

THE CATHOLIC FLEMISH STUDENT MOVEMENT 1875-1935

EMERGENCE AND DECLINE OF A UNIQUE YOUTH MOVEMENT

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In the international historical literature on youth movements, there are traditionally two ‘prototypes’ mentioned: the German *Wandervogelbewegung* and the English Scouting. The *Wandervogelbewegung* – starting in 1903 and lasting until 1914, though with far reaching repercussions on the *Bündische Jugend* of the Weimar republic – was a society of pupils from secondary schools.¹ They formed small local branches of the movement and organised hiking tours through the countryside in an attempt to escape from the industrial and conservative society (*‘Gesellschaft’*) of imperial Germany. They wanted to experience forms of genuine community life (*‘Gemeinschaft’*) in their own group and through contact with traditional songs, folklore and local customs, that were considered to be expressions of a German authenticity. Their fundamental critique against the established society, led them to a form of escapism in creating an ‘empire of youth’ outside of the ‘real’ world.

‘Scouting’, introduced by Robert Baden-Powell – officially during a camp on Brownsea Island in 1907 – was above all a method wherein ‘self-government’ was a core element.² An altruistic life code was summarized in the slogan: ‘be prepared’, referring both to mutual help and service to others. To develop this attitude there was an emphasis on hiking and camping in the open air and working together for survival. The deeper aim was to educate youngsters in ‘good citizenship’, which referred more to a smooth integration into society than to a critique on the establishment.

The aim of this chapter is to present a third prototype not mentioned until now within international literature, but a worthy inclusion for comparison with the two above mentioned examples and even pre-dating both of them: the Catholic Flemish Student Movement (with capitals, as here it is used as a proper name).³ It was an autonomous youth movement, mainly for pupils of secondary

¹ Felix. Raabe, *Die Bündische Jugend. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Weimarer Republik*, Stuttgart, 1961; Walter Laqueur, *Die deutsche Jugendbewegung. Eine Historische Studie*. Cologne, 1978² (1962); Heinz .S. Rosenbusch, *Die deutsche Jugendbewegung in ihren pädagogischen Formen und Wirkungen*, Frankfurt 1973; Peter D. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement. 1900-1945. An Interpretative and Documentary History*. London, 1981; Otto Neuloh and Wilhelm Zilius, *Die Wandervögel. Eine empirisch-soziologische Untersuchung der frühen deutschen Jugendbewegung*. Göttingen, 1982.

² John Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society*, London, 1977; Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden Powell and the Origins of the Boys Scout Movement*. New York, 1986; Robert H. MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire. The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement. 1890 -1918*. Toronto, 1993.

³ The authors, both historians and professors at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium), have been studying the subject for 40 years now, have published several books and articles about it based upon original sources, and wrote the chapters on ‘Student movements’ in the 19th and 20th centuries in W. Rüegg (ed.) *A History of the University in Europe*, Cambridge (University Press) (Vol III, 2004, ol IV in print), wherein they compared different European cases. The most important books dealing with this subject are: Lieve Gevers. *Bewogen Jeugd. Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van de Katholieke Vlaamse Studentenbeweging. 1830 -1894*. Leuven,

schools, under the leadership of university students from the Catholic University of Leuven, as well as seminarians (students preparing for the priesthood). It had been flourishing in Flanders – the Dutch speaking northern half of Belgium – for about 60 years, from 1875 until 1935. It combined the need for fraternity among young people with a critical commitment to the (Catholic) Flemish (national) Movement, and played a major role in the self-education of generations of influential Flemish Catholic intellectuals, and in preparing militants committed throughout their life to the Catholic Flemish cause.

Youth order, youth care, youth movements

The concept of ‘youth’ did not always have the meaning or connotation that it evokes today. Now it refers to a clear cut part of the life-cycle between childhood and adult life, with specific characteristics of its own. In pre-industrial societies, such a life-cycle period certainly did not exist as a general pattern. In those days, children immediately after their infancy had to work for their daily bread and were therefore confronted with the hardships and struggles of life from a very early age. Nevertheless, there was also a privileged category of youngsters that had existed since ancient time, one that belonged to the nobility and other upper social classes and who experienced a distinct period between childhood and adult life, one which was devoted to learning. Their number increased in the middle ages with the foundation of universities, and the growing demand within the centralising modern states for civil servants with a proper education. In medieval cities there were also craft- and professional fraternities formed to meet the needs of young apprentices travelling in search of training. But in a society where 85 % of the population lived on the land, it was only a small minority of young people benefiting from these opportunities, and experiencing their youth as a specific stage in their life.⁴

Also in pre-industrial societies though, the bulk of young people met in spontaneous and informally, structured, local fraternities, giving room for the get-togetherness of their generation. This ‘traditional youth order’ – as it was labelled by the Dutch sociologist J.S. Van Hessen – had specific functions, not on the economic level, but as self regulating bodies both in the moral and social order. Their functions included the regulation of communal sexuality, particularly the access to marriage, the guarding of the traditional order within a system of unwritten rules which resulted sometimes in enforcing the social equilibrium of village life by ritual and symbolic ‘*charivari*’.⁵ But in daily life, this ‘traditional youth order’, which lasted in non-industrial areas in Western Europe until the end of the nineteenth century, was less spectacular. Its daily pattern comprised of hanging around in a group at certain places, strolling the streets, visiting pubs and dance halls, listening to music or making it

1987, and Louis Vos. *Bloei en Ondergang van het AKVS. Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Vlaamse Studentenbeweging. 1914-1935*, Leuven, 1982.

