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In the face of death. Societal attitudes and popular opinion on medical aid and dying in Belgium 1936-1950

Introduction

In this contribution, we evaluate the scope, tone and volume of Belgian newspaper coverage in three events linked to euthanasia, which occurred prior to the emergence of Belgian advocacy groups on the subject in the 1980s. In doing so, we will show how the issue is related to the philosophical fault line that permeates Belgian society of the first half of the 20th century and consider how the issues related to medical aid in dying are related to the legitimatisation of social-sanctioned killing. This legitimatisation is one of the functions of the death system as presented in the introduction to this special section.

Before presenting the results of our research, we think it necessary to attest to the relevance of our endeavour. A couple of reasons come to mind. Firstly, Belgium and its Dutch neighbours, have, since the partial decriminalisation of euthanasia and other forms of medical aid in dying in the early 2000s, been considered internationally as pioneers in bio-ethical law-making, giving rise to an abundant volume of research. Two decades later, this legal situation remains highly exceptional.¹ Where historical research on the Dutch case exists, most notably in the form of the work done by Heleen Weyers, attempts to historicise the subject in Belgium until recently remained limited mostly to the narrowed scope that is the legislative work spanning from 1993 until 2002, with some short contributions on proposed legislation in the 1980s that were never dealt with.² Since 2002, euthanasia has been partially depenalised, coupled with laws governing palliative care and patient rights. In 2014, the euthanasia law was revised to include minors.³ The current progressive reputation stands in stark contrast to the decades following the Second World War, in which the influence of Catholicism, its church and its associated political formations dictated much of the legal and societal reality. Belgian society was highly pillarised,

¹ Apart from Belgium and the Netherlands, some form of either assisted suicide or euthanasia exists in Spain, Luxembourg, Canada, New Zealand and Switzerland. Several US states also allow assisted dying. See: Aser Garcia Rada, "Spain will become the sixth country worldwide to allow euthanasia and assisted suicide," *British Medical Journal* 372, no. 147 (2021).

² One concise contribution in the English language is: Bert Broeckaert, "Belgium: towards a legal recognition of euthanasia," *European journal of health law* 8, no. 2, (2001): 95-107. The proposals of the 1980s were not broad-based. The only political party supporting legislation of euthanasia at that time was Agalev, the Dutch speaking green party. The socialist and liberal formations of that time did not express themselves on the matter.

³ Belgisch staatsblad 12.3.2014, Wet tot wijziging van de wet van 28 mei 2002 betreffende de euthanasie, teneinde euthanasie voor minderjarigen mogelijk te maken, <https://pha.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/45-wet-euthanasie-voor-minderjarigen-1.pdf> .

i.e. various clusters of organisations existed, and to some extent still do (such as political parties, trade unions, health services and educational institutions), which belonged to the same family when it comes to politics and philosophical dispositions.⁴ Within these clusters (the pillars), people were affiliated with different organisations or made use of their services. People could thus be guided, as it were, from the cradle to the grave. The largest, and only fully-fledged pillar in Flanders, has always been the Catholic one. The two other pillarised groups, namely socialists and liberals, did and do not carry the same weight. Firstly, they did not have a superstructure based on ideology or life stance. Secondly, they were hampered by socio-economic limitations.

The second point of interest of research on Belgian euthanasia lies in the unique position of Belgium at the intersection of Catholic and Protestant spheres of influence. Generally speaking, the presence of French in the Belgian society fosters contact with the Latin world, whereas Dutch, being a shared language with the Netherlands, enables Protestant and Anglo-American ideas to seep through. Since the history of euthanasia advocacy and the associated legislation initiatives in Great Britain and the United States have been researched thoroughly, the exchange of ideas and concepts might be of particular interest.⁵

As a third and final point, one can take into account the fact that Belgian secular(ist) and humanist organisations have been advocates of liberal law-making since their emergence in the 1850s, in areas such as civil funerals, cremation, contraception and sexual education.⁶ The current humanist organisations claim to have done the same for the legalisation of euthanasia. This link would not be unexpected since that same connection partially applies to the United

⁴ Pillarisation is quite a complex concept, and determining it falls outside the scope of our paper. A workable definition can be found in Jean Faniel e.a., *Les mouvements sociaux en Belgique, entre pilariation et dépilariation*, CRISP, 2017, whereas Jeffrey Tyssens provides a detailed analysis of the validity of this concept in the Belgian context in "L'organisation de la laïcité en Belgique," A. Dierkens (ed.), *Pluralisme religieux et laïcités dans l'union européenne* (Brussel, Ed. de l'Université, 1994), 55-69. (Problèmes d'Histoire des Religions, 5/1994).

⁵ Some excellent historical work on the American and British cases has been done by Ian Dowbiggin and N.D.A. Kemp. Their books *A Merciful End. The Euthanasia Movement in Modern America* (Oxford: University Press, 2003) and *Merciful Release. The history of the British Euthanasia Movement* (Manchester: University Press, 2002) are to be considered as a point of reference.

⁶ The work done on these issues is too extensive to be cited. The contributions of De Spiegeleer and Tyssens in this issue sufficiently prove this point for civil funerals, as does their work on cremation. The role played by these groups in contraception and sexual education is less clear cut. To this day, the reference work remains: Jeffrey Tyssens and Els Witte, *de Vrijzinnige traditie in België* (Brussel: VUBPress, 1996).

