only people who were so obedient, poor, and celibate, who deprived themselves of everything and were able to interpret any setback as a sacrifice to God, who moreover were well organized and could be massively deployed in labor", only such people could have accomplished what the 19th century congregations did (van Heijst 2008, p. 161).[23] Heijst argues that religious congregations today, with their post-conciliar perspective, usually dismiss this mentality as an accidental excess or an unwanted side effect. van Heijst argues, instead, that it was core to the congregations and the reason for their success (van Heijst 2008, p. 160). Their motivation was extrinsic: the honor of God and the salvation of souls (first of the religious and second of the receiver of the apostolate) were prioritized. The material benefits of the apostolate (in nursing or charity) were of only marginal importance (van Heijst 2008, p. 158; cf. Alkemade 1966, p. 230). The apostolate was seen as a means to a religious end, which is the glorification of God and the salvation of souls (both of the practitioner of the apostolate and the care-receiver). It was not in the slightest intended to effectively solve worldly problems. This means that, implicitly, contemplation was still prioritized over action, even in the active congregations. Sisters and nuns "did not receive a theologically well thought out spirituality for their work *in* the world", but instead had to mistrust the world, and had to acquire a sacrificial mentality. Before a sister could practice her apostolate in the world, her formation (postulate and novitiate) was a period of quarantine. This reflects, according to Heijst, the "dualist asceticism" that was proper not only to contemplative, but also to active religious life (van Heijst 2008, pp. 158–59).

Heijst's claims are supported by several testimonies. The testimonies in Leeuw's study show how the sisters are still (it is 1968) informed by supernaturalist and dualist presuppositions, as they juxtapose matter to spirituality in their accusations of withdrawn sisters (van der Leeuw 1968, p. 95). Baeten testified about the pre-conciliar cloister mentality, saying that they "lived in a dulling kind of dualism, in which nature and supernature were put into opposition. You were forced to interpret everything supernaturally, while you had to suppress your nature" (Baeten 2002, pp. 268–69).[24]

5.2. Rootedness in Neo-Scholastic Theology

This mentality was firmly embedded in the neo-scholastic theology of that time, which, simply put, is characterized by unhistorical supernaturalism, anti-modern polemics, dualism, sacralization, and obscurantism. Mark Schoof, OP discusses the 19th century theology of Catholicism in a more nuanced manner. In the early 19th century, he writes, the theological center of Tübingen and the influence of romanticism, historical sciences, and dialogues with Protestantism led to new and interesting insights from multifaceted theologians, among whom were Sailer, von Drey, Möhler, Kuhn, Bautain, Lamennais, Hermes, and Günther (Schoof 1970, pp. 23–29). Around the same time, personal and devotional practices became popular, especially eucharistic devotion, devotion of the Sacred

Heart (which encouraged self-sacrifice), and devotion of Mary, which was continuously promoted by the many rumors of apparitions. A large number of apologetic and devotional booklets were printed and spread among the laity.

During the pontificate of Pius IX, who became surprisingly defensive after the crisis of 1848, Catholic theology became, likewise, defensive. However, it still made ample use of the modernist and positivistic methods for the development of a new scholastic theology. Schoof suggests the decline of romantic influence after Hegel's death in 1832 caused Catholic theology to become more technical and to require more precise definitions and analytical, objective, and mathematical methods. In conjunction with the crisis of 1848, which caused a sudden conservative turn in the pontificate of Pius IX, Catholic theology became outspokenly anti-modern and unhistorical, ironically by making use of the same methods of positivist modernism (Schoof 1970, pp. 31–34). The official Catholic theology became generally dull and uninteresting until the Second Vatican Council changed this, but this does not mean that there was no creativity in theology at all. Many interesting theologians were active during the 'neo-scholastic' time: Newman, Blondel, Loisy Tyrell, Chenu, Congar, de Lubac, and de Chardin are the most important examples (Schoof 1970, pp. 40–118).