⁴ John R. Gillis, *Youth and History. Tradition and Change in European Age Relations. 1770 to the present*. New York, 1974, p., 26-31

⁵ Peter Selten, *Het apostolaat der jeugd. Katholieke jeugdbewegingen in Nederland. 1900-1941*, p. 35 referring to E. Shorter, M. Crubellier, J. Le Goff and J.-C. Schmit.

themselves, and chasing the girls. The 'traditional youth order' can be characterised as a primary institution, close to the function of the family because it contributed to the process of socialisation and self development.

The industrialisation, first in England, then in Belgium, France, and Germany, brought fundamental changes to European society. It gradually became divided into social classes with, aside from the privileged aristocracy and the hard working labour class, also a *bourgeoisie* or middle class that began to see itself as the main bearer of the nation, of modernisation, and of democracy, therefore also responsible for religious and moral regeneration. This process enhanced the need for an expansion of schooling at the secondary level, attracting mainly youth from the middle class, and to some extent from rural areas as well. The secondary schools became the main instrument for the formation of a new more educated class of civil servants and teachers. For some it was also the stepping stone to the university where the elite was educated.

The gradual segmentation of schooling caused a clearly cut segmentation of the life cycle, so that a distinct period of adolescence appeared, as a 'moratorium' wherein societal responsibilities for the young were postponed in order to make room for a formal education. It also opened the way for the creation of a specific 'youth culture', and extra-curricular activities in a 'third milieu of education' beneath family and school. In the interwar period more youngsters benefited from this new system, but it was only after World War II that it became more or less a general pattern in Western Europe.

In the second half of the 19th century, those concerned with the welfare of children came to the fore. Their motives could be of a religious nature or inspired by an enlightened scientific view. The notion of 'adolescence' for all youth, not only for a happy few that could afford to study, served here as a cornerstone. The idea that it was necessary for young people to experience their youthfulness was in England expressed in the slogan 'boys will be boys'. It was at first attributed mainly to the inmates of secondary elite schools, but was later generalised to all youth, regardless of their class or background.⁶ Also, the idea that it was better to organise the 'free time' of youth rather than let them hang around spontaneously, became predominant

The breakthrough in an organised group life for youth that followed was the result of three developments: the conviction in circles of educators that it was necessary to create some specific provisions for youth, the choice of the association model, which already existed for adults, and the idea that some elements of the traditional youth order should best be incorporated in the new youth organizations.

From different sides there were initiatives to establish such forms of 'youth care', set up by adults. Some were of a Christian denominational colour, other more 'neutral' and apolitical. We mention for Britain here only the creation of the YMCA in 1854, the Boys Brigade in 1883 and the

⁶ John R. Gillis, *Youth and History*, p.138-139.

Toynbee Hall in 1884. On the continent from the 1850s, there were Catholic patronages set up, firstly in France and Belgium, while in Germany the Catholic priest Adolf Kolping launched the *Sankt Joseph Gesellenverein* which expanded into the Netherlands. In French speaking Belgium, priests began circles for secondary school pupils, meeting during holiday-periods, and labelled as '*Estudiantines de vacances*'. Those initiatives were inspired "by a certain romantic notion of youth as source of personal and societal revitalization".⁷ Some adults wanted to mobilise the young for societal goals: examples were the several local branches of the *Zouaven-corps* - whose name referred to that of the military volunteers fighting for the Pope in 1860-1870 - established by priest-teachers as an extracurricular association in Flemish Catholic secondary schools in Flanders, the ideologically completely different '*Bataillons scolaires*' of the French Third republic, and also, around the turn of the century, several 'Young Guards' of political parties which were established in Belgium. In all those associations, although the members were young people, the responsibility laid mainly with the adults organising them, with an emphasis on 'paternity'.

At the end of the 19th century, there emerged a new type of youth association which went beyond the previous 'youth care' organisations, leaving more scope of responsibility for the youngsters themselves. This new form became known as the 'youth movement'. Steadily, small groups of friends formed by young people, with 'fraternity' as a core element, creatively organized their own youthful educational, recreational and cultural activities, according to the principle of 'self-government'. A 'youth movement' could be defined as 'a youth association, lead by young people under their own responsibility, with members joining on a free basis, requiring an active participation of all group members to create a fraternal local group atmosphere, embedded in, and inspired by, a specific code of life, which would guide the attitude and behaviour of the members, not only during the group meetings, but also in daily life, as they nurtured their awareness of belonging to a specific generation, with a mission of its own'. Self responsibility of the young did not stand in the way of support from adults, who were accepted as advisers and helpers, but the decisions were made by the young people themselves. As opposed to the 'youth care'-approach, where the emphasis was upon what John Gillis has called the 'paternity'-component, in the 'youth movement' the centre of gravity shifted to the 'fraternity' approach, which was closer to the 'natural' need of young people for getting together.⁸

In the self image and early historiography of the first youth movements, the emergence was usually presented as a spontaneous rebellion of youth, driven by the need for emancipation against repressive adults and authorities. That was a mystification. The social atmosphere wherein those youthful initiatives emerged, needed to provide enough oxygen to let them breath. The viability of a youth movement is dependent upon the appreciation of parents and teachers, who in most cases were

⁷ John R. Gillis, *Youth and History*, p. 141

⁸ John R. Gillis, *Youth and History*, *passim*

even at the origin of the sensibility of youngsters to start it. This is logical given the fact that socialisation of youth is always the result of an interaction between cultural elements transmitted by adults and its appropriation and adaptation by young people, who through their fresh contacts transform and renew the existing culture.