States, since the early 20th century.⁷ Previous research has proven the statement made by Belgian humanist organisations to be partially true for the period following 1980, although shared with more pluralist organisations dedicated specifically to euthanasia advocacy such as *l'Association pour le droit de mourir dans la dignité* (ADMD) and *Recht op Waardig Sterven* (RWS), established in 1981 and 1983, respectively.⁸ What has remained unclear, however, is the situation of euthanasia advocacy or even its presence as a social issue prior to 1970. When taking into account foreign trajectories, our starting point might be found anywhere from the 1870s onwards. As most of the popularised works on euthanasia in Belgium claim an absence of any form of societal debate on the matter before the 1970s, we have chosen to select some well-known international cases as a point of reference. These are, respectively, the British Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Bill of 1936 proposed by sir Arthur Ponsonby, the American euthanasia trial of Dr Herman Sander in 1950, and the release of the film “Meurtres” in that same year by Richard Pottier, in which famed French actor Fernandel played a man mercy-killing his wife. This film was based on the eponymous five-volume book written by Belgian novelist Charles Plisnier in 1943. These cases were sufficiently mediatised for us to expect coverage on the matter. One might very well expect coverage to exist in Belgium on two grounds.

Firstly, as is the case in the Netherlands, publications on euthanasia before the 1950s do exist.⁹ However, the volume, like that of the Dutch at that time, is most likely incidental at best.¹⁰ One Dutch publication provides a striking insight in the connotation of euthanasia as mercy killing, a prevalent notion at that time. It brings misery to the forefront of medical aid in dying, a fact that is not without importance in the Belgian case, as we shall see:

⁷ Ian Dowbiggin, *A Merciful End. The Euthanasia Movement in Modern America* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 12-14.

⁸ Niels De Nutte, 2020. “So to Live, that One has also at the Right Time One’s Will to Death. Humanist Euthanasia Advocacy in Flanders between the 1970s and the 1990s. A Story of Personal Choice and Therapeutic Tenacity,” *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 28 (2020). At <https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/publications/eph/journals/volume28/nutte/>, accessed 14 December 2021. ADMD and RWS are, respectively, the French- and Dutch-speaking right to die organisations that emerged the 1980s, parallel to similar foreign like-minded organisations. The author strongly suspects a durable link with, for instance, the American *Hemlock Society*. This and other international connections of the 1980s are part of further research.

⁹ We have found, for instance, a published lecture on ‘Euthanasia of de goede dood’ [euthanasia or the good death] dating back to 1920 and a chapter on euthanasia in the 1928 book ‘Pillekes’ by medical doctor and catholic opinion maker Wilfried Broeckaert (1977-1948). See: Wilfried Broeckaert, *Pillekes* (Brugge: Davidsfonds-Exelsior, 1928) and Fr. Nuijens, *De euthanasie of de goede dood* (Antwerpen: Verhandelingen van de algemeene Katholieke Vlaamsche Hoogeschooluitbreidingen, 1920).

¹⁰ Heleen Weyers, *Het proces van de rechtsverandering* (Amsterdam: University Press, 2004). 46.

‘Euthanasia is related to a broad spectrum of life-shortening treatment by doctors. The essence of euthanasia is to be found in a desire for an earlier death, born out of misery.’¹¹

Secondly, Belgian newspapers allocated a substantial amount of their content to foreign news and developments. The quality of the coverage could vary, but that of neighbouring countries such as France, England and Germany was up to standard. This largely had to do with the existing networks of informants and local correspondents.¹² In the 19th century, this medium was used as a weapon in ideological, communal and socio-economical conflicts. This meant that the majority of periodicals could be considered as part of the pillars we mentioned, becoming affiliated to one political tendency or party. Although this partition became progressively less noticeable in the era following the Second World War, this source can be considered highly useful in examining the extent to which coverage of medical age in dying existed in Belgium in the three decades following 1920. As newspapers can be considered an emanation of social groups present in society, reflecting their opinions, we cautiously extrapolate possible public support on this issue and aim to establish whether or not the spectrum of ideas on euthanasia aligns itself with the existing philosophical fault line of that time.¹³ In doing so, we add to the work done by Silva in 2018 on ‘framings of faith and faithlessness that occurs when the existence of god is not the only topic of conversation.’¹⁴ As we will see, the analyses of newspaper articles on euthanasia lends itself well to an analyses of discourse.

Coverage, tone of voice

The source material used for this paper is comprised solely of the digitised newspapers present in the collection of the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR). The Belgica Press project currently comprises more than four million digitised images of newspaper pages. These have been processed with Optical Character Recognition software (OCR) to produce text files of their

¹¹ Idem, 47.

¹² Romain Van Eenoo. “De krant als bron”, Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique, LXXVIII, no. 1–4 (2007): 216-219.

¹³ This fault line, also called the fault line between church and state, has given rise to the Liberal and Catholic parties, which have found themselves at opposite sides in conflicts on burial ground and schools. Today, this fault line still emerges in discussion on schools and those of an ethical nature. An overview is given in: Lynn Bruyere, Anne-Sophie Crosetti, Jena Faniel and Caroline Sägerser (eds.) *Pilliers, dépillarisatie et clivage philosophique en Belgique* (Bruxelles : CRISP, 2019).

