



BRILL

SECULAR STUDIES 7 (2025) 123–138

SECULAR
STUDIES
brill.com/secu

“Re-igniting the Soul like the Flame of a Candle between Two Doors”

Conversions in the Biography of Three Belgian 20th Century Art Critics

David Veltman | ORCID: 0000-0002-6625-9790

University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands

d.veltman@rug.nl

Received 9 September 2024 | Accepted 28 January 2025 |

Published online 14 April 2025

Abstract

In this article, I would like to problematize the continuing friendship between the Belgian twentieth century art critic Jan Walravens and the visual artist Felix de Boeck, despite their growing differences in religious orientation. The conversion of this art critic brought about profound changes in the framework that he used to evaluate the artworks by De Boeck. By describing the conversion careers of two other critics writing about the art of De Boeck, I will try to show something of the role that these conversions played in their evaluation of his art. It will be argued that their conversion can shed a new light on the conceptual framework that these critics used to interpret religious art in the context of a secularist art world.

Keywords

art criticism – religious art – conversion

At a relatively early stage in his career, the Belgian journalist and art critic Jan Walravens (1920–1965) became convinced of the importance of an existentialist movement in literature and the arts. When he first entered the bureau of the liberal newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* just after the Second World War, he still thought of himself as a “Christian adolescent”, who cherished the “authentic

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/25892525-bja10086

© DAVID VELTMAN, 2025 | ISSN: 2589-2525 (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

and evangelical power” of art.¹ But thirteen years later, Walravens had thoroughly revised the religious framework that he used to evaluate the work of his friend, the Catholic artist and farmer Felix de Boeck (1898–1995).² Now he argued that “every religious faith feels strange to me, and I value the art of De Boeck as the lucid expression of a humanist character, as well as the well-trying representation of Christian thought.”³

In thirteen years’ time, Walravens was converted from a self-assured Catholic art critic to one that embraced the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, authors who he now saw as able to probe the “depths of the soul”.⁴ In 1949, Walravens had started the “contemporary-traditional” literary magazine *Tijd en Mens* [Time and Man], in which he paid ample attention to these existentialist authors.⁵ This adjective “contemporary-traditional” could also be applied to the art of De Boeck. In his paintings the Catholic artist repeatedly visualized themes like the self-sacrifice for a higher cause (*de Zelfgave*, as it was called by him), the Crucifix and the Eucharist. De Boeck’s abstract style clearly wanted to provide an alternative to the traditional way of depicting the Catholic sacraments, as they were often seen in church paintings. He for example visualized the Eucharist by making several paintings of his own hands, offering a shining light, which represented the word of God to him.

After reading Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *La Nausée* and attending a lecture by the author in Brussels in 1945, Walravens became convinced that the Catholic art of De Boeck did not give the final answer to the questions that young people were struggling with just after the Second World War. He now argued that existentialism was better able to accommodate the humanist values that were depicted in De Boeck’s paintings too. Despite his growing doubts about the importance of the artist’s religious oeuvre, Walravens continued his friendship with him. In his letters to Walravens, the artist was able to accommodate and even support the secularist worldview of his young friend, urging him to “keep courage”, because “life will be still mild and good” after his conversion.⁶

In this article, I would like to problematize the continuing friendship between De Boeck and Walravens, despite their growing differences in religious

1 Jan Walravens, *Felix de Boeck* (Elsene: Tallon, 1965), p. 11.

2 David Veltman, *‘Sterven in het bed waarin ik geboren ben’. Een biografie van Felix de Boeck (1898–1995)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2021).

3 Walravens, *Felix de Boeck*, p. 11.

4 Letter from Walravens to De Boeck, 22 March 1950, archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

5 Jos Joosten, *Feit en tussenkomst. Geschiedenis en opvattingen van Tijd en Mens (1949–1955)* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 1996), p. 195.

6 Cited in Walravens, *Felix de Boeck*, p. 75.

orientation. Indeed, Walravens' conversion brought about profound changes in the framework that he used to evaluate the artworks by De Boeck. While often described as an “engine of change” in the spiritual worldview of an individual, conversions can also be seen as a moment in life when these interpretive frameworks become explicit. In what follows, I will test this statement by comparing Walravens' conversion career with that of Pierre-Louis Flouquet and Henri Pichette, two other art critics who were converted after they got acquainted to De Boeck. During their conversion, these critics dared to look straight in the mirror and tried to judge their beliefs as fairly as possible. Although Flouquet and Pichette were both former advocates of secularist communism, in the 1930s they chose to embrace the Catholicism of their youth again. In their letters to De Boeck, they wrote openly about their justification for this choice, which makes their conversion an interesting theme in biographical research.

