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Imagining the ‹bon patron catholique›. Industrial Entrepreneurs in Belgium and Northern France, and their Apostolate of the Factory (1870–1914)

Peter Heyrman

The impact of the Catholic Church and its teachings on social policy and industrial relations in the 19th and 20th centuries has been studied extensively and from many different angles. Historiography, however, has predominantly focused on how Catholic social teachings supported the social emancipation of the increasingly wage-dependent population of modern industrialized society. By harnessing organized labour and other popular movements, the Catholic Church managed to retain and even broaden its societal impact, clearly influencing social policy.¹ The ways in which the Church interacted with the entrepreneurial class, however, have been given far less attention.

Although historians, both of business and of religion, have often criticized the Weberian link between the social ethics of ascetic/Calvinist Protestantism and the rise of modern capitalism, their work has illustrated both the importance and the complexity of the interchanges between the fields of religion and enterprise since the dawn of modernity.² The religious identity of entrepreneurial families is often invoked to explain their business practices, networks and market strategies, or to clarify the particular social climate of their companies.³ The ec-

¹ Philip Manow/Kees van Kersbergen, *Religion, Class coalitions and welfare states*, Cambridge 2009; Patrick Pasture, *Building the social security state: a comparative history of Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany (from the 19th century to the 1960s)*, in: Lex Heerma van Voss/Patrick Pasture/Jan De Maeyer (ed.), *Between cross and class. Comparative histories of Christian labor in Europe 1840–2000*, Bern/New York 2005, 251–284.

² Marie Emmanuelle Chessel/Denis Pelletier, *L'entreprise et les religions: Max Weber, Baby Loup et le bricolage*, in: *Entreprises et histoire* (2015), 5–14; Nathalie Luca/Rémy Madinier (ed.), *Figures de l'entrepreneur religieux*, in: *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 61/175 (2016).

³ David J. Jeremy, *Business and religion in Britain (Business History Series 5)*, Aldershot 1988; Id., *Capitalists and Christians. Business leaders and the churches in Britain 1900–1960*, Oxford 1990.

lectic literature on what today is understood under the plexiform label of corporate social responsibility (CSR), often refers to its religious, particularly Christian roots.⁴ Other research has focused on how denominations, and in Western Europe especially the Catholic Church, have instigated entrepreneurs and employers to create network associations of a clearly religious strand.⁵ Although these circles of Catholic entrepreneurs only seldom took on socio-political roles as interest organizations – such functions were mostly carried out by neutral employers' associations – they nonetheless expanded into powerful structures, elucidating the social teachings of the Church and fostering a dialogue on the responsibilities of Christian entrepreneurship.⁶ In 1931, at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and the promulgation of its successor *Quadragesimo Anno*, the French, Belgian and Dutch Catholic employers' federations laid the foundations of the *Union Internationale des Associations Patronales Catholiques* (UNIAPAC, 1949). This originally European federation and its national chapters had a manifest but as yet under-researched impact on the structures and practises of the post-war welfare state.⁷

The mere existence of these Catholic entrepreneurs' circles and their international federation already suggests that the mark of the Church on the broad and multiform world of business and enterprise in Western Europe should not be minimized. However, it remains difficult to evaluate this impact, both on the micro-level of business values and praxis, and on the ways in which entrepreneurs (collectively) voiced their interests and influenced public opinion, politics, social and other legislation. In order to tackle these wide-ranging subjects, it seems crucial to have a better understanding of the ways in which the Church dialogued with the entrepreneurial elites, resulting in more or less coherent discourses and normative frameworks to which this specific target audience could

⁴ Rob Bodice, *Forgotten antecedents: entrepreneurship, ideology and history*, in: Rafael Ziegler (ed.), *An introduction to social entrepreneurship. Voices, preconditions, contexts*, Cheltenham 2009, 133–154; Brian W. Husted, *Corporate Social Responsibility Practice from 1800–1914: Past Initiatives and Current Debates*, in: *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 25 (2015), 1, 125–141; Rosamaria C. Moura-Leite/Robert C. Padgett, *Historical background of corporate social Responsibility*, in: *Social Responsibility Journal*, 7 (2011), 4, 528–539.

⁵ Michael P. Fogarty, *Christian democracy in Western Europe 1820–1953*, London 1957; Joseph B. Gremillion, *The Catholic movement of employers and managers: a study of Uniapac*, Rome 1961.

⁶ Peter Heyrman, *Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs' organisations, 1880–1940: a dialogue on social responsibility*, in: *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte/Journal of Business History*, 56 (2011), 2, 163–186.