Therefore the usual interpretation suggesting that the *Wandervogelbewegung* emerged as a natural 'spontaneous' protest, is doubtful. It seems that the protest against the suffocating and coercive atmosphere within German secondary schools, originated and had its first success in the 'Gymnasium' of Berlin-Steglitz, a school characterised by a relatively open climate, and even an open-hearted contact between teachers and pupils. As a consequence, Ulrich Aufmuth defines the emergence of the *Wandervogelbewegung* as "eine gelernte Rebellion", a 'taught attitude', cranked-up to a certain extent by some teachers.⁹ The movement was not so much opposing the middle-class-culture, but the aristocracy still dominating the society, and the industrialisation. It reflected as such the anxiety of the middle-class for the modernizing society.¹⁰

Catholic Flemish Student Movement

There are parallels with the situation in Flanders – i.e. the Dutch speaking northern part of Belgium – Were in the last quarter of the 19th C. emerged the Catholic Flemish Student Movement, as the first free youth movement. Its birth was embedded in a romantic commitment to the cause of the revival and revitalisation of the Flemish community and people, which was considered to be in its deepest and most authentic essence Catholic. The broader 'Flemish Movement' was initially a mere by-product of Belgian nationalism. It aimed at putting the Dutch language – the language of the people in Flanders – on an equal footing with French, which since 1831 had been proclaimed the only official language in Belgium, and was spoken not only in Wallonia – the Southern part of the country – but also in the North by the upper-class. From the second half of the 19th Century on, the Flemish Movement was mainly supported though by Catholics, especially by many priests. For them, the struggle for a Catholic Flanders and for equality of the Dutch language became two sides of one coin. In about 1890, the Flemish Movement broadened its programme, advocating a Flemish Belgian sub-nationalism

⁹ Ulrich. Aufmuth, *Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung unter soziologischem Aspekt*. Göttingen, 1979. p.145. In his analysis, Aufmuth argued that the view of a "spontaneous rebellion of youth" was based upon three unproven suppositions. The first one is that an 'objectively unfavourable situation' is immediately recognised as such by the youngsters and therefore would affect immediately their conscience. The second one, that this new awareness would automatically and immediately cause an attitude of protest. The final one, that reaction in a new situation always follows a transparent cause-consequence scheme. In reality, the 'objective' reality is not immediately experienced as such, but perceived and therefore also transformed by interpretation. The subsequent action is less inspired by an intellectual analysis than by value-judgments and by the social position someone has. Therefore, the reaction of individuals or groups in a given situation can not completely be explained by a simple stimulus-response scheme. Ulrich Aufmuth., *Die deutsche Wandervogelbewegung*, p. 92-93

¹⁰ Peter D. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement. 1900-1945*; Otto Neuloh and Wilhelm Zilius, *Die Wandervögel*.

including not only a linguistic but also a social, economic and political emancipation of the Belgian-Flemish community. The Christian Worker's Movement also supported those claims. Gradually the Catholic, Flemish and social emancipation became three terms within the same equation.¹¹

The Catholic Flemish Student Movement joined in with the Catholic Flemish Movement as a whole, and shared her ideals and objectives. It emerged in Flanders in the 1870's as a free youth movement, without a formal link to the Church or to Catholic organisations. It attracted mainly students of secondary school-level, between 12 and 18 years old, but also university students and seminarians, who were preparing themselves for the priesthood. Students and seminarians studying at Leuven University formed the overarching leading committee. It would last until the 1930s before public life in Flanders – including the secondary schools – would switch from French to Dutch. Throughout almost the entire period under consideration, the students, seminarians and secondary school pupils in Flanders were daily confronted with French as the language of instruction.

Therefore it is understandable that in the self image of the movement, the members described its birth as the result of a spontaneous protest on places where the burden of French culture was felt most. However, that heroic story has not been confirmed by our historical research. We concluded that, on the contrary, as well as at the moment of its conception in the nineteenth century, during its revival after World War I, the movement flourished first and foremost where a certain pro-Flemish climate already existed. In nineteenth century Flanders, the structural pre-condition and the seed for the emergence of the movement was the network of Catholic secondary schools, most of them under the authority of the bishops, where the atmosphere was created by young priests who taught there, a common practice being to give young priests, normally ordained at the canonical age of 24, their first appointment in a secondary school rather than in a parish.

The conjuncture was formed by the political polarisation in Belgium between Catholics and Liberals in the second half of the nineteenth century, which also affected the Flemish movement. The rise since 1872 of a militant anti-clerical and free-thinking liberalism trying to get a grip on the whole Flemish Movement, caused a Catholic reaction. Hugo Verriest, a priest from West-Flanders and a teacher at the minor seminary of Roeselare, with the approval of his bishop, called the youth to arms, in order to defend the Catholic heritage. Entwining Catholic and pro-Flemish arguments against the threat of free masonry was a potent mixture that appealed to the Catholic students. His call was responded to by the generation ending its secondary school in 1876, with Albrecht Rodenbach as its charismatic leader.¹² When he went to the Catholic University of Leuven, he met student leaders from other provinces inspired by the same commitment for the renaissance of a Catholic Flemish people and culture. Together, they founded in 1877 an overarching organisation, comprising student leaders

¹¹ Emmanuel Gerard, 'The Christian Worker's Movement as a Mass Foundation of the Flemish Movement' – Kas Deprez & Louis Vos (eds). *Nationalism in Belgium. Shifting Identities. 1780-1995*. Basingstoke, 1998, p. 127-138.