In biography, not only the question what made a new religious orientation so appealing should be answered, but also questions about why and how people were converted in the first place, how did they get any knowledge of the road that they needed to cross the (perceived) ideological boundaries between their “old” and “new” orientation. In which social context was it even possible to discuss the differences between the norms and values in these contexts? Applied to twentieth century art criticism, answering these questions could lead to new insights in the way a conversion can contribute to the critical evaluation of religious art in an avant-garde context. Since the 1920s, modernist art has been associated with avant-garde in the sense that the true artist should be in front of the troops, to gain inspiration and develop new ideas solely by himself and not by being influenced by predecessors.⁷ Thus, the image could emerge that modernism required a great deal of solemn contemplation and devotion to the arts, that could easily be compared to religion. Modernist artists often ascribed a spiritual quality to their work, which served to give it a certain level of autonomy.⁸ But still, the choice of the avant-garde for autonomous art and a non-Catholic spirituality stood in stark contrast to the artistic practices prescribed by the Catholic Church.⁹

7 Sandra Kisters, *The Lure of the Biographical. On the (self-)representation of modern artists* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), p. 105.

8 Rajesh Heynickx, “Space and mystic contemplation. On the Self-Fashioning of Converted Avant-Gardists,” *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 88 (2010): pp. 1277–1292.

9 Theo Salemink, “‘Huiver voor ontaarding.’ Katholieken en avant-garde”, in *Avant-garde en religie. Over het spirituele in de moderne kunst 1905–1955*, ed. Frank Bosman and Theo Salemink (Utrecht: Van Gruting, 2009), p. 289.

Through his art, De Boeck posed questions about religion and faith. In this sense, he was much more original than for example the traditional Neo-Gothic idiom that was taught at the St. Lucas art schools of his time.¹⁰ But his modern take of religious art did not mean that he questioned the eternal truth of the Catholic Church. De Boeck did not adhere to a principle of Christian humanism, that wanted to relegate religion to the private sphere, in order to safeguard its autonomy from public domains such as politics or the Church.¹¹ Instead, he actively engaged in a debate with art critics like Walravens about the importance of the religious motifs in his art for the individual viewer, no matter if they believed in God or not.

Therefore, the conversion of these art critics will always cause tension between their private religious opinions and their public statements about the artworks that were shown to them. Indeed, a conversion can shed a new light on the conceptual framework that these critics used to interpret religious art in the context of a secularist art world. To test this hypothesis, I will not limit myself in this article to Walravens' conversion to an existentialist worldview. By describing the conversion careers of two other critics writing about the art of De Boeck, I will try to show something of the role that these conversions played in their evaluation of his art. But first, I will discuss the role of conversions in current biographical research and methodology.

1 Biography and Conversion

In biography, we are able to assess the historical significance of an individual change in religious orientation. With help of ample archival sources, we try to find the right context to describe the historical meaning of this orientation. It is tempting to contextualize the change in behavior, feelings and attitude after a conversion with help of the newly acquired social system of norms and values—religious or not—and then use this context as an explanation for the way this normative system functions.¹² This kind of biographical research can be regarded as functionalist, because it interprets the events that lead to a con-

10 Rajesh Heynicks, *Meetzucht en mateloosheid. Kunst, religie en identiteit in Vlaanderen tijdens het interbellum* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2008), p. 101.

11 For a discussion of Christian humanism in Belgium, see Jean-Louis Jadoulle, *Chrétiens modernes? L'engagement des intellectuels catholiques "progressistes" belges de 1945 à 1958* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia and UCL, 2003).