Still, the combination of early 19th century piety and devotional practices, the massive spread of booklets on apologetics, devotions and proofs of apparitions, the conviction that the truths of faith were untouched by history, and the obscurantism of theological sources of Scripture and Tradition by the hierarchy must have put the world of many of the faithful under a spell of enchantment. Jürgen Mettepenningen interprets it as a vicious circle between the Magisterium granting the highest authority to neo-scholastic theology and neo-scholastic theology in turn being the "Church's only intellectual conceptual framework" (Mettepenningen 2010, p. 20). Such a system proved to be fertile ground for vocations. The division with the secular world encouraged a belief of dualism between nature and supernature, where the spiritual realm was preferable over the material realm. This explains the supernatural priority of the apostolate.

5.3. The Sacralization of the Vocation

A further consequence of this belief system was the sacralization of vocations. According to Hostie, sacralization (in general) is much more resilient to scientific criticism than supernaturalism. The hierarchy, and by extension the entire church, could judge any questioning or criticism as blasphemous. It was prohibited and taboo to question that which was thought of as sacred (Hostie 1972, p. 264). This was reinforced by the tendency to obscure the meaning and foundations of Catholic teaching and customs (the discouragement for the laity to read the Bible and Latin masses are but two examples). Obscurity leads to mystification and sacralization, and when this is done collectively, it leads to untouchable ideas and taboos. One of these untouchables was the vocation, which was thought of as holy, mysterious, and inviolable. Questioning a vocation was taboo, both among the religious and the laity. A testimony about an ex-sister by her younger brother can serve as an example. The author explains that nobody knew her motives for becoming religious, but that this obscurity was probably related to the taboo on the topic of election. The family never talked insistently about the "mysterious concept of *vocation*" and assumed that someone who had such a holy intention must not be expected to justify her choice and was not held back (van Gent 2002, pp. 207–8).

The power of such collective mystifications cannot be underestimated. Withdrawal was nothing to go over lightly and was considered to be a grave sin against God's will: "It was told emphatically that once you had permission to profess the vows, this meant that Christ called you; refusal was not allowed", says one of Leeuw's retreated sisters (van der Leeuw 1968, 69).[25] Hostie's study affirms this when he addresses the coercion ad intra exercised by the monasteries. This consisted of scandalizing and shaming withdrawal, even when that would occur before the vows. This scandal, said to be a sin against God's will, was so coercive that candidates usually stayed in the community, motivated only by fear

and pressure: "Many a superior or spiritual guide have threatened with the prospect of a deeply unhappy life, with divine wrath, with the eternal damnation". According to Hostie, these accusations and threats can be found in most of the devotional literature, but he does not refer to anything specific (Hostie 1972, p. 260).[26] Additionally, the household played a role, as many religious were afraid to disappoint their parents: "Greet said openheartedly, that the death of our parents had taken away the severity of her resignation from the monastery and even caused a certain sense of relief" (van Gent 2002, p. 210).[27]

5.4. The Incarnational and Holistic Theology of Vatican II

In comparison, the Second Vatican Council embraced the notion of the *nouvelle théologie* to revalidate the theological significance of natural, historical phenomena. Traditional sources were treated within their context.[28] Instead of dualism, a more sacramental and incarnationally inspired understanding was adopted and applied to many theological domains: to fundamental and biblical theology (*Dei verbum*), to ecclesiology (*Lumen gentium*), and to the theological interpretation of the world (*Gaudium et spes*).[29] This dismissed the spiritual dualism that was ultimately core to the active congregations. The theological foundation for this particular way of life disappeared and the incentive to keep the religious in the monasteries (the peer pressure) also lost its foundation. Indeed, the Council teaches that material and spiritual well-being are not contradictory, and even that material, physical needs can hinder spiritual growth. In *Gaudium et spes*, there is a consistent emphasis on the entire human person. The human person is not a soul and a body, but an embodied soul, or an ensouled body. It is no longer seen as virtuous to despise the body (or any material reality) in favor of the spiritual (GS (2019) 3, 22, 24, and 29; DV (2019) 13 and LG (2019) 8).