¹² Michiel De Bruyne and Lieve Gevers, *Kroniek van Albrecht Rodenbach (1856-1880)*, Brugge, 1980, 294 p.

of the five Flemish provinces, with an aim to build up a movement lead by University students but which had ramifications in all of the provinces among the Catholic Flemish youth in secondary schools.

The University of Leuven had a medieval predecessor (founded in 1425) but was re-established under episcopal supervision after the revolutionary period in 1835. At the time under discussion here, there were French-speaking and Dutch speaking students attending the same classes, but both language groups had a separate social life.¹³ From the 1870's on, the Flemish students began to organise their social, cultural and political activities through Dutch-speaking associations. Inspired by a 'back to the people spirit', they saw themselves as men with a mission in the service of the Flemish people, forming a second class group within Belgian society. They joined the broader Flemish Movement as a group, wherein from the 1870's onwards, they played a spearheading role. As such, they were an example of a student movement of the "classical type", a movement joining a broader emancipation movement wherein it served as a vanguard and as mobilizing force. Due to their leading role in the Catholic Flemish Student Movement, the Flemish students in Leuven also had a great impact on the orientation of the pupils within the secondary schools.¹⁴

Ideological evolution

Once the movement was on its way, some tension arose with school and church authorities. The reason was that the movement drew the obvious conclusions of the teachings of the young priests and as a result demanded a new more authentic Flemish atmosphere in the schools. By doing so it became a source of trouble in the eyes of the authorities. In 1877 and 1878, the bishop of Bruges ordered measures against the movement which was, at that time, gaining momentum within his schools, largely hindering and, to some extent, stopping the local activities and the overarching organisation. However, this could not prevent the movement from taking off again after 1880. The sanctions of the bishop were not so much in opposition to the Flemish demands of the movement as such, but were directed against a rebellious spirit which could lead to insubordination and a weakening of discipline and an undermining of the ecclesiastical authority.¹⁵

¹³ All courses were taught only in French until 1914, and only in about 1935 were all classes taught both in French and Dutch, so that students were able to choose the linguistic regime. In 1968, the university was completely split along linguistic lines, and the Francophone part was transferred in the 1970's to an area South of the linguistic borderline, where it formed the nucleus of a new city called 'Louvain-la-Neuve' (near Wavre).

¹⁴ Lieve Gevers and Louis Vos, Ch. 8 'Student Movements' – in, Walter Rüegg (ed). *A History of the University in Europe. Volume III. Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800-1945)*. Cambridge, 2004, p. 269-361; Louis Vos 'Rebelse generaties. Het studentenprotest in de jaren zestig', in Louis Vos, Mark Derez, Ilse Depraetere en Wivina Van der Steen. *De stoute jaren. Studentenprotest in de jaren zestig*, Tiel, 1988, p. 7-54.

¹⁵ Lieve Gevers, 'The Catholic Church and the Flemish Movement' – K. Deprez & L. Vos (eds). *Nationalism in Belgium. Shifting identities. 1780-1995*. Basingstoke, 1998, p. 110-119.

The ideological evolution of the Catholic Flemish Student Movement followed the winding road of the mental changes within the broader society. The founder of the first student association in West-Flanders and in Leuven, Albrecht Rodenbach, was a cultural nationalist, aiming more at creating a new mentality in Flanders rather than at political action. Through his writings and organisational talent, he gave to the movement its classical form; that also later – he died as a student at the age of 24 in 1880- would continue to serve as a point of reference. His protests, and that of his friends, were mainly against the ‘degenerating education’ – because it was French in language and spirit – in the secondary schools, and of course also against the repression of his movement by the bishop of Bruges. But he also turned against both the lukewarm attitude of many pro-Flemish Catholics and the, in his eyes, hypocritical policy of the Flemish liberals. He was convinced that this generation of Flemish students and pupils would play a key-role in the Catholic-Flemish awakening. More than anyone else, he was responsible for spreading the feeling of a specific “mission” of commitment to the cause within the student body. For more than a century, this missionary pro-Flemish spirit would be transmitted from generation to generation.

From about 1879, the movement’s centre of gravity shifted from West-Flanders to seminarians in Mechelen and then to pupils from Antwerp secondary schools, with Adolf Pauwels as main leader. They changed the objective from cultural towards political action. Through language legislation they hoped to realise – at least partially – ‘Dutchification’ of the public secondary school system in Flanders, under the supposition that the numerically stronger Catholic network of secondary schools would also then automatically follow. Indeed, in 1883 a law imposed some bilingualism within the public secondary schools, which nevertheless remained French-speaking. The orientation towards advocating language legislation in education was maintained after 1884, when the leadership of the movement came again into the hands of students from different provinces in Leuven, and the political climate had changed because the Catholic Party again was in power. A new generation of students supported the organisation of several Flemish national meetings, wherein both Catholic and non-Catholic Flemish nationalists, students and non-students, tried to bundle their forces in order to put pressure on the government.

This collaboration with non-Catholics provoked reaction, and seminarians in Mechelen gained control over the Flemish Catholic Student Movement, in order to preserve its Catholic character. The second overarching organisation they created in 1890, the Catholic Flemish Student Association, referred explicitly to the religious component of the movement. Their slogan was AVV VVK (‘Alles for Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Christus’) or ‘All for Flanders, Flanders for Christ’. But the new overarching organisation did not distance itself from the demands for education in Dutch and, subsequently, the archbishop of Mechelen formally forbade the movement in his diocese in 1892. However, the effect of this step did not last for long. The movement continued to exist and, after a

short while, the rectors or directors of Catholic schools and the authorities in the seminaries turned a blind eye, even on occasion supporting the movement once more.