12 Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory", in *New Perspectives in Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp. 97–119.

version in light of its outcome. But biography could also be seen as a revisionist genre, able to problematize the context in which a conversion took place.¹³ No one knows exactly how a conversion started, and biography is able to shed light on the inherent uncertainty of its outcome, no matter how much the new religious orientation felt “right” to the subject. Instead of acknowledging the norms and values of a “converted truth”, as Hans Renders calls it, biography should start with the contradictions that normative systems often impose on social behavior.¹⁴ It is a genre that addresses the fragmentizing, discrepancies and plurality of perspectives that all normative systems show to a certain degree.¹⁵

The social context of a conversion can be read in two ways in biography. First, conversion is often deployed as an age-old narrative trope that can gain significance when the biographer is able to apply “hidden” meanings to “odd” or unusual particularities of his subject.¹⁶ For example, the subject always had a secret inclination to view the world from within a hidden spiritual framework, which is “revealed” by the biographer to explain the change of religious orientation. But a conversion can also be used in biography as a way to show how an “odd” or presumed meaningless fact in life can gain significance by taking it as a clue for certain incoherencies in the social system in which the conversion took place. Due to this contingency of the conversion narrative, I would argue that its significance should not be limited to changes in religious orientation, but also to ideological changes, including those in the direction of non-belief.

In his seminal study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the psychologist William James for example tends to choose the same metaphors to describe the change in religious experience before and after a conversion. He describes the human mind as a hierarchy of ideas, that can influence each other. People have “frozen”, “cold”, “rigid” ideas, that can suddenly become “hot” and “vital” after a conversion.¹⁷ According to James, a small number of new ideas can bring about a conversion in a young person, whereas older people are not so much influenced anymore by them, because the new religious orientation has to compete

13 Daniel R. Meister, “The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography”, in *History Compass* 16(2017), no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12436>

14 Hans Renders, “Converted Truth”, unpublished lecture delivered at the workshop “Biography & Secularism”, March 22, 2024, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

15 Levi, “On Microhistory”, p. 109.

16 Hetty Zock, “Paradigms in Psychological Conversion Research. Between social science and literary analysis”, in Jan N. Bremmer, Wout van Bekkum, and Arie L. Molendijk, ed., *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion* (Leuven, etc.: Peeters, 2006), pp. 41–58.

17 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longman, Green & Co., 1902), on Project Gutenberg.

with other ideas. But, as we will see, sudden religious experiences can shake the foundations of older people too. Biographers do not need to “prove” the provenance of a conversion by taking its conditions and contexts as absolute values, but we can probe its historical significance by scaling between individual circumstances and the normative society in which it took place.¹⁸

Whether or not a conversion had the character of an epiphany, or of a long spiritual crisis, biography starts with premise that it all depends on the individual perspective. How can biography then contribute to the knowledge we have of conversion as a historical phenomenon? The three art critics that I chose for my research all showed a changing attitude towards religion during their lives. They were all raised as devout Catholics from birth, although they grew up during the 1930s, a time of a renewed popularity of Catholicism in France, as well as in Holland and in Belgium.¹⁹ Influenced by the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, a restoration movement under the name of *renouveau catholique* tried to reverse what was called the detrimental effects of secularization and democratization. In his study *Art et Scolastique* (1920, a Dutch translation appeared in 1924), Maritain had showed how the Catholic tradition could have a modern interpretation, without fully embracing modernity.²⁰ Presumably, this book had a profound influence on the religious worldview of Catholic artists and art critics, and the justification they had for losing or renewing their faith after the Second World War.

Catholics that were born and raised in this religion responded differently to the *renouveau catholique*, compared to those who were converted later on in life. Depending on these circumstances, people gave different meanings to their conversion. As we will see, Flouquet was converted after meeting Maritain in person, Pichette’s conversion took place after he became acquainted to a Catholic friend (De Boeck), whereas Walravens was converted after his lecture of Sartre and Camus—or did the fact that he was miraculously saved after a bombardment during the Second World War have something to do with it?²¹

18 A similar point was made by Ginzburg in an interview with T.R. Gundersen, “On the dark side of history”, on *Eurozine* (2003), pp. 7–8.

19 Rajesh Heynickx, *Meetzucht en mateloosheid*, p. 132.

20 English language studies on Maritain’s network are for example Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz-Age Catholicism. Mystic Modernism in Post-War Paris, 1919–1933* (Toronto etc.: University of Toronto Press, 2005) and Rajesh Heynickx and Jan De Mayer, ed., *The Maritain Factor. Taking Religion into Interwar Modernism* (Leuven: Leuven UP, 2010).

21 Different types of conversions were described in lecture IX and X of William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* (1902).