¹⁴ Eric O. Silva, “Stigmatization and Validation of Atheism, Literalism, and Non-Literalism in the Discourse over Evolutionary Theory,” *Secularism & Nonreligion* 7, no. 1 (2018); 1.

content.¹⁵ Freedom of the press is a principle that has been written into the Belgian constitution since its conception.¹⁶ The period spanning 1870 to 1914 saw an enormous expansion in printed media and is generally seen as its ‘belle époque.’¹⁷ As French was the dominant language until well into the 20th century, Flemish newspapers lagged behind for quite some time. The nature of the printed press as a political press with a strong ideological anchoring remained a point of fact well into the 1960s.¹⁸ For our research, the nature of *Vooruit* and *Le Peuple* as the respective Dutch and French speaking outlets of the socialist political sphere of influence, will prove to be of particular importance.¹⁹

The results we gained using a variety of keywords, though not massive in number, cannot be considered inconsequential. For the decade and a half from 1935 to 1950, we have found a total of 85 articles covering our three cases.²⁰ Of these, 36 were published in newspapers that can be identified as Catholic (*De Standaard, Het Handelsblad, Vers l’Avenir, Le Pays Réel, De Nieuwe Gids, Het Volk, De Gentenaar, Het Nieuwsblad, Het nieuws van de dag, La Libre Belgique, Gazet Van Antwerpen*), 10 as liberal (*L’Indépendance Belge, La Dernière Heure, Het Laatste Nieuws*), 24 as socialist (*Vooruit, Journal de Charleroi, De Volksgazet, Le Peuple, La Wallonie*), 12 as apolitical or neutral (*Le Soir, La Lanterne*²¹) and one as communist (*De Roode Vaan*).²² As newspapers are generally considered a prime source for establishing an

¹⁵ <https://www.kbr.be/en/belgica-press/>. Under Belgian law, content dating from before 1918 is freely accessible. Since more recent editions are still under copyright, we were allowed to access issues up to 1951 for research purposes.

¹⁶ It was a point of contention of the revolutionary years, in which some journalists played significant roles. See: Els De Bens, *De pers in België. Het verhaal van de Belgische dagbladpers. Gisteren, vandaag en morgen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2001), 24.

¹⁷ Theo Luyckx, *Evolutie van de communicatiemedi*a (Brussel : Elsevier Sequoia, 1978), 275.

¹⁸ Els Witte, *Media en politiek. Een inleiding tot de literatuur* (Brussel: VUBPress, 1991), 125.

¹⁹ Els De Bens, *De pers in België*, 33.

²⁰ Further articles can be found on, for instance, the Nuremberg trials. These fall beyond the scope of this current article. Important to note is the fact that articles on our cases, most of which concern euthanasia with the connotation of mercy killing attached to it, were published alongside those covering the trials and Nazi practices. In those articles however, euthanasia was used in the sense of its eugenic connotation. This distinction however was seldom made explicit. As such, both these interpretations seem to have coexisted for quite some time.

²¹ La Lanterne did self-identify as apolitical and certainly had a disdain for political parties and their corresponding morals. The newspaper however had strong sympathies for British and Anglo-Saxon spheres of influence. For our contribution, the nature of La Lanterne as ‘moderate left’ is worthy of note. See: Jean-François Fueg, “La Lanterne. Un nouveau quotidien à la Libération,” *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent*, no. 1 (1996), 73.

²² These newspapers are by no means equal in production, number or distribution. Those journals that can be considered as secular (socialist and liberal) were geographically limited. There has never existed a Belgian secular daily with a national outlet. Generally, these newspapers were linked to cities and regions with a strong secular foundation. Specific information on most of these publications can be found in: René Campé, Marthe

understanding of a given timeframe's opinion making, we felt this number sufficiently representative for our endeavour.

1936 Bill

The Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Bill, introduced by Lord Ponsonby, was debated by the House of Lords on 1st December, 1936, by Lord Ponsonby.²³ The bill aimed to 'allow voluntary active²⁴ euthanasia for patients requesting it who were of sound mind, who were over the age of 21 and who were suffering from an incurable and fatal illness accompanied by severe pain.' The intention was not to provide non voluntary mercy killing. Rigorous buffers were provided against abuse. A patient requesting the practice had to provide an application signed in the presence of two witnesses. This, along with two medical certificates had to be examined by a euthanasia referee appointed by the minister of health. Said referee would then provide a license to administer euthanasia.

The bill is covered 13 times in Belgian newspapers. Approximately half of the articles, published by newspapers of all convictions, are limited to a factual report of the vote, namely that the proposal failed by 35 votes to 14.²⁵ The other half, however, clearly take sides with regards to this euthanasia bill. The socialist journals *Journal de Charleroi* and *Vooruit*, the liberal *L'Independance Belge* and the Catholic *Het Volk, De Gentenaar, Het Handelsblad* and *De Standaard* provide some prime examples.²⁶ We provide some excerpts from journals that can be considered secular:

(*Vooruit*) ... some time ago, a movement has arisen that advocates, with the help of science, the right to take one's own life in certain cases ... they would answer pleads of the incurably

Dumon, Jean-Jacques Jaspers (eds.). *Radioscopie de la presse belge* (Verviers: Gérard, 1976) and s.n. "La presse quotidienne belge vue par elle-même," *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* 16, no. 62 (1960) : 1-8.

²³ This paragraph is based on Tim Helme, "The Voluntary Euthanasia (Legalisation) Bill (1936) revisited," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 17 no. 1 (1991): 25-29.

²⁴ The distinction between 'active' and 'passive' euthanasia plays a significant part in the Belgian debates of the 1980s. Active is linked to the deliberate shortening of a patients' life, whereas passive is related to the principle of the double effect. For the period tackled in this paper however, using this terminology would be anachronistic.

²⁵ *L'indépendance belge*, 2/12/1936, 3.