One reason was that in the two other dioceses comprising Flemish provinces, i.e. those of Ghent and Liège, there was no repression at all, but rather overt or quiet support of the movement by the clergy. There was also a lessening of the tension between the church- and school authorities who wished to keep their seminarians and secondary school pupils away from politics, because at around the turn of the century, the Flemish Movement as a whole broadened its programme. As a result, within the Catholic Flemish Student Movement the interest shifted from the political to the cultural level and mainly targeted the personal cultural development of its members, combined with the social commitment of the student youth and the younger clergy in the then booming Catholic Social Organisations. In 1903, for the third time, an overarching organisation the AKVS (Algemeen Katholiek Vlaamsch Studentenverbond / General Catholic Flemish Student Association) was founded where the label 'general' meant the whole of the Flemish region, crossing the borders between the provinces or dioceses. It flourished for more than a decade, but was brought to a standstill by the outbreak of the First World War.¹⁶

Many older members found themselves serving as soldiers in the trenches. Most local associations, as far as they could continue activities, did so in the line of the pre-war tradition. From 1919 onwards, there was a resurrection of the movement both on the local and the overarching level. It experienced a flourishing period. But the First World War also brought about an ideological rupture in the larger Flemish Movement. In fact, two factions emerged that became more and more antagonistic in the interwar period. On the one hand there were those who considered themselves the heirs of the Activists, pro-Flemish militants who, during the war, had accepted the help of the German occupier in carrying out some structural changes in order to solve some pre-war Flemish grievances. On the other hand, there was the majority of the Flemish movement – mainly of Christian-democrat orientation, who during the war had remained loyal to Belgium.

The former created a Flemish-Nationalist political party aiming at 'home rule' for Flanders but gradually evolving more into an anti-Belgian direction, rejecting not only the Belgian state, but soon also the Belgian parliament and parliamentarism itself. In the early thirties, the ultra-Flemish-nationalist party was transformed into a uniformed fascist one, adopting the principle of all power to the leader. The latter remained loyal to Belgium and democracy, was supported by the majority of pro-

¹⁶ The first overarching organisation of 1877 was named 'Vlaamsche Studentenbond' (=Flemish Student Association), the second one established in 1891 'Katholiek Vlaamsch Studentenverbond' (= Catholic Flemish Student Association), the name AKVS dates from 1903 when the final overarching association the 'Algemeen Katholiek Vlaamsch Studentenverbond' (= General Catholic Flemish Student Association) was established, but retrospectively AKVS is used to indicate the organisation of the Catholic Flemish Student Movement over the whole period.

Flemish citizens and wished to achieve mono-lingualism in Flanders for public affairs through parliamentary action and language laws.

This rupture had major consequences for the student movement. The post war generations of Flemish students in Leuven were strongly attracted to the radical orientation and they also tried to push the Catholic Flemish Student Movement to come over to the radical camp. Disciplinary measures by the rector, fully supported by the episcopate due to provocations by anti-Belgian Flemish-nationalist student leaders lead to an open student revolt in 1924 and 1925. The Belgian bishops' condemnation of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism in 1925 fuelled radicalism, not only in Leuven, but also in many Catholic secondary schools. These developments alarmed the bishops, especially as the moderate wing of the student body which had tried to counter this radical offensive was apparently unsuccessful.

Therefore, on the one hand the bishops tried to stop anti-Belgian Flemish-nationalism in their schools by repressive means, whilst on the other hand the most pro-Flemish of them, firstly the bishop of Liège and later a new bishop in Ghent, attempted to free the local branches of the movement within their own diocese from the leadership in Leuven. This led to the formation of an alternative Catholic Flemish Student Movement, not anti-Belgian but certainly pro-Flemish, approved by the ecclesiastical authorities and with a larger role for the seminarians in the overarching provincial organisation. When around the same time the idea of organised Catholic action, as propagated by the Pope, was set up in Flanders, it seemed logical to incorporate in this new structure the local associations of pupils, seminarians and students. They were eventually forced to cut all contact with the leadership in Leuven and join the new Catholic Student Action organisations.

This was possible because of the functional autonomy of the local groups. Between 1928 and 1935, a long power struggle took place, putting the young members in the difficult dilemma of remaining faithful to the old organisation, or choosing to follow the bishop. The new youth organisations considered themselves to be the heirs of the old free Catholic Flemish Student Movement, because many of the local associations simply continued their activities, maintaining many of the old traditions, but now within a different framework. That new framework was more 'modern' and more in tune with the spirit of the time than the old AKVS, because it was conceived as top-down structure. Indeed, it was organised under the direct leadership of the bishop and clergy, and therefore was characterised by hierarchical decision making, with even the appointment of youth leaders by chaplains taking place at the lowest level.

The Catholic Flemish Student Movement came to its end as a result of both external coercive action and internal antagonism between different orientations. In the 1920s, the controversy was between those who wanted to place emphasis on the cultural and educational function of the movement, and those who sympathised with a radical anti-Belgian ideology and wanted more political

action. In a second stage, at the turn of the 1920s to the 1930s, when the bishops tried to channel the student youth away from the old organisation, it was about rebellion or obedience to the Church authorities. Finally, midway through the thirties, among the small group of believers that still followed the 'old tradition', there came a clash between those who wanted to maintain the custom of an autonomous student movement, and those who chose for incorporation in one of the radical right wing Flemish-national political formations.