Converts were often reproached for taking a disproportionate part in the emancipation movement within the church.²² Nevertheless, many Catholic converts have embraced modernity only selectively—they did not form a coherent group with a unified program. Indeed, a transition can be pointed out in the *renouveau catholique* and in the symbols, rituals, and ideologies that engendered a conversion. This transitional aspect of the conversion surge between the two World Wars can be regarded as characteristic of modernity: since the end of the nineteenth century, people had developed a certain mobility in their spiritual orientation. Modernity made them more vulnerable to new ideas. The more flexibility one showed in his or her religious worldview, the more agency he or she had in the cultural field.

A conversion was often preceded by a radical experience, an epiphany that forced converts to draw far-reaching consequences of their step, even outside the realm of their previous political loyalty. Converts often felt the need to write about those experiences, to “bear witness before God”, and thus to give meaning to it. Thus, a conversion can serve to investigate the norms, values and prejudices of the culture in which it takes place. But that is only one side of the story: during a conversion, people always distance themselves from a previous system of norms and values.²³ It is therefore possible to take the conversion story as a starting point to ask: how did this individual search for alternatives to the culture in which he was raised?

During the interwar years, and well until the Second Vatican Council (1965), the Catholic Church had positioned itself firmly as guardian of the tradition and as a stronghold for anti-modernity. Therefore, converts had to find new ways to describe their rejection of modernity and their appeal to Catholicism. Under influence of Maritain, converts often had an admiration for the fixed forms and traditions of the Middle Ages, which was explicitly contrasted with the fragmentizing of modern life and professionalization of the industrial-capitalist society.²⁴ There was a predilection towards the estheticism of days passed, to the simple life of small rural communities, to unspoiled nature and the “purity” of the original Christendom. With help of these contexts, we are able to assess the significance of the individual conversion story.

22 Paul Luykx, *Daar is nog poëzie, nog kleur, nog warmte*, *Katholieke bekeerlingen en moderniteit in Nederland, 1880–1960* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007), p. 27.

23 Luykx, *Daar is nog poëzie, nog kleur, nog warmte*, p. 24.

24 Luykx, *Daar is nog poëzie, nog kleur, nog warmte*, p. 22.

2 Pierre-Louis Flouquet

The first conversion career that I will describe is that of the French journalist, artist and art critic Pierre-Louis Flouquet (1900–1967).²⁵ In 1930, De Boeck received a letter by Flouquet, in which the latter announced that he wanted to move to Brussels again. His two year’s stay in his hometown Paris had been *merveilleux* and *attristant* at the same time: he was pleased to see the scenery of his youth again, but he had also searched in vain for the “new, deeper soul, who could harness itself against the temptations of this new era”. Paris had received him warmly, but the city was not able to lend him an “acceptable gateway” to the “drama” that took place in his mind.²⁶

In Meudon, a suburb of Paris, Flouquet had been living next door to Jacques Maritain. In 1929, he was converted by the latter to embrace the Catholic church of his youth again. In his letter to De Boeck, he described the spiritual crisis that this conversion had engendered. He had painstakingly tried to convince his friends and relatives of the sincerity of his decision to abide by the gospels again. Because of this decision, he was even forced to leave his job as artistic director of the communist newspaper *Monde*, as he did not want to collaborate on articles that supported Stalin and his pogroms against Russian-Orthodox people. But Flouquet felt as if he was not taken seriously by Catholics either: they mistrusted him because he had not explicitly broken up his friendship with Marxist friends. In his letters, he described himself as a “half angel-half demon”.²⁷

Flouquet was not the only former Marxist in De Boeck’s network of artists. And for his part, De Boeck had no “blind faith” either: he often engaged in a discussion with his pastor after he had attended mass, and he could not accept all the mysteries which surrounded the profession of his faith. Possibly, this criticism of the Church made it easier for his non-religious friends to accept De Boeck in their middle.

But there was more. Between 1925 and 1934, De Boeck had lost four of his five young children to tuberculosis. The realist portraits that he made of his deceased offspring, two girls and two boys, were often interpreted as a subtle

25 Cécile Vanderpelen, “Écrire sous le regard de Dieu. Le monde catholique et la littérature en Belgique francophone (1918–1939)”, PhD thesis Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels 2003, published as Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre, *Écrire en Belgique sous le regard de Dieu. La littérature catholique belge dans l’entre-deux-guerres* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe/Ceges, 2004).