⁷ At the meeting in Rome in 1931 there were also delegates from Italy, Germany (Zentrumspartei) and Czechoslovakia. The Bund Katholischer Unternehmer (BKU), the Swiss Vereinigung Christlicher Unternehmer (VCU) and the Italian Unione Cristiana Imprenditori Dirigenti (UCID) were all founded in the spring of 1949.

subscribe. We consider this a first but central piece of a much bigger puzzle: evaluating the impact of social Catholicism on the business world.⁸

Our analysis focuses on the industrial area of Northern France and Belgian Wallonia during the last decades of the 19th century. A remarkable number of big industrialists in this border-transcending region developed social initiatives within their factory walls or for the workers' communities that lived close by. They sponsored different social provisions, schools and leisure associations, established factory stores, introduced health insurance and pension funds, sponsored social housing and promoted home ownership. Some companies experimented with forms of profit-sharing and/or offered alternative forms of remuneration such as family bonuses or child allowances. By no means were all of these industrialists Catholics (or especially devout), but for many of them their <patronage social> was clearly motivated by religious convictions. In any case, many of them considered the spiritual and moral instruction of their workforce as paramount. Industrialists created devotional and catechetical associations, promoted the cult of factory patron saints, organized processions and pilgrimages, masses and joint moments of prayer. Some of them even built chapels within their factory walls.⁹

These provisions and practices are often labelled as manifestations of paternalism, inspired by or in any case referring to feudal models of dependency. Prevailing literature stresses the dominant involvement of factory owners and the resulting atmosphere of coercion. Historians have mainly studied them from a functional point of view, questioning how they supported managerial strategies by disciplining the workforce and thus thwarting its mobility.¹⁰ This

⁸ On social Catholicism as a «succession de sociabilités militantes répondant aux exigences immédiates d'une société en souffrance, au sein desquelles la doctrine sociale de l'Eglise joue un rôle de norme régulatrice», see: Denis Pelletier, *Le catholicisme social en France (XIX^e–XX^e siècles): une modernité paradoxale*, in: Benoît Pellistrandi (ed.), *L'Histoire religieuse en France et en Espagne. Colloque international*, Madrid: Collection de la Casa de Velazquez, 87 (2004), 371–387; Id., *Les pratiques charitables françaises entre «histoire sociale» et «histoire religieuse»: essai d'historiographie critique*, in: Denis Pelletier/Isabelle von Bueltzingsloewen (ed.), *La charité en pratique. Chrétiens français et allemands sur le terrain social: XIX^e–XX^e siècles*, Strasbourg 1999, 33–47.

⁹ Erik Aerts et al. (ed.), *Liberalism and paternalism in the 19th century. Proceedings Tenth International Economic History Congress (Leuven August 1990 session B-13) (Studies in social and economic history 17)*, Leuven 1990. A wide-spread contemporary overview: Emile Vandervelde, *Institutions patronales: exposition universelle de Paris 1889, section Belge, groupe XI, Economie Sociale*, Brussels 1889. Some examples of profit-sharing in: Emile Waxweiler, *La participation aux bénéfices*, Paris 1898.

¹⁰ André Gueslin, *Le paternalisme revisité en Europe occidentale (seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle, début du XX^e siècle*, in: *Genèses*, 7 (1992), 201–211; Gérard Noiriel, *Du «patronage» au «paternalisme»: la restructuration des formes de domination de la main-d'œuvre ouvrière dans l'industrie métallurgique française*, in: Marianne Debouzy (ed.), *Paternalismes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, in: *Le Mouvement Social*, 144 (1988), 17–35; Donald Reid,

article takes a different perspective. It argues that these provisions and practices were the manifestations of a specific form of Catholic social activism, the result of the increasing efforts of the Catholic Church in the region to mobilize the entrepreneurial class in support of its social apostolate. Due to the efforts of several actors, the Jesuit Order in particular, a more or less coherent discourse community was created that subscribed to a model of good Catholic employer-ship, linked to a broad range of commendable managerial practices and social provisions. Our contribution analyses these processes, highlights the context and the main actors, and introduces the core characteristics of this imagined *«bon patron catholique»*.