Structural and functional characteristics

Four channels connected the local groups with the leadership in Leuven. A first one was the system of representatives. Some university students in Leuven, being also members of one of the many local associations in towns and villages in Flanders, served as a contact person between the lower realms of the movement and those at the very top, responsible for the exchange of information in both directions. This system proved at times to be a weak link, simply as a 'bottle-neck' in communication sometimes occurred. If the representatives were not dutiful, the ongoing contact between top and base evaporated. Moreover, there was also always the danger that the representatives would care less about transferring opinions and demands from the local level, and more about passing through the message from the top. That could easily lead to ideological manipulation.

But there were three other channels of bottom-up communication. Firstly, the secretary of each local association regularly drew up a report of the activities and mailed it to the leading general committee in Leuven. Secondly, there were organised meetings of the local leadership at the provincial and general rallies during Easter and summer holidays. Finally, there regularly appeared journals and sometimes circular letters with suggestions and directives for local activities. To avoid regional isolation, local associations also established mutual contacts on their own initiative. Sometimes leaders of different local chapters met in the same secondary school, sometimes they created an overarching regional structure wherein adjacent local groups could work together, and also there were mutual visits of the groups at fraternization meetings or local celebrations.

The structure of leadership followed in principle a bottom-up direction. The leadership was democratically chosen by annual elections in all of the local associations, nowhere was there a system of a top-down assignment. Through their representative in Leuven, the local chapters were entitled to elect the provincial leadership, and sometimes there was even an election on a provincial rally with all the presidents of the local groups participating. Amongst the five provincial committees, a general committee was chosen with one general president, usually someone who had served as a provincial president in the previous year. Throughout the whole period 1875-1935 though, the provincial autonomy was strong: for each decision there was unanimity needed within the provincial committees.

It was a tradition that even survived the AKVS as an organisation, and also remained strong in successive organisations incorporated within the Catholic action movement.

Another remarkable characteristic was that – despite the bottom-up structure – there was enough scope for the leading elite within the university to put their own accent on proceedings, without the threat of local associations amending it. This resulted in some tension with the seminarians, of whom only a small part studied in Leuven, and with local associations who did not agree with the general direction. Those tensions did no great harm to the activities of the majority of the members, because despite directives from above, in reality the local groups had functional autonomy. They could continue unimpeded, whether in line with what Leuven prescribed, or not.

During the academic year, the leadership in Leuven prepared the publication of the AKVS-periodicals and planned the activities for the Easter and summer vacations. Then there were rallies and meetings on the provincial and general level, but mainly on the local level, where in some cases the members of the local association met for activities almost everyday. In 1924 – the heyday of its history – the 233 regularly working local associations comprised of about 7000 young people in total. We estimate that in the eastern province of Limburg, $\frac{3}{4}$ of all pupils attending Catholic secondary schools were members of the movement, in West-Flanders half of them, in East-Flanders probably $\frac{2}{5}$, and in the province of Antwerp at least $\frac{1}{3}$.¹⁷ So, we can say that in the first half of the 1920's, the movement was firmly rooted in the milieu of Catholic pupils and students in Flanders. Important for its radicalisation in the 1920's was the fact that the leading elite of the youth movement were also deeply involved at the university level in the Flemish (university) student movement. So there was a certain merging of the youth movement with the 'classical' student movement at the university.

The Catholic Flemish Student Movement was embedded in the broad Catholic Flemish movement in different ways. Through its structural link with the student movement at Leuven University, through the lectures and speeches delivered by leading Flemish figures at local, provincial and general meetings, and the articles they wrote in the journals of the movement, and through the many priests teaching at the Catholic secondary schools, many of whom were former members of the movement, who transmitted their enthusiasm for the moral and cultural uplifting of the Flemish people. As a result, an idealistic commitment to the renaissance of a Catholic Flemish people was encouraged amongst the young students, from one generation to another.

The most typical element on the structural level was that the movement fully developed the characteristics of a youth movement, but also borrowed some elements from the university student movement. In the local branches it developed youthful life in a group of young people under their own leadership, directed towards personal and social development, but on the other hand it was embedded in the Flemish movement implying both preparation for a later commitment in adult life, and a direct

¹⁷ L. Vos *Bloei en ondergang van het AKVS.*, t. 1, p. 213-215. For the Flemish part of the province of Brabant there is a lack of evidence to calculate or even estimate percentages.

support of the movement of the contemporary period. This combination of an orientation prone to action, with an emphasis on personal and social formation oriented towards a commitment later in adult life, was the originality of the Catholic Flemish Student Movement. On the one hand it provided a free haven for youth, whilst on the other it oriented them towards the development of the broader community.

Despite all overarching initiatives, the movement only obtained its real stature on the local level. The local associations were founded on the initiative of local pupils, students or seminarians. In provincial towns, their associations were working permanently throughout the year, which was also the case in the semi-secret associations in Catholic boarding schools, mainly in East- and West-Flanders. The most common form of a local association though, scattered even across small villages in Flanders, gathered only during school holidays at Christmas, Easter and in the summertime. They then elaborated a very lively activity program, with almost daily meetings. Those groups had an average membership of 25 to 45 people, most of them studying in secondary schools. In some associations, the group of 12-14 years old was so large, that they could form a division of their own, to whom an appropriated program was set up, wherein recreational activities played a larger part than discussion meetings.