26 Letter from Flouquet to De Boeck, 30 July 1930, archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

27 Letter from Flouquet to the poet Pierre Bourgeois, cited in Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre, *Écrire en Belgique sous le regard de Dieu*, p. 157.

testament of the firmness of his Catholic faith. The portraits made his friends aware that the artist and his wife should be treated only with respect: De Boeck knew what he was talking about when he discussed the significance of the religious concepts in his work.

Through the mediation of Flouquet, the Catholic artist opened his atelier to literary authors and journalists of the proletarian publishing world, like the poets Edmond Vandercammen and Albert Ayguesparse. They even dedicated their poetry in manuscript or in print to De Boeck, which can be seen as a clue that they did not have to stick to the norms of their original “pillar”, despite growing pressure from the Belgian communist party to keep its members on the straight and narrow path.²⁸

3 Henri Pichette

Another proletarian author who became convinced again of his original spiritual outlook was the French critic, poet and dramatist Henri Pichette (1924–2000). In this case, Felix de Boeck had a more direct influence upon this conversion. After De Boeck invited him to his farm for the first time in 1947, Pichette wrote to the artist that this visit “had made a lasting impression” on him. During this visit, De Boeck had confessed that the loss of his children had induced “the most solemn happiness” in him. Four years later, Pichette wrote a letter to De Boeck in which he described the shock that this confession had stirred in him: “You believe in God, Felix, but why? Excuse me for my curiosity, which follows me every day. I want to believe too. But how do you do that? Can one save others too?”²⁹

In October 1952, Pichette wrote a report of a visit to De Boeck in the newspaper *Les Lettres Françaises*, which had been a periodical of the communist resistance during the Vichy regime in France, that supported the German occupation. In the report, De Boeck was presented as a very religious man, who had developed a preoccupation with death after he lost four of his five children. Thus, the sincerity of De Boeck’s faith was defended against possible questions that could be raised by non-religious or communist readers, who would renounce the metaphysical nature of his works.

28 Eva Schandevyl, *Tussen Revolutie en Conformisme. Het engagement en de netwerken van linkse intellectuelen in België, 1918–1956* (Brussels: Academic and Scientific Publishers, 2011).

29 Letter from Henri Pichette to Felix de Boeck, dated “nov. ‘51”, archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

Following Jesus' gospel, De Boeck claimed that the eye was the "light of the soul". According to the artist, this metaphor of the light could be related to the epiphany, considered as a sudden and overwhelming impression of the presence of God Almighty. Through the eye of the sitter on his portraits, De Boeck argued that he was able to connect with the "divine" in every human being.

In his article about De Boeck for *Les Lettres Françaises*, Pichette did not write about his own conversion into Catholicism. But shortly after its publication, the author chose not to work for the former communist newspaper anymore. He then sought contact with the editorial board of *Esprit*, the intellectualist journal founded by the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950). In De Boeck's letters, Pichette received continuous support for his decision to become a member of the Catholic Church again. In return, Pichette tried to introduce the work of his Belgian friend to various art galleries in Paris, but to no avail: "godless Paris" did not show any interest.³⁰

After the Second World War, Emmanuel Mounier and his magazine *Esprit* had taken up the role that Jacques Maritain had played before the War in seeking to console and support many artists and writers who wished to return to their Catholic faith.³¹ Pichette was one of these authors. In these uncertain times, with enormous victories of the communist parties during the first post-war elections in France and in Belgium, many Catholics faced trial and persecution because of their involvement in the regimes that had collaborated with the German occupier. In 1942, Maritain had decided to flee to the United States. For this reason, Mounier reproached Maritain for being concerned with defending the faith only on philosophical battlegrounds, and not in real life.³²

During the War, Mounier was forced to stop the publication of *Esprit*. To keep himself occupied, he continued to work on a philosophical project that he had started in the 1930s under the name of "personalism". In his studies into the relation between "action" and "contemplation", he wanted to isolate the characteristics of the "man who tried to live in the eternal" (i.e. for whom religious experiences were important), and to contrast him to the "man who lives only in the moment, or in the past, or in dreaming of the future".³³

30 Letter from Henri Pichette to Felix de Boeck, dated "novembre 1954", archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

31 Jean-Louis Jadoulle, *Chrétiens modernes?*, p. 34.

32 John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930–1950* (Toronto etc.: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 196.