This resonated with Catholic theologians throughout the world. There is "only one vocation to salvation", wrote Gustavo Gutiérrez originally in 1972 (Gutiérrez 1975, p. 102). The holistic understanding became a necessary ingredient of the theology of liberation. A good critique of the dualism between nature and supernature in the context of salvation can be found in this book (Gutiérrez 1975, pp. 102–9). He refers in this context to Karl Rahner SJ, Henri de Lubac SJ, Thomas Aquinas OP, Edward Schillebeeckx OP, *Gaudium et spes*, and Gustave Martelet SJ, who said that the key term of the constitution *Gaudium et spes* is 'integral', and wants to address the *entire* person (Gutiérrez 1975, pp. 107–8). As mentioned by Erik Borgman, Schillebeeckx wrote in a letter in 2009: "Salvation comes from God, but is experienced in the world" (Borgman 2020, p. 158).[30] The older conviction that only spiritual salvation matters was thus denied by the council, which undoubtably had much more of an impact on the thoughts and experience of the religious than the single line of LG 40 about the universal call to holiness.

5.5. The Law of Disadvantageous Lead

Heijst regrets the collective forgetfulness about how all-pervasive this pre-conciliar mentality was in monastic life. It is neglected both by researchers and the religious themselves, who both tend to focus on the achievements of the religious apostolate in a purely functionalistic sense. She calls this "ascetism forgetfulness" (van Heijst 2008, p. 160). Instead, the significance of this theological core cannot be underestimated. However, where it initially led to excessive success, it eventually also caused the decline. To support this, Heijst appeals to the law of disadvantageous lead, developed by Romein (Romein 1935; van Heijst 2008, p. 153). Technically, this 'law' is not a law (in the sense of explaining a phenomenon that always occurs in certain fixed conditions), but it can be discovered in many historical occurrences, allowing one to approximate predictions despite the conditions of uncertainty and coincidence that are characteristic of history. Indeed, according to Romein, history is an indivisible complexity of coincidence and determination (Romein 1935, p. 753). The law of disadvantageous lead states that historical progress is not a linear process, but that instead an advantage at a certain moment will result in a disadvantage later, precisely *because* it had an early advantage. Romein gives the example of the lampposts in London, which long after electricity was invented continued to run on gas. Because the English had

an advantage in streetlights running on gas compared with other European cities, the big city of London was soon illuminated entirely. By the time electricity was invented, many other cities did not have such a large-scale street lighting system, which made it easier and much cheaper for them to immediately, and earlier than London, switch to electric lighting (Romein 1935, pp. 771–72).

Similarly, the ascetic dualism and world-renunciation is said to have caused both the success and the decline of religious life. Heijst demonstrates this by several examples. One regards the professionalization in healthcare (van Heijst 2008, pp. 186–89). The 20th century's increasing demand for efficiency and treatment was difficult to reconcile with the ascetic mentality. While the Dutch bishops pleaded for professionalization and update twice (in 1926 and 1949), this never succeeded. One of the complicating factors was the view on authority: when doctors became leading figures in hospital(-unit)s, sisters were hesitant to take orders from them. The cloister mentality did not allow the sisters to simply take orders from laity; they listened to their superior. Moreover, the cloister mentality heavily discouraged the sisters from taking individual responsibility and forbade them from intermingling with lay colleagues, being ambitious, or taking pride in their talents. As such, the cloister mentality made it considerably difficult for them to meet the modern demands of professionalization (van Heijst 2008, pp. 167–72).[31]