²⁶ *Vooruit* is, as we said, linked to the Belgian Socialist Party (BWP). It mainly targets working class readers, alongside some civil servants and farmers. *Journal de Charleroi* identifies as socialist democrat, independent of the political party. *Het Volk* identifies as Christian-democratic and targets roughly the same groups as *Vooruit*, whereas *De Standaard* and *het Handelsblad* identify simply as catholic. *De Standaard* is to be considered a newspaper for the bourgeoisie and the readership of *het Handelsblad* consists mainly of the middle class. See: s.n. "La presse quotidienne belge vue par elle-même, 3-8.

ill, who suffer long and miserably, demanding a short and painless death to be rid of their unbearable misery.²⁷

(L'Independance Belge) ... Do we have the right to die ? ... with the goal of giving the incurably ill the legal right of 'receiving' their end of life at the hands of a doctor. Euthanasia (sweet death) ... the euthanised are not seen as having 'died a violent death'.²⁸

(Journal de Charleroi) ... The British House of Lords has rejected the euthanasia bill (i.e. killing by request)... If the proposal were accepted, it would legalise the premature 'soft' ending of the life of the ill.²⁹

Conversely, some examples from Catholic newspapers:

(Het Handelsblad 1) ... a bill that would allow doctors to send patients suffering from unbearable agony to 'eternity', using a pill or powder. Euthanasia ... murder. This is the truth, as Lord Dawson mentioned, and nothing else.³⁰

(Het Handelsblad 2) And you will see, for all common sense and inviolable principles, be it out of hate for religion or spurred on by freemasons, it seems sufficient to acquire a majority of votes to permit and even legalise murder, gentle (?) murder. We have seen this happen in Belgium with regards to other matters, such as cremation or the pagan burning of bodies... Godless, modern Progress!³¹

(De Standaard) ..if this proposal of law were accepted, 'gently' helping a sick individual to leave this world, would be legal, which equals a violation of the fifth commandment.³²

(De Gentenaar) Right to kill, euthanasia in hospitals. Horrible threat to helpless sick... The world is paganised... Those outside the Catholic church have a very different opinion. They see life as personal property instead of a gift from God...Modern arguments concerning euthanasia are the consequence of the fact that the world no longer recognises God's inalienable rights.³³

²⁷ Vooruit, 14/04/1936, 3.

²⁸ L'Independance belge, 09/11/1936, 3

²⁹ Journal de Charleroi, 10/11/1936, 2.

³⁰ Het Handelsblad, 3/12/1936, 2.

³¹ Idem, 12/01/1936, 10. The author of this lengthy column is clearly a medical doctor, most likely Wilfried Broeckart.

³² De Standaard, 8/12/1936, 4.

³³ De Gentenaar, 8/12/1935, 6.

(Het Volk) Suicide is declared legal in England. A shameful proposal will be thwarted... remember that suicide is considered a crime. The exotic designation of 'euthanasia' attempts to take root on the continent.³⁴

In the introduction to this themed section, we introduced the seminal concept of American psychologist Robert Kastenbaum. That system 'consists of a complex web of elements that mediates individual deaths in society and manages personal expectations related to death and dying.' In the examples above, the expectations of those articles published in Catholic journals and those published in secular ones stand in stark opposition to each other. Although, as we mentioned, euthanasia only grows into a societal issue many decades later, a form of conflict is apparent. This, of course, is not a discord relating to physical attributes, as is historically the case with regards to civil funerals, but rather one of mindset and philosophical framework.

On the Catholic side, the terminology is noticeably hostile. Broadly speaking, the techniques used are twofold. On the one hand, readers are reminded of the doctrine of the church (Inalienable right of God, violates the fifth commandment, sending to eternity), whilst on the other hand, the articles make use of 'othering' those supporting the idea of mercy killing (Murder, Godless modern progress, outside the church, right to kill, paganised). It is made explicit that those that argue for euthanasia are not part of the targeted readership. This is a good example of implicit polarisation by presenting the doctrine of the church as the 'good' position and equating those supporting the bill to pagans and murderers.

On the secular side, the terminology makes clear a form of secularisation of the legitimatisation of social-sanctioned killing as part of the death system. This secularisation is related to the role granted to suffering. As stated by O' Rourke:

'In the Catholic tradition, acceptance of suffering, of which physical pain is a prototype, is a means to spiritual growth... Suffering, especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan: it is, in fact, a sharing in Christ's passion and a union with the redeeming sacrifice which he offered in obedience to the Father's will.'³⁵

³⁴ *Het Volk*, 28/10/1935, 2.

³⁵ Kevin O' Rourke, "Pain Relief: the Perspective of Catholic Tradition," in *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, 7 no. 8 (1992): 485-486.

This merit that the Catholic doctrine assigns to suffering is absent in all of the secular publications. The wording presents pain, especially that linked to the incurably ill, as something to be alleviated if possible (long and miserable, short painless death, unbearable misery, sweet death, soft ending of life). Our first case thus provides at least one tentative conclusion. Namely, that by 1936, there existed in Belgium – not unlike in Great Britain or the United States – a conflicting mindset on the issue of medical aid in dying along the existent philosophical fault line between Catholics and seculars.