33 Letter from Mounier to P. de Lubac, in *Oeuvres IV. Recueils posthumes. Correspondance*, ed. Paulette Mounier (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 722.

Although Mounier refrained from political involvement during the War, clandestine or otherwise, he was arrested on 15 January 1942, because his name was found in the papers of a resistance movement. The German authorities kept him in jail until the summer of 1942, although he did not hear of the accusations that were leveled against him. After several unsuccessful requests to start a legal process, he and his fellow prisoners staged a hunger strike. The disobedience that he showed by the hunger strike made him a lightning example to many Catholics after the War. It was seen as a protest against the official line of the Church and its support of the Vichy regime.

The obedience, authority, stability and order that was advocated by Philippe Pétain, the leader of the Catholic Vichy regime, had led to a far-reaching compromise with the German enemy in France. As a result, Mounier became convinced that the true “revolution” was to be found in the purity and simplicity of the Christian faith, instead of the Catholic Church. Christianity was “conservative, defensive, sulky, afraid of the future”, he argued.³⁴ Ironically, when Mounier left the Church out of his unease with the Catholic support of the Vichy government, Pichette was converted to become a Catholic again. This personal flexibility towards religious matters could be found as well in many other readers of *Esprit*, like Jan Walravens.

4 Jan Walravens

In September 1939, De Boeck gave an interview to the liberal newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* in which he said that he was happy to give visitors a private tour around his workshop on the attic of his farm, where hundreds and hundreds of paintings were stored. After reading this, Walravens must have decided to go and visit the farm of De Boeck too, together with his friends Florent Welles and Albert Bontridder.

In May 1942, Walravens was summoned to report at the German *Arbeitseinsatz* for forced labor in Germany. Just before he left, he visited De Boeck once more. It was an impressive visit, as can be judged from the elated tone of the letters that Walravens sent to De Boeck afterwards: “All plans should go overboard! This Thursday, I will leave for Germany. A completely new life will start. God give that I would not waste my talents”, he wrote self-confidently.³⁵ At first, his new job as an office clerk at a factory in the German town of Weissensee

34 Emmanuel Mounier, “l’Affrontement Chrétien”, in *Oeuvres III*, ed. Paulette Mounier (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 34.

35 Letter from Jan Walravens to De Boeck, 17 June 1943, archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

seemed rather calm. But after a fierce bombardment of the factory, he felt as if his religious faith was seriously tested: “Do you believe, Mr. De Boeck, that God is content when we bow and scrape to his feet, or should we call upon his greatness by the work of our own hands and the inventions of our own genius?”³⁶

During his stay in Germany, Walravens thought a lot about the oeuvre of De Boeck. He saw a “pure Catholicism” in his paintings: “You withdraw from earthly narrow-mindedness and open the door to another, spiritual, sphere of life. Your work is heavy with metaphysical unrest, that’s why you’re unique in Flanders.”³⁷

After his return to Belgium in 1944, Walravens continued to ventilate this metaphysical interpretation of the art of his friend. He soon found a job as a journalist at *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the newspaper in which he had read about the art of De Boeck for the first time. He had the intention to write regularly about the artistic development of his friend in various periodicals, such as *De Zweep*. In this magazine, he continued to praise the “spiritual art” of De Boeck.

Walravens attributed a special significance to the *clair-obscur* in De Boeck’s portraits, which were painted as an intricate play of half and complete circles. The artist often made series of portraits of the same person, which were put in a differently coloured light, depending on the mental state in which he portrayed them. About these portraits, Walravens wrote: “In each work of De Boeck the light flames up with impressive spiraling lines, colours and shadows. The shining center is the eye of the sitter, which looks you straight in the face, as an abyss that tries to swallow you.”³⁸

In Walravens’ view, the oeuvre of De Boeck still had a mythic connotation, as it had had when the artist still took part in the historical avant-garde of the 1920s. But thirty years later, De Boeck’s outspoken religious symbolism and psychological use of colours could not exactly be called avant-garde anymore. Walravens argued in his contribution to periodicals as *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *De Periscoop* and later on *Tijd en Mens* that De Boeck had been an important predecessor of the post-War generation of visual artists. Walravens thus justified his own engagement with *Tijd en Mens*, without having to renounce the more or less traditional artistic development that De Boeck had pursued in the meantime.