Some of this theory was already anticipated by van Heijst in 1985, when she wrote, on the pre-conciliar popular religiosity as fertile ground for vocations, that: "Catholicism in the 19th century cultivated strongly the inner devotion and was full of devotional practices: veneration of Saints, processions, all kinds of (ejaculatory) prayers at home and in church. In such an environment, vocations have a lot of opportunity. Many congregations *transferred this type of religiosity unchanged into the next century*" (van Heijst 1985, p. 22).[32] Other anticipations are found in Hostie (1972) and Alkemade (1966). Alkemade says that the dualism in the congregation constitutions resulted in a continuous tension in the lives of the religious in the 20th century and caused a division between self-sanctification and the service of the apostolate (230–321). The dualism supported unconditional sacrifice by which the apostolate could flourish, but it later complicated the idea of the intrinsic value of the apostolate and caused uneasy tensions in the religious attitude towards life and the apostolate in the twentieth century. Hostie wrote that the success of religious life was at once the reason why they struggled to adapt to new developments in society. He observed three stages in the lifespan of the institutions: growth, stability, and rigidification of aspiration (Hostie 1972, p. 255). With this latter concept, he means that those aspects that caused the success were solidified and therefore became suspicious toward change. It became more difficult to adapt to any rule, organization, or structure. Success causes stability and undercuts any will to change. Indeed, why would one change what is working perfectly—albeit that it only *seemed* to work perfectly? (Hostie 1972, pp. 265–66). This rigidity infested all levels, Hostie explains. The "general chapters cease to address any fundamental matters, unless to determine all that which is unquestionable" (Hostie 1972, p. 274).[33] The hostility towards anything that would question the presumed stability became dogmatic.

5.6. Evaluation and Critique

This is the first theory that includes the relevance of theology and spirituality for the social phenomena that surround religious life and the apostolate in the 19th and 20th century. Admittedly, Schneiders approach is, just like this one, theological at its core. The difference is that she does not discusses the decline of religious life. Since this theory did not yet resonate in other publications on the decline of religious life, it has to date been relatively safe from critique. That being said, we mention three potential risks.

(1)   The finding that theology informed the reality of the religious in their apostolate much more than most social scientists acknowledge is a fine asset to our knowledge about the decline, but must not result in neglect of the social sciences or an exclusion of the insights of previous studies. It may relativize the claims of the other theories, but it

does not exclude, for example, that in in the 1960s many or at least some boys and girls aspiring to enter religious life may have considered the cost–benefit ratio of this life compared to the lay alternative and concluded that there were more opportunities in the latter.

(2) The fact that the defenders of this theory are so few and isolated to the Dutch-speaking region can obscure it from the international academic society. The fact that most of them write in Dutch does not help (Hostie's book has been translated into English, however). The relatively isolated state of this theory made it relatively underexposed to criticism, which may render the arguments newer and more naïve than the publication dates might suggest. The current article is an attempt to bring the synthesis of their insights to the international debate.

(3) This theory does not at all mean that we need to construct a pre-conciliar framework in order to revitalize religious life. Instead, it adds a new challenge to construct a theological framework in line with the fundamental theology of the Council in which religious life can find new fertile ground. This is exactly what can be found in Schneiders' work (2013), where she develops a theology of religious life for the third millennium, in line with the incarnational, holistic approach of the Second Vatican Council.[34]

6. Conclusions

We end this article with a repetition of the conclusions mentioned in the introduction, but now supported with additional argumentation drawn from what has been done throughout the text.

(1) *Counting together the numbers of deaths, departures, and vocations obscures the possibility that the decline started earlier than is usually assumed.* This was demonstrated by exposing the theory of Stark and Finke to the finding of Heijst that, in the Netherlands, the vocations started to decline in the 1930s and the withdrawals started to increase in the 1950s. The societal explanations of Section 3 can help to explain why monastic life became less attractive between 1930 and 1965. The theological explanation of Section 5 further supports this by showing how the cloister mentality made it difficult for religious congregations to adapt to new developments in society. The neo-scholastic theology and the ascetic dualism that supported the cloister mentality became increasingly implausible during the years before the Council, which influenced the attractiveness of religious life, and could help to explain the increase in withdrawals during the 1950s. Further research needs to investigate these individual numbers of deaths, vocations, and withdrawals in other countries.

(2) *Some researchers on the topic of the decline of religious life are oblivious to the significance of theology to the success and the decline of religious life, reduce the complexity of theology to one sentence in* Lumen gentium 40, *or interpret it in terms of costs and benefits.* The reductive nature of this interpretation became especially clear in the fifth section, where the impact of the pre-conciliar theological frame on both the success and decline of religious life was thoroughly demonstrated. Either further research will have to take the significance of theology into account or it must be able to disprove its importance.