The Sander Trial of 1950

The trial of physician Dr. Hermann N. Sander was the first in the history of the United States in which a physician had to stand trial for mercy killing. Dr. Sander ended the life of his cancer-stricken patient, a woman in her fifties, at her request by injecting air into her veins. The trial, which took place in Manchester (New Hampshire), attracted more than 100 reporters, both foreign and domestic. *Time* magazine called it the most controversial trial since the 1925 Scopes trial on evolution.³⁶ Although Sander was acquitted, Dowbiggin argues for the historical significance of this trial due to its relevance for the ‘divisive debate over euthanasia’.³⁷

The bulk of the articles identified for our contribution in the collection of Belgica Press are related to this case. Of the 35 newspaper articles related to the trial, the majority once again provides only a factual account of the cause, motives and proceedings of the trial, some slight additions that give away the newspapers’ stance on euthanasia notwithstanding. This is, of course, to be expected following Romain Van Eenoo’s analyses of the coverage of foreign affairs in Belgian newspapers for this time, as we mentioned before. The periodicals involved are *La Libre Belgique*, *Het Handelsblad*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *De Gentenaar* and *de Standaard* on the Catholic side, and *Le Journal De Charleroi*, *Le Peuple*, *La Dernière Heure*, and the *Volksgazet* on the secular side.³⁸ Added to this are *Le Soir* as an independent newspaper and *La*

³⁶ Ian Dowbiggin, “From Sander to Schiavo: Morality, Partisan Politics, and America’s Culture War over Euthanasia, 1950–2010,” in *The Journal of Policy History* 25 no. 1 (2013); 12-13; Giza Lopes, *Dying with Dignity: A Legal Approach to Assisted Death*. A Legal Approach to Assisted Death (s.l.: Praeger, 2015), 56. An account on the dynamics behind the Scopes trial can be found in Stephen Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 194-197.

³⁷ Dowbiggin, “From Sanders to Shiavo,” 12.

³⁸ The content of *La Libre Belgique* is to be found on the conservative side of the catholic press. *De Gentenaar* belongs to the ‘catholic’ group of *De Standaard* and *het Handelsblad*. *La Dernière Heure* is a liberal newspaper that targets working class and middle class readers, without a formal link to the Liberal Party. *Le Peuple* and *de*

Lanterne. Out of the 14 articles covering the subject for a newspaper that identifies as Catholic, six of them go beyond a factual account. Once again, we provide some abstracts:

(*De Standaard*) .. The stance of the Catholic Church on this subject is ‘widely known’. The danger lies in those who let themselves be guided by sentimental reasoning. He who disregards the sanctity of life, cannot foresee where his reasoning might lead...Where does it end? Tomorrow as a solution for lunatics and the elderly?³⁹

(*Het Volk*) Euthanasia in conflict with Christian moral code. As the Italian newspaper ‘*Il Quotidiano*’ writes, Catholics know that euthanasia stands opposed to the Christian morals.⁴⁰

(*De Gentenaar*) Dr Sander guilty of murder...he has recently been guilty of euthanasia by injecting the veins of a sick woman, suffering of an incurable disease, with air.⁴¹

(*Het Nieuwsblad*) Sweet death, life is in God’s hands...Which doctor can be considered reliable? Where is the line? Life is sacred, the church categorical... Man cannot dispose of his own life.⁴²

Three periodicals, of which two self-identify as socialist and one as apolitical, actually use the Sander trial as a cause for a survey of their readership. *Vooruit*, *Le Peuple* and *La Lanterne* call upon their readers to voice their opinion on euthanasia. The results of their undertaking are quite striking, given the fact that hitherto, the earliest known quantifiable social support for any form of medical aid in dying in Belgium was to be found in the late 1980s.⁴³ *Le Peuple* reports 7 out 10 readers support the practice of euthanasia as evidenced in the case of Dr. Sander. The title of the article speaks volumes:⁴⁴ ‘Le Docteur Sander a tué par pitié: l'euthanasie a ses

Volksgazet are, like *Vooruit*, linked to the Belgian Socialist Party. *Le Peuple* targets the same readers as *Vooruit*. See: s.n. “La presse quotidienne belge vue par elle-même,” 3-8.

³⁹ *De Standaard*, 18/04/1950, 2.

⁴⁰ *Het Volk*, 6/1/1950, 4. This Italian article is quoted a number of times by Belgian Catholic newspapers in relation to the Sander trial.

⁴¹ *De Gentenaar*, 6/1/1950, 1.

⁴² *Het Nieuwsblad*, 6/1/1950, 1-2.

⁴³ A 1988 survey by sociologists of INUSOP (Institut Interuniversitaire de Sondage d’Opinion Public) concluded that roughly 83% of the population in Belgium at that time supported euthanasia, defined as an ‘action that shortens the life of an incurably ill individual with the goal of ending their suffering’. See: Institut Interuniversitaire de sondage d’opinion publique, *Les soins de santé dans la société belge* (Brussels, 1988), 56.

⁴⁴ Somewhat outside of our temporal demarcation for this paper, we have identified a survey that further strengthens the idea of significant social support. It concerns a questionnaire conducted by Radio Luxemburg, a multilingual radio station on which the English-speaking programs competed with the BBC in the 1960s, on the Belgian Softenon trial in 1962. This trial was held as the result of a young mother in Liège who killed her newborn infant deformed by the Softenon drug one year prior. The audience was asked if the defendants should be convicted or acquitted. 16,732 out of 17,670 respondents voted against conviction. See: J. Paules and J. Rozet,

partisans et ses praticiens’ [Doctor Sander has killed out of compassion: euthanasia has its supporters and practitioners]. The surveys by *Vooruit* and *La Lanterne* are more qualitative in nature. They each provided readers with a specific question and published an excerpt of the answers.⁴⁵ Both journalists, *Louise De Mey* for *Vooruit* and *Louis Quievreux* for *La Lanterne*, conclude that a large segment of their readers support the actions taken by Herman Sander.⁴⁶ The fact that both newspapers have deemed it necessary to publish the thoughts penned down by some of their readers, provides us with an excellent insight into the arguments used in the 1950s. Moreover, the letters that were published vary widely in age and most likely as in profession and/or education.⁴⁷ We set out some of the arguments here⁴⁸:

(*Vooruit*) Should Dr. Sander be convicted, as is the law: for involuntary manslaughter without any mitigating circumstances, or should a legal solution be sought?