In 1952, Walravens wrote a short monograph about the work of De Boeck, in which he argued that the artist had found a new “answer to the question

36 Letter from Jan Walravens to De Boeck, 2 September 1943, archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

37 Letter from Jan Walravens to De Boeck, 2 September 1943, archive FeliXart Museum, Belgium.

38 Jan Walravens, *Felix de Boeck* (Antwerp: De Sikkel, 1952), p. 16.

about the relation between the human and the divine”. In his portraits, De Boeck showed the “traits of the sitter with the traces of his fears, of his hope and desperation, of his desire, but with an eye that flares up and stares to eternity.”³⁹ This was what Walravens called the “Kierkegaardian Christendom” in the work of De Boeck. His work was able to “stagger, fade and re-ignite the soul of a Christian, like the flame of a candle between two doors. A confession to God, in which man is able to express his feelings unashamedly, as he is better understood by God.”⁴⁰

With these statements, Walravens positioned himself in the debate about existential freedom of choice, about which he had heard Jean-Paul Sartre during a lecture in Brussels. Walravens argued that man had a fundamental freedom of choice, just because he is able to visualize the divine. According to him, artists like De Boeck showed that an abstraction could not be something to pursue separately, whether in art or in life. With help of an inspired soul, we are able to reveal a previously hidden view of harmony in the visual world. Looking backwards, it can be argued that Walravens’ conversion was a necessary step for this later “champion” of existentialism after seeing the atrocities of the War.⁴¹

In this article, I have described the conversion career of three friends of the Catholic artist Felix de Boeck. In the case of Flouquet, the conversion was informed by Maritain’s *renouveau catholique* and by frustration about the lack of respect that his communist colleagues in journalism showed for his Catholic upbringing. Pichette developed a more flexible stance towards his Catholic faith: he did not write publicly about his conversion, but chose to discuss it in his private correspondence with De Boeck. Although Walravens did write about his conversion, he did so in a very philosophical manner, by showing the relation between humanist Christendom and existentialism. In all cases, it appeared that it was not possible to simply “jump” from one side to the other during a conversion: all subjects continued to justify their decision to choose a new religious orientation until well after their conversion.

Throughout the twentieth century, Holland, Belgium and France saw a surge of conversions, that had a specific character due to the ambition of many converts to embrace the “total Catholicism” of their youth again. This ambition extended over the most diverse domains in public life, because it was seen as the only guarantee for a restoration of law and order after the confusing years

39 Walravens, *Felix de Boeck*, p. 18.

40 Walravens, *Felix de Boeck*, p. 16.

41 Jos Joosten, *De verdeelde mens. Jan Walravens (1920–1965): schrijver, ijkpunt en avant-gardist* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2018), p. 97.

after the First World War. By converting into Catholicism, an intellectual elite of scientists, authors and artists took up a critical and non-conformist position against the existing moral. These converts were often directly or indirectly influenced by the network of the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. His intellectual stance renewed the respectability of the Catholic religion in these countries.

Just after the Second World War, Catholics and liberals found each other for a short while in their battle against cultural rigidity and petty provincialism. The Catholic philosopher Mounier wanted to root out the “illness” of society, but for him the Catholic faith became an essential part of this illness.⁴² The obedience, stability and order that was prescribed by Catholic Church during the War, had led to a far-reaching obedience to the German enemy. As a result, Walravens turned inward, to investigate the reasons for the prostitution of his Catholic ideals, and even to examine his own religiosity.⁴³ Instead, Flouquet and Pichette chose to embrace the religion of their youth after the War. Just as Walravens, they did not have to break the ties with their former networks of friends and colleagues. They wanted to “progress by looking backward”, by embracing the “pure” Christian faith that they found in De Boeck, combined with his humanist appeal to find shared values and build a spiritual community on his farm. Indeed, the Catholic modernism as displayed in De Boeck’s letters accommodated the humanist values of many converts, for example by the critical evaluation of the eternal truths of the Church and its struggle for emancipation through self-education.