(3) *It is not possible to exclude any of the four main categories of explanation.* This article has demonstrated that it is impossible to claim that there is a single, easily identified cause for the decline as authors such as Stark, Finke, Ebaugh, Gribble, and Rodé do. Instead, historical, societal, ecclesial, and theological factors all play a role and mutually influence one another. Theology, the church, society, and history form a complex entirety and influence the development of religious life as well as its success. Further research will either need to prove that there can be indeed one clear cause, or will need to be prepared to accept that a single cause is highly unlikely. In the latter case, future research on opportunities for religious life must situate those opportunities in a social–historical–ecclesial–theological framework and in the context of developments

in society and the Church today, but also account for the developments in Catholic theology after Vatican II up to today.

Notes

1   More accurately: worldwide, the decrease in religious (sisters, brothers, and religious priests) is 33% (from 1,232,516 to 824,793). In the United States, the decrease in religious (sisters, brothers, and religious priests) is a much more dramatic 71% (from 194,474 to 55,466) (CARA 2021). About Europe it was difficult to find consistent data. The drop of 59% accounts for both Western and Eastern Europe between 1973 and 2018 and does not include the religious priests (Secretaria Status Rationarium Generale Ecclesiae 1975, p. 89; Agenzia Fides 2020).

2   This article is part of a research project that investigates the relation between religious life, the religious apostolate, and eschatology. When dealing with eschatology and hope in concrete situations, one must not be tempted to ignore or deny potential worrying signs of history. Hope must exist in truth despite of how worrying or frightening this truth might be. Ignoring the decline would be false optimism rather than true hope. Therefore, we thought it necessary to include research on the decline of religious life. A second reason is, of course, to better understand what is at the source of the success and decline of religious life and to estimate what the future is for religious life in Catholic Christianity.

3   We use a combination of different sources: CARA (*Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*) on religious sisters and brothers in the world and in the United States from 1970 until 2018 (CARA 2021; Agenzia Fides 2020; Secretaria Status Rationarium Generale Ecclesiae 1975, p. 89; 1981, pp. 301–19; 1987, pp. 188, 195, 202; 1993, pp. 188, 195, 202; 1999, pp. 200, 207, 214; 2005, pp. 200, 207, 214; 2011, pp. 208, 216, 224; 2012, pp. 208, 216, 224; 2017, pp. 208, 216, 224; Belgische Bisschoppenconferentie 2019, pp. 38–46; 2020, pp. 100–3). We have compared these data with the data provided by the particular articles and books that are discussed in this article.

4   Especially regarding withdrawals, monasteries were said to be hesitant to acknowledge such data. Additionally, the publication of yearly statistics by (arch)dioceses was often distorted by denial about the real situation. Various strategies were applied over the last few decades to make it seem as if the numbers are not as extreme (van Heijst et al. 2010, pp. 742–47).

5   In the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae 1979*, which covers the years between 1974 and 1979, the data are organized differently from that of other years and other institutes. Instead of providing a single number that presents religious women, religious brothers, or religious priests per country per year (as is done in the publications before 1974 and after 1979), a distinction is made between temporary vows, temporary professions, perpetual professions, departures, deaths, novices, etc. (Secretaria Status Rationarium Generale Ecclesiae 1981). This complicates the data between 1974 and 1979, especially if one is interested in the evolution of religious life in particular regions or countries during those years, since there are no geographical distinctions. Nevertheless, this presentation also has the benefit of distinguishing between numbers of people entering the monastery, departures, and deaths. It is unfortunate, however, that this distinction was only made in the reports by the Secretaria status rationarium generale ecclesiae between 1974 and 1979. As will be demonstrated later in this article, the merging of the numbers of departures, vocations, and deaths into one single number representing the totality of religious obscures important information and trends. Some researchers on this topic make this mistake by constructing theories on the basis of the merged numbers.

6   For instance, the opinions by some journalists (Briggs 2006); members of the church hierarchy (Rodé 2011); and even theologians (Weigel 2012a; cf. Weigel 2012b).