ADB(Ghent, Sint-Amandsberg), 52, mechanic	Cows are euthanised, why not people? Has seen the death throes of two family members. Why not shorten the suffering preceding death?
AVV (Aalst)	Why not shorten the suffering preceding death? How many doctors begin a treatment they know to be pointless?
FR (Ghent, Ledeberg), 35	A doctor has a duty to help a patient. The comparison with euthanasia for animals is made.
MD (Ghent), 16, student	Too often the notion ‘where there is life, there is hope’ is used. The comparison with euthanasia for animals is made. A medical examiner can prevent abuse.

Le procès de la Thalidomide (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1963) and Gaston Weytjens, *Euthanasie* (Antwerp: Humanistisch Verbond, 1962), s.p.

⁴⁵ *La Lanterne* repeats this for two weeks, *Vooruit* for three.

⁴⁶ *Louise De Mey* (1908) was raised in a working-class family and became part of the editorial staff of the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* in 1936. As a female in a male-dominated industry, she grew to become one of the first female journalist in 1944. Her work was related mostly to women’s pages a film reviews. *Louis Quievreux* (1902-1969) was a journalist and essayist that published works on brussels, where he was born. During the Second World War, he wrote for some British newspapers and as of 1946 he joined the Belgian newspaper *La Lanterne*, where he covered the Nurenberg trials. See: Madelief Van den Steen, “Aimée Jacobs en Louise De Mey, ‘de twee dames van Vooruit’”, *Brood en Rozen*, no. 1 (2006): 7-14; Paul F. State, *Historical Dictionary of Brussels* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 354; René Margritte, *René Magritte: Selected Writings* (Minnesota: University Press, 2016), s.p.

⁴⁷ These were rarely specified, but given the age gaps and representation of both men and women, a variety in these aspects can be expected.

⁴⁸ We use parts of the following articles: *Vooruit*, 5/02/1950, 5; 12/02/1950, 5; 19/02/1950, 5; *La Lanterne*, 11/01/1950, 2; 19/1/1950, 8; 25/1/1950, 8.

EDD (Ghent)	Ending suffering is a service to the patient and those close to them. Criticises the hypocrisy of the church sending people to their deaths in wars.
RD (Ghent), 26	Assumes the durability of the demand of Dr. Sanders' patient and sees him not as a killer but the one who relieves pain.
JS (Ghent), 34	The decision should be made by multiple doctors to prevent abuse.
ADL	Shortening a life should be allowed in the case of an incurable disease and insufferable pain. Patient and those close to them should consent.
CMD	Should be sanctioned by a commission
GB	Legal solution for the elderly is needed through the consent of multiple doctors.
LF, 25	Legal solution should be sought, including a panel. Consent of those close to the patient.

(La Lanterne) Should one acquit Dr. Sander due to 'mercy killing'? Should the court forget the law and judge out of sentiment, not with the weapons of repression?

Madame De Singly (Brussel, Sint Gilles)	Using the example of colon cancer, this woman feels Dr. Sander was in his right and the family would thank him.
Arthur Daix (Nossegem)	He would acquit, because a doctor that knows death is near, cannot prolong suffering and is just in 'activating' the death of the patient.
Pauline Vanhavre (Watermaal Bosvoorde, Brussels)	Against, warns about possible abuse.
Louise Desirent-Moesen (Stockel, Brussel)	Allowed, in cases where pain killers have no more use and death is near. Patient and family should consent, doctor should be brought before court.
Germain-Lucigny (Brussel)	Supports Sander. Doctor should find two colleagues to consent and contact a magistrate.

Roger Geeraerts (Luik)	Wishes opinion-makers would suffer at the gates of death to test their convictions.
Mme Leers-De Passe (Vorst, Brussel)	Relates the case of her husbands' death from cancer. He was helped by a local doctor after being abandoned by a professor. She wishes a Dr. Sander for anyone in need. The case should be supported by the family and a doctor should confer with two colleagues.

The excerpts above further strengthen our argument from the first case of a secularisation of the role granted to suffering and the sanctity of life, and thus to the secularisation of a function within the death system. This is evidenced once again by the rift that exists between what could be argued as polar opposites, the Catholic and secular perspectives. On the one hand, again, we see the doctrines of the church repeated (stance of the catholic church is widely known, danger in sentimental reasoning, disregards the sanctity of life, conflict with Christian morals). The quote from the Italian newspaper *'Il Quotidiano'* puts it bluntly: 'Catholics know that euthanasia stands opposed to the Christian morals'. This is a clear example of what Silva calls 'distancing', i.e. the process of framing one's position as distinct from another point of view.⁴⁹ It namely implies that to support euthanasia can only be done by someone that does not adhere to Christian morals.

On the other hand, secular arguments once again disregard any special statute for suffering (relieve pain, pointless treatment, activate death). The coverage of the Sander case, however, provides us with more practical arguments than the 1936 case. This is, of course, largely due to the fact that the surveys give agency to the thoughts and considerations of the average readership, as opposed to opinion makers and journalists. This opens our eyes to arguments that are in line with the 1936 bill, such as the need to prevent abuse, the consultation of multiple specialist and the need for legalisation. In addition, some readers make comparisons with the euthanising of animals, ending the human exceptionalism, whilst others stress the need for the consent of the patient and those close to them. The personal dimension that these surveys add, opens up the debate to more pragmatism.