Those ‘serious’ meetings though, formed the backbone of the local program. They were a succession of lectures, songs, debates and encouraging words. It was there that the spirit of the movement was transmitted from generation to generation. It was also there that younger members came to the fore with declamations for the first time, and where they practised, through unprepared speeches, the fluency and command of the Dutch language, as their formal schooling was in French. Special attention was given thereby to the use of the standard language, and the avoidance of dialect. In many groups, those speeches were assessed, as far as their form was concerned, by a previously appointed referee. Aside from those ‘serious’ meetings, there were also more recreational and social activities like hikes, cycling-tours, pilgrimages, playing games and outdoor activities. Above all, in most groups there were also the daily rehearsals of the great theatre play that would bring together the whole local community at the end of the summer holiday, in an effort to contribute to popular education. All activities were imbued with Flemish nationalism and a Catholic spirit. Not surprising that each day started with the recommended daily group mass in the parish church, where prayers were said for Flanders.

The link between recreational activities and the educational program was the living tradition. It was also that tradition on which the authority of the leadership in Leuven, and in fact the whole organisational structure, was based. It was evoked at the provincial and general meetings where former student-leaders encouraged the actual members to keep the torch burning. It was omnipresent in the journals wherein “the great men of our People” were presented as ‘role models’ for the contemporary generation. Tradition was also articulated during the discussion meetings in the local associations,

where former members of the local group, priests, missionaries or ordinary lay people, regularly appeared as living parts of the uninterrupted chain that linked the past to the present. There were more local customs supporting this living tradition: the flag or standard of the group, for the creation of which the predecessors had, with great effort, collected donations. That flag was the symbol and rally-point for the association. It was solemnly carried in processions and in provincial or general parades, and it was the central symbol in the ceremony for the acceptance of new members. There were other symbols as well: the official song specially composed for that particular local association, and above all the logbook wherein all the activities were registered, handed over from generation to generation, wherein the actual members discovered that older local people, family, teachers, parish-priests or other well known public figures, had once also been active in the association. Through out all of this, the members got the impression that they were not simply forming a peer group of the same generation, meeting for fun and recreation, but also participants in a fraternity overreaching time and space, and fighting for the same noble cause.

Very correctly, John R. Gillis wrote – and I quote – “any explanation of youthful behaviour at a given point in time must take into account not only social and economic structures, but also previous historical experience of the age group, as an independent variable of its own. Tradition did not always stand in the way of change, but interacted with it in ways that made custom itself an agent of transformation”.¹⁸ The past was not simply the past, but “the layer upon layer of youth traditions”, and this reconciled tradition and continuity with change and renewal. That is also the reason why in the historical analysis of youth movements one should not stick only to the ideological evolution, because they follow the changes in the social context over time. More important is to find what the core characteristics of a youth movement are, and to also include in the analysis the slower pace of change in function and structure of the movement. It is only in the interaction between ideology, structure, daily life at the local level, and the functions in society that the specific identity of a movement can be described.

The functions of the Catholic Flemish Student Movement were different according to different groups: the members, the student elite at the university, the clergy and the ecclesiastical authorities, and the Flemish movement as a whole. For the members, the movement had foremost a function in their education and socialisation. It provided the opportunity to express their own creativity and to develop fresh contacts with the existing culture, and to do so by interpreting their mission in their own way together with members of the same generation. At the same time, this experience made them members of a broader ‘imagined community’ working for the benefit of the Flemish people. For the university students who were the leaders of the movement, its function was also partly that it could serve as a transmitter of ideas that emerged in the actual student generation in Leuven, to subsequent generations. The students of tomorrow were still in secondary schools. If they could be convinced of

¹⁸ John R. Gillis, *Youth and History*, p. 38

the orientation that prevailed at a certain moment in Leuven, this would consolidate that orientation for the future. There was a possible pitfall, especially in times of a radicalisation of the student movement at the university. If the leadership tried to spread the radical ideology within secondary schools, they risked coming into conflict with the school and church authorities. In the 1920's, this was actually the time bomb undermining the further autonomous existence of the Catholic Flemish Student Movement.

For the clergy and most of the bishops, the movement had the function of an auxiliary agent of idealistic and Catholic education. The altruistic and religious attitudes that the church and the teachers in the Catholic schools from the outside tried to impose upon their pupils in a normative and rational way, was also a part of the life code of the movement, and therefore more easily appropriated by the members in an intuitive way. On an educational level, the movement was simply seen as a third pillar after some time, alongside the family and the school. In 1919, it was rightfully a former provincial leader and then priest, Paul Vandermeulen, who typified the Catholic Flemish Student Movement as: “the main factor in our Flemish Movement, because it is from here, as from a source permanently bubbling up, that the convinced and unselfish militants emerge, who must procure the Flemish fight its uninterrupted continuation and final victory”.¹⁹ This statement also indicated that the movement was seen not only as a means for personal education, put also as a mobilising force ‘for Christ and Flanders’, and that was also why the broader Flemish movement – in majority Catholic – appreciated and supported it, as long at least as it remained within the broad consensus and the common front of those fighting for the resolution of the Flemish grievances.