7   Many scholars, for instance, reduce the complexity of the entire theological framework of Vatican II to one sentence in *Lumen Gentium* (LG 40) and interpret it in economic terms of costs and benefits.

8　　Besides Schneiders, this religious confidence is also noted by investigative journalist Eileen Markey: "Given the dire future their communities face, women religious could be forgiven for a gloomy or fearful attitude. But the nuns aren't a defensive remnant. Optimism, confidence and even excitement characterise their atttudes toward the future" (Markey 2007, 2a).

9　　One can compare the statistics of religious sisters and brothers to other aspects of Catholic life. In the United States, for example, the number of brothers and sisters combined decreased from 172,554 in 1970 to 45,158 in 2020. This is a decrease of 74% over fifty years. On the other hand, the total number of priests in the United States decreased by 40% (59,192 to 35,513), the number of baptisms decreased by 50% (1,089,000 to 545,710), the number of parishes decreased by 8% (18,224 to 16,703), and weakly mass attendance is estimated at a decrase of 31%. Worldwide (between 1970 and 2018), the numbers of religious decreased far more rapidly (33%) than priests (1%) baptisms (2%), and the number of parishes, which increased by 17%, (CARA 2021). Both in the West as worldwide, religious life has seemed to decrease, and this decrease is by far the steepest of any statistic in the Church.

10　　It is confusing because there is no strict definition, the causes are unclear, and the predictions that follow also differ. The classical secularization theory, for instance, argues that the disappearance of religion in public life is inevitable (see Bruce 2010). José Casanova, on the other hand, challenges the CST and says that this only applies to Europe (Casanova 1994). He also speaks of a process of "deprivitazation" of religion (Casanova 1994, p. 211), where Peter Berger and David Martin speak of "desecularization" (Berger 1999; Martin 1969). There is also confusion about what exactly it is. Most would argue that secularization is the decline of religion, but others say that it is just the differentiation of spheres, which has the effect that religion is put into its own sphere without relevance to other spheres such as politics and the sciences.

11　　They also mention Marie Augusta Neal SNDdeN, who also "listed changes in society and the Church as reasons why fewer people were entering religious orders" (Johnson et al. 2014, 9; cf. Neal 1984).

12　　See, for instance, the testimony of Luc van Gent about his sister who wanted to leave the monastery: "Indecisive religious did not want to hurt their family, especially their parents. This was a dominant thought for a very long time". On the following page the author explains further: "In 1959, thirty years after her entrance, Greet again became just miss Van Gent and she was, despite her unusual choice for the time being, warm-heartedly welcomed by everybody" (van Gent 2002, pp. 209, 210). Translation ours.

13　　Translation ours.

14　　The twentieth century depreciation of charitable work by (1) the church, (2) by society, (3) by historians, and (4) by the religious themselves has been analyzed thoroughly by van Heijst (2002, pp. 267–82).

15　　"I chose to use GNP (gross national product per capita) as an indicator of female labor force participation, based on numerous studies that have demonstrated a correlation between career opportunities for women and the rate of industrialization in a society" (Ebaugh 1993, p. 71).

16　　Italics in original.

17　　In the context of the controversy about wearing the habit, a significant historical argument can be found in the work of Hostie. He wrote that in the Middle Ages the "religious came to dress themselves in distinctive clothing, while their founders aspired only one thing: inconspicuous clothing that made them disappear in the crowd. Pachomius prescribes his monks to dress them like the farmers of the surrounding area". Francis, Norbert, and even Ignatius prescribed similar things (Hostie 1972, p. 270). Translation ours.

18　　Cf. The following citations by Rodé: "was it not precisely this 'renewal' that has landed us where we are today?" (Rodé 2011, p. 24). Additionally: "Many religious were uncomfortable with wearing the habit. Social and political agitation became the acme of apostolic action. The New Theology shaped the understanding and the dilution of the faith. [. . .] The results came swiftly in the form of an exodus of members. [. . .] Vocations quickly dried up. Even as the results began to speak for themselves, there were still those who said that things were bad because there hadn't been enough change, the project was not complete. And so the damage was further compounded. It must further be noted that *many of those responsible for the disastrous decisions and actions of those post-conciliar years later left religious life themselves*" (30).