⁴⁹ Eric O. Silva, "Stigmatization and Validation of Atheism, Literalism, and Non-Literalism in the Discourse over Evolutionary Theory," 11.

As a final comment regarding this case, we point out that although in both *Vooruit* and *La Lanterne* the large majority of readers support the practice of euthanasia, as evidenced by Sander, some published contributions do also oppose euthanasia. We have not included them above, since the arguments largely coincide with those of the Catholic newspapers. It is worth noting these opinions, however. It shows that, although a conflicting mindset along the philosophical fault line might exist, broadly speaking, individuals' positions are most likely not so clear cut.

The film “Meurtres”

Our third and final case is somewhat different from the previous ones. “Meurtres” is a French film released in 1950. The protagonist, Noel Annequin, is played by the then famed French actor Fernandel.⁵⁰ This film is based on the eponymous, five-volume book written by Belgian novelist Charles Plisnier in the 1940s.⁵¹ The Annequin family, presented as the prime example of the bourgeoisie, is turned upside down by the scandal of Noël killing his cancer-stricken wife at her request. The film ruthlessly attacks the bourgeoisie, ridiculing its obsession with status and social advancement. This picture, though clearly related to the question of medical aid in dying, does not take a formal stance on the matter. It shows a man killing his wife at her request and spends the rest of the time relating the difficulties that man has in coming to terms with his action and his religious beliefs. The medium, of course, is very different to our other two cases. Whereas the Ponsonby bill and Sander trial are clearly politically charged events, which we see reflected in their media coverage, “Meurtres” misses that dimension. Furthermore, being a film, articles on the issue are part not of the foreign news section. As such, we can expect the readership and corresponding tone of the articles to be somewhat different from the previous examples. We have found 21 articles on this film, divided almost evenly between Catholic and other newspapers. Of those, not all mention euthanasia, but when they do, those of a secular

⁵⁰ ‘Seldom was an actor linked as strongly to a genre as was Fernandel to comedy’. A biography of Fernandel can be found in: Gwénaëlle Le Gras et Delphine Chedaleux (eds.). *Genres et acteurs du cinéma Français 1930-1960* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 2019). The Belgian audiences were not used to seeing Fernandel taking on such a serious role, a fact that was frequently mentioned in the reviews of this picture.

⁵¹ Charles Plisnier (1896-1952) published these books between 1939 and 1941. In his early life, Plisnier was a politically active communist. After being ejected from the party, he became a member of the socialist BWP and turned to literature. He became a member of the *Académie royale de langue et de littérature Françaises* de Paul Delsemme, “Charles Plisnier,” accessed December 25, 2021, <https://www.arlfb.be/composition/membres/plisnier.html>.

and 'neutral' persuasion tend to support the right of an individual to euthanasia, whereas Catholic ones most often regret the lack of positioning of the film on the subject and sometimes even go so far as to "severely caution" their readership against watching it. Most of the articles review this film in the context of the 'quinzaine du cinema Française' [the fifteen days of French cinema] held between 1 and 14 July of 1950 in the Casino of Knokke, and focus more on the fact that the famed French actor, Fernandel, starred in this film than they do on its storyline. We include some of the noteworthy content here. The Catholic ones first:

(Het Volk) "After much persuading by his sick wife, Noel consents to give her an injection with a lethal substance. She is freed of her misery, but Noel knows he is guilty of murder.⁵²

(De Standaard) The fact that the film maker has not delved further into the issue of euthanasia, is to be regretted... Noel knows he needs to be punished.⁵³

(Het nieuws van de dag) This cannot be considered a successful film. Morally speaking we strongly caution against watching it. The talent of Fernandel, however, is confirmed here.⁵⁴

A secular one, from the socialist *De Volksgazet*:

(De Volksgazet) This tale of the sweet death, which one inflicts out of love, is one of those issues that generates importance everywhere. Euthanasia, prey to many conflicting debates in past years, mostly between doctors and jurists...A Redeeming and at the same time deadly injection. This gesture of compassion gives rise to a family drama.⁵⁵

Our previous observations are again confirmed here, as evidenced by the wording (guilty of murder, knows he needs to be punished, strongly caution against watching it) (sweet death, redeeming injection, gesture of compassion). One obvious remark here is the mention by the *Volksgazet* of euthanasia being prey to many conflicting debates. We have some inklings of the debate on mercy killing going as far back as the 1920s in Belgium. With our three cases now covered, we complete our contribution by proposing some observations pertaining to our research questions.

⁵² Het Volk, 8/9/1950, p. 14.

⁵³ De Standaard, 29/12/1950, p. 8. This article is close to a literal copy of the one published in Het Nieuwsblad on 2^d of September.

⁵⁴ Het Nieuws van de dag, 1/9/1950, p. 2.

⁵⁵ De Volksgazet, 21/7/1950, p. 3.

Conclusion

Throughout this contribution, we have dealt with the manner in which Belgian newspapers have focused on the issue of euthanasia between 1936 and 1950. We set out to show whether any sort of popular support for medical aid in dying existed at that time, how the topic relates to the philosophical fault line that permeates Belgian society of the first half of the 20th century and consider how the issues related to euthanasia are linked to a function within the death system, as presented in the introduction to this special section. Although we do realise that newspaper coverage does not paint a full picture to answer these questions, we are confident in what we have deduced below.