Profile, significance, legacy

We can define the Catholic Flemish Student Movement as an original youth movement, comprising Catholic pupils of secondary schools, seminarians and students, organised in a structure wherein the local associations had a large functional autonomy and wherein the decision making followed a democratic bottom-up principle, although the leading elite of students and seminarians at the University of Leuven had an important role of its own, not controlled by the local associations. Its identity was the result of a specific configuration of several elements such as: the emergence as a by-product of an emancipation movement, a structural link with university students, a living youth tradition, a generational consciousness, a formal autonomy and self activation in local associations. Moreover, it had a specific function appreciated in general by the Catholic Flemish community in Belgium, and by the people responsible for Catholic and Flemish education. Its decline was due to the fact that gradually this positive functional perception disappeared.

¹⁹ In a letter from priest Paul Vandermeulen d.d. 20 May 1919 to seminarian Jozef Meekers, quoted by Louis Vos, *Bloei en ondergang van het AKVS.*, t. 1, p. 12.

The leading elite was strongly affected by the political development of the Flemish student movement at Leuven University and tried to influence the local associations, so as to keep up with the ideological developments in Leuven which sometimes caused tension with the Church authorities. The movement was embedded in the broader Flemish movement. This was accomplished through the actions of the leadership in Leuven, through the appearance at meetings of Flemish leaders and militants and the articles they published in the journals of the movement, and through the role of priests and seminarians played out on the local level in schools and associations.

Nevertheless, formally the movement remained autonomous, deciding on its own direction without any interference from the authorities, as well as being a great place for the living tradition, past down from generation to generation. Concerning the pattern of values, the movement always maintained the Flemish and Catholic emphasis, highlighting as a specific goal the education of its own members. This education in the formative years of adolescence would encompass problems on a social, cultural, religious and even political level, and somehow link them to the Flemish movement. So it embraced the 'now', but it aimed also at a militant participation within the Catholic Flemish movement 'later'.

Some have labelled the Catholic Student Movement as 'the oldest youth movement'. Certainly it was one of the oldest, but more importantly it was a unique one as compared to others. It did not create a specific youth realm of its own which rejected the "adult world", as the 'Wandervogelbewegung' had done in their heyday. It did not serve as an instrument for preparing youth for 'good citizenship' and for a smooth integration into the established order, as was the case for scouting. But it did combine the preservation of a space where committed youth could be themselves in an idealistic framework of serving the Flemish and Catholic community in the present and at a later time, and at the same instant enhanced the critical attitude towards the existing 'social order', without being tied to the leash of the Catholic Church or of a political party. Those were elements that would remain a part of "the subterranean traditions of youth"²⁰, especially in secondary schools and at university, for almost a century, affecting both the new Catholic Action youth movements that succeeded the AKVS in the thirties, and the commitment of generations of Catholic Flemish university students in Leuven. Its idealistic tradition was continued over many generations, until the 1960's. And even during the later period it might be an element in the explanation of why youth movements remained strong in Flanders, while in most other European countries they simply withered away from the sixties onwards.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that, apart from the above mentioned reasons for the decline of the AKVS, a more general aspect of the 'Zeitgeist' played a role also. In the 1930's, a time where a huge ideological struggle of radical right (and left) wing ideologies were engaged in a power struggle,

²⁰ David Matza, 'The Subterranean Traditions of Youth' – *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1961, 228, p. 102-118.

there was no longer any room left for autonomous youth associations. Not just in Flanders, but everywhere in Europe one saw the 'free youth movements' disappear. They were absorbed or replaced by new youth organisations, incorporated within political parties or Churches, with the aim of creating "a youth with a mission" that would affect the social and political developments. Especially when economic crisis spread over Europe, and political regimes seemed unable to stop it, the demand for radical solutions became stronger. Not only the Catholic Church, but also other organisations tried to strengthen their grip on the youth. The 'new youth' had to be incorporated again within organisations led by adults in their march towards a new order and a new society. In all those new formations, structure and form were important. The movements were all organised from top-down and developed a specific style. They wore uniforms, marched at the call of the clarion in a military style, bearing their banners to the rhythm of rolling drums. This style – which would survive the Second World War and remain a major element in Flemish youth movements until the 1960's – was an attempt to give expression to the 'new times'.

The decline of the Catholic Flemish Student Movement marked the end of the free youth movements in Flanders, but not of the youth movement as such. The new youth movements were structurally integrated within their ideological Catholic, socialist or liberal 'pillar', each of them consolidating their segment of the population. They were considered a reservoir for the mobilization of future militants. The Catholic youth movements were aiming at personal sanctification of their members as a preparation for their commitment to a conquest of society by religion. Their 'deviant conformism'²¹ was enhanced, i.e. their radical commitment as a group to defend the Catholic cause in the society, but always within the lines prescribed by the Church and the Catholic pillar.

Gradually though, and already the case since the 1940's, in all those youth movements, the focal point shifted from direct actions in the broader community towards personality development through group activities, although the ideological framework remained unquestioned, and the Flemish emphasis continued to be a self evident reflex, albeit more in emotional and cultural terms than in political demands. At the same time, 'youth movement' as a method was systematically developed, in its classical form of out-door activities in groups, borrowed partly from scouting and other older youth movements. Like the parades, the open-air activities and the emphasis on group life was a way out of the tedious meetings of the study circles. This development was seconded with the theoretical underpinning of "the unique methodology" of the youth movement by adults responsible for education. They suggested that the 'youth movement' was 'the third milieu of education', after the family and school. In all youth movements, leadership training adapted to various age groups was introduced, and the quality of the publications for leaders and members improved. It was through the 1950's that national and regional offices with paid 'leaders' were established, a period which, along

²¹ Klaus Allerbeck. *Soziologie radikaler Studentenbewegungen. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und den Vereinigten Staaten*, München-Vienna, 1973.