In biography, conversions are able to problematize the individual behavior, decisions and emotions. It is not enough to describe a “chronicle” of events that took place during a conversion. The description of meaningful facts around a conversion will be distorted when they are placed in a rigid system of norms and functionalist processes of social change. Instead, biography can show the relation between normative systems and the degree of openness these systems offer to individual conversion careers. The individual is able to choose a new spiritual framework, without having to place absolute borders between the life before and after a conversion.

42 Mounier, “l’Affrontement Chrétien”, p. 34.

43 Jos Joosten, *Feit en tussenkomst*, p. 108.

Works Cited

- Gundersen, T.R. 2003. “On the dark side of history”. At *Eurozine*, accessed 29 August 2024.
- Heynickx, Rajesh. 2008. *Meetzucht en mateloosheid. Kunst, religie en identiteit in Vlaanderen tijdens het interbellum*. Hilversum: Verloren.
- Heynickx, Rajesh. 2010. “Space and mystic contemplation. On the Self-Fashioning of Converted Avant-Gardists”, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 88 (4): pp. 1277–1292.
- Heynickx, Rajesh and De Mayer, Jan ed. 2010. *The Maritain Factor. Taking Religion into Interwar Modernism*. Leuven: Leuven UP.
- Hellman, John. 1981. *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930–1950*. Toronto etc.: University of Toronto Press.
- Jadoulle, Jean-Louis. 2003. *Chrétiens modernes? L’engagement des intellectuels catholiques “progressistes” belges de 1945 à 1958*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia and UCL.
- James, William. 1902. *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longman, Green & Co.). At Project Gutenberg, accessed 29 August 2024.
- Joosten, Jos. 1996. *Feit en tussenkomst. Geschiedenis en opvattingen van Tijd en Mens (1949–1955)*. Nijmegen: Vantilt.
- Joosten, Jos. 2018. *De verdeelde mens. Jan Walravens (1920–1965): schrijver, ijkpunt en avant-gardist*. Nijmegen: Vantilt.
- Kisters, Sandra. 2017. *The Lure of the Biographical. On the (self-)representation of modern artists*. Amsterdam: Valiz.
- Levi, Giovanni. 2001. “On Microhistory”, in *New Perspectives in Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press), pp. 97–119.
- Luykx, Paul. 2007. *‘Daar is nog poëzie, nog kleur, nog warmte’, Katholieke bekeerlingen en moderniteit in Nederland, 1880–1960*. Hilversum: Verloren.
- Meister, Daniel. 2017. “The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography”, in *History Compass* 16(2017), no. 1. At <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12436>, accessed 29 August 2024.
- Mounier, Emmanuel. 1963. *Oeuvres*, vol. III–IV, ed. Paulette Mounier. Paris: Seuil.
- Renders, Hans. 2024. “Converted Truth”, unpublished lecture delivered at the workshop “Biography & Secularism”, March 22, 2024, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Salemink, Theo. 2009. “‘Huiver voor ontarding.’ Katholieken en avant-garde”, in *Avant-garde en religie. Over het spirituele in de moderne kunst 1905–1955*, ed. Frank Bosman and Theo Salemink (Utrecht: Van Gruting), pp. 289–333.
- Schandevyl, Eva. 2011. *Tussen Revolutie en Conformisme. Het engagement en de netwerken van linkse intellectuelen in België, 1918–1956*. Brussels: Academic and Scientific Publishers.

- Schloesser, Stephen. 2005. *Jazz-Age Catholicism. Mystic Modernism in Post-War Paris, 1919–1933*. Toronto etc.: University of Toronto Press.
- Vanderpelen, Cécile. 2003. “Écrire sous le regard de Dieu. Le monde catholique et la littérature en Belgique francophone (1918–1939)”, PhD thesis Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels.
- Vanderpelen-Diagre, Cécile. 2004. *Écrire en Belgique sous le regard de Dieu. La littérature catholique belge dans l’entre-deux-guerres*. Brussels: Éditions Complexe/Ceges.
- Walravens, Jan. 1952. *Felix de Boeck*. Antwerp: De Sikkel.
- Walravens, Jan. 1965. *Felix de Boeck*. Elsene: Tallon.
- Zock, Hetty. 2006. “Paradigms in Psychological Conversion Research. Between social science and literary analysis”, in ed. Jan N. Bremmer, Wout van Bekkum, and Arie L. Molendijk, *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion* (Leuven, etc.: Peeters), pp. 41–58.