Generally speaking, the first mentions of euthanasia in Belgian newspapers seem to have emerged in the 1920s. This is implied by authors describing it as “not a new subject” when covering the 1936 euthanasia bill and corresponds to the British and American timelines.⁵⁶ What strikes me as remarkable, however, and warrants further research, is the seemingly intimate knowledge journalists in the 1930s have of both the British and American euthanasia advocacy groups. Socialist contributions in *Vooruit* and *De Volksgazet* reflect this particularly well.

In any case, surveys found within the source material tend to suggest the existence of some form of popular support. Since the surveys were conducted by three newspapers and a radio station, one has to take into account the fact that the results are directly linked to the existing readership or audience, some of which are, of course, limited, both numerically and geographically. This is, however, partly countered by the intensity of the responses received. Both the Dutch-speaking newspaper *Vooruit* and the French-speaking journal *La Lanterne* find themselves compelled to publish the responses they received several weeks in a row. The journalists involved, Louise-Hamers Le Mey and Louis Quievreux, both attribute this to the large number of responses. Although both journalists eventually summarise their sections, taking a position favourable to voluntary euthanasia, both authors equally remark on and publish the wide variety of opinions among their readers. It is thus fair to conclude the existence of a form of popular support for voluntary euthanasia in Belgium by the 1950s.

⁵⁶ Kemp, *Merciful Release*, 60-82.

If we widen the scope from humanists to seculars and their organisations broadly construed, the link to support for euthanasia as mercy killing becomes quite clear. As we have proven throughout this paper, the terminology used by Catholics and seculars differs greatly, both in tone and frame of reference. The terminology on the Catholic side is quite explicitly hostile towards the proponents of mercy killing and clearly makes use of framing mechanisms. Those who support euthanasia are presented in our cases are considered an outgroup. This is done both by making use of implicit polarisation and of distancing. Implicit polarisation is evidenced by Catholic newspapers referencing doctrines of the church as absolute and opposing this by equating supporters of euthanasia to “murderers, pagans and those outside the church”. Distancing is used, for instance, by making explicit the incompatibility of being a Christian with supporting euthanasia.

Seculars, on the other hand base their arguments on compassion, on the one hand, and rationality on the other. Wording includes short painless death, soft ending of life, activating death. Rationality, we feel, is to be found in the negating human exceptionalism by referring to the euthanising of animals and in the practical nature of seeking solutions to end suffering whilst ensuring fail saves to prevent abuse.

The philosophical-religious fault line that permeates the entire Belgian society of the 20th century thus applies quite obviously as well. Lastly, the division made by Kemp in 2002, between Protestant willingness to accept euthanasia and Catholic objection to any form of the practice rings true.⁵⁷ Emblematic in this regard is the rectification of an article in the *Nieuws van de Dag* in which the author reported that 500 priests and rabbis signed a statement endorsing euthanasia. ‘Good Catholics will have spotted this error. The clergy were 500 pastors and rabbis. The doctrine of the Catholic Church is very clear in this area.’

One significant remark that I feel has to be made, is the rather modern nature of the arguments readers and journalists use when dealing with voluntary euthanasia in this period. Present are all of the following: slippery slope, the doctrine of double effect, mental competence of the patient, assessing questions by using multiple medical specialists and incurable illness. Two exceptions are the usage of the Fifth Commandment to demonise euthanasia and the need for the consent of the family. It is surprising to see this last one used in secular arguments, since

⁵⁷ Kemp, *Merciful Release*, 91.

the secular argument for the legalisation of euthanasia in later decades is based primarily in the freedom of choice and patient rights of the individual, whereas family consent becomes a part of the Catholic, personalist point of view. It does line up perfectly with the Belgian abortion debate, where the freedom of choice argument was a dimension not introduced before the 1960s.⁵⁸ It is, indeed, only from that time onwards, under impulse of the advancement of individualism that the calls for a right to a medically hastened death were seen as a way of keeping the narrative of self-identity intact up until death.⁵⁹

Finally, it seems natural to conclude that the Belgian death system, at least from the mid-1930s onwards, underwent a secularisation in the secular sphere, namely in relation to the legitimatisation of social-sanctioned killing as part of the broader death system. We reiterate here the lack of reverence for suffering as it is present within Catholic doctrine. The how and why is left to further investigation. As far as we know, no domestic cases had been mediatised before, nor have any conflicts taken place. Our newspapers did, however, provide us with some personal testimonies of suffering in the family that was perceived as needless or excessive. The frustration in those cases was aimed at the doctor and as such, does not necessarily have to be a conflict with religion. s

The result, however, is one of a secularising of the moral framework. Throughout history, there has not only been struggle for the control of (or access to) material resources and rituals within the death system of a society, as was the case in 19th-century Belgium and is illustrated in the contributions by De Spiegeleer and Tyssens to this special section. Where the moral authority of the dominant religion is in a state of crisis, the way is left open for a more general competition in the definition of death. In these cases, groups and institutions with different interests and perspectives compete for a “moral monopoly” in the framing of emotions and understanding in the death system of a society. It is clear that the first debates about medical aid in dying in Belgium, during the first half of the 20th century, show a contest over moral authority in the norms that indicate when, how, and for what reasons an individual’s life can be put to an end.

⁵⁸ Els Witte, “Twintig jaar politieke strijd rond de abortuswetgeving in België (1970-1990),” *Res Publica* 32, no. 4 (1990): 436-437.

⁵⁹ Naomi Richards, “The fight-to-die: older people and death activism,” *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 7 no. 1 (2012): 13.

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