19　　By 'third world' we obviously intend to express the original sense of the term during the cold war: countries that did not fall within the sphere of influence of either the capitalist West (first world) or communist East (second world). We do not intend any stereotypical misinterpretation of the term beyond this original meaning.

20　　This decree contains a variety of practical guidelines to renew religious life according to the needs of the time (*aggiornamento*) and founded on the original charism of the founder (*resourcement*). Among other things, the document abolishes the *clausura papalis* for the sisters dedicated to apostolic works (§16), and instructs the institutions to organize general chapters (§23), to adapt the habits (§17), and to provide proper training for their members (§18).

21　There are texts by other authors that almost explore this possibility, but they retreat from it before it becomes interesting. An example is Amy Koehlinger. In her book *The New Nuns*, where she investigates racial justice in the context of religious reform in the 1960s, she mentions the 'cloister mentality', which was codified in the CIC in 1917, and was meant to protect the sisters from profane pollution. This found expression in rigid restrictions on the sisters on what they could and could not do (Koehlinger 2007, p. 6). Koehlinger's book is somewhat disappointing if one is interested in the theology underlying this 'cloister mentality', but this is not the aim of the book. Koehlinger's aim is merely to investigate and explain the racial apostolate of American sisters from the 1960s onwards.

22　The main reason for Heijst to write an article about pre-conciliar ascetic dualism was to answer the common critique of her previous work on the reappreciation of charitable work (van Heijst 2002), that it would be too praising about the religious (van Heijst 2008, pp. 154–57).

23　Citations of Heijst in this paragraph are our translation, slightly modified only for literary purposes.

24　Translation ours.

25　Free translation of original: "Nadrukkelijk werd gezegd dat, als je eenmaal toestemming had gekregen om de geloften te doen, dit betekende dat Christus je riep; dan mocht je niet weigeren".

26　Translation ours.

27　Translation ours.

28　See, for instance, the affirmation that God incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth *in history* (*Dei verbum* 2; 13).

29　See: *Dei verbum* 13: "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, by taking on the weak human flesh, became like humans". *Lumen gentium* 8: "But the hierarchically organized society and the Mystical Body of Christ, the visible external assembly and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church who is given heavenly gifts, must not be considered as two realities: instead, they form one complex reality which is assembled from a human and a divine element". And in *Gaudium et spes* 3: "Therefore, the human being, as one totality, with body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will, will be the focus of our entire explanation".

30　Translation ours.

31　In her words: "The same solid structure that caused the congregations in the 19th century to rise and grow, becomes in the twentieth century an obstacle to the ability to accept authority based on expertise and to grant professionalized religious individual responsibility. Even when the situation in the hospitals clamoured for it, it appeared impossible to relativize the authority of the superior and to grant the nurse-religious freedom of action. This led to dividedness among the sisters, because the professionalized religious felt the need for more space, but they could not obtain it, not from the superior of their house and sometimes not even from the higher superior. Was this inflexibility just rigid rigorism or was it spiritual loyalty to the monastic tradition and to a sanctified rule?" (van Heijst 2008, p. 172). Translation ours.

32　Translation ours. Emphasis ours.

33　Translation ours.

34　In effect, she is dismissive of any world-renouncing theology. Intended is, of course, to counter pre-conciliar sentiments and anti-modern nostalgia, but one may wonder whether this does not negatively affect the hermit spirituals who genuinely seek God in isolation from the world (see Schneiders 2013, pp. 14–19, 55–57, 64–65, 67, 112–13). An answer to this question can partly be deduced from her presentation of asceticism in religious life as a process of "letting go", "purification of desire", and "detachment" of worldly goods (Schneiders 2013, pp. 318–28). It seems as asceticism in itself is good, according to Schneiders, lest it be inspired by a love for the world and not by hate of it and the wish to escape it.

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