Vincentian networks and social activism

Although the Catholic Church in Northern France and Belgium had for centuries sought its main support in temporal matters amongst the nobility, in the 19th century it quickly became aware of the rising socio-cultural dominance of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. Those new entrepreneurial elites were of course welcomed as benefactors, for instance supporting the infrastructure and provisions of the growing network of parishes and the many new (female) religious institutes that were founded during that *«temps des fondations»*.¹¹ Wealthy industrialists, however, were also mobilized by the Church to take up an active role in charity, catechesis and apologetics. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, for instance, instituted in Paris in 1833 and rapidly expanding throughout France and Belgium, counted a growing number of industrial and commercial entrepreneurs within its ranks. Vincentian conferences both complemented and competed with the official and thus neutral poor-relief structures that had been set up under Napoleonic rule. The *«sons of Ozanam»* visited and instructed poor families, and distributed food, clothing and coal. They founded Sunday schools, youth and adult clubs, libraries, legal counselling services, etc. But they also patronized various catechetical and devotional associations.¹² The

Industrial Paternalism: Discourse and Practice in Nineteenth-Century French Mining and Metallurgy, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 27/4 (1985), 579–607.

¹¹ Claude Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin. Les congrégations françaises à Supérieure Générale au XIXe siècle*, Paris 1984, 203–33 and 627. On Belgium: Kristien Suenens, *«Too robust to be saint». Female congregation founders in 19th-century Belgium: double-voiced agency, religious entrepreneurship and gender tension*, PhD dissertation KU Leuven 2018.

¹² Jan De Maeyer/Peter Heyrman/Patricia Quaghebeur, *Een glorierijk verleden: de Vincentianen in Gent (1845–1992)*, in: Jan De Maeyer/Paul Wynants (ed.), *De Vincentianen in België/Les Vincentiens en Belgique 1842–1992*, Leuven 1992, 279–317; Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société Saint-Vincent-de-Paul au XIXe siècle. Un fleuron du Catholicisme social*, Paris 2008.

Vincentian conferences and their provisions in the industrial cities of Belgium and Northern France were closely interlinked with ultramontane, intransigent and in France also legitimist/monarchist networks. Structures such as the Belgian *Archiconfrérie de Saint-Pierre* (1871) or the *Confrérie de Saint-Michel* (1875) fully subscribed to Pope Pius IX's defensive stance against modernity and to his *Syllabus Errorum* (1864).¹³ The efforts of the Church to rally Catholic industrialists and employers would of course increase significantly during the culture wars of the 1860s–1870s. In both France and Belgium the Church sought to counterbalance the (often Masonic) networks of entrepreneurs, lawyers, journalists and other intellectuals that formed the core of liberal anticlericalism. The rise of socialism obviously had an important galvanizing effect, with the Paris Commune (1870) as a most disturbing warning sign.¹⁴ «Autrefois le patron allait au combat entouré de ses ouvriers et de ses serviteurs», so sighed Frédéric Le Play (1806–1882), «aujourd'hui il les trouve armés dans le camp ennemie.»¹⁵

The border-transcending Catholic elites in 19th century Belgium and Northern France have not yet been analyzed in depth.¹⁶ However, their leading or at least most famous actors can be named: the Ghent textile industrialist Joseph de Hemptinne (1822–1909),¹⁷ the Tournai industrialists Jules (1833–1911) and Henri (1830–1917) Desclée, Valère Mabile (1840–1909) in Morlanwelz-Mariemont, Henri Pirmez (1839–1902) in Gougny, Clément Bivort (1819–1875) in Monceau-sur-Sambre, lawyer-entrepreneur Léon Collinet (1842–1908) and mining industrialists such as Jules Dallemagne (1840–1922) and Omer Lambiotte (1869–1960) in the Liège region.¹⁸ Amongst the main protagonists for Northern France, nearly all of them textile industrialists, we must surely mention Philibert Vrau (1829–1905) and his friend and brother-in-law Camille

¹³ Emiel Lamberts, *The Struggle with Leviathan: social Responses to the Omnipotence of the State, 1815–1965*, Leuven 2016.

¹⁴ Christopher Clark/Wolfram Kaiser, *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Cambridge 2003.

¹⁵ Frédéric Le Play, *L'organisation du travail selon la coutume des ateliers et la loi du Décalogue*, Tours 1870, 177.

¹⁶ Alain-René Michel, *Les catholiques sociaux du Nord et les modèles belge et allemand*, in: Yves-Marie Hilaire (ed.), *Cent ans de catholicisme social dans la région du Nord. Actes du colloque de Lille, 7 et 8 décembre 1990*, in: *Revue du Nord*, 73, 290–291 (1991), 321–328. See also: Frédéric Barbier, *Le patronat du Nord sous le Second Empire: une approche propographique*, Genève 1989.

¹⁷ Emiel Lamberts, *Joseph de Hemptinne: een kruisvaarder in redingote*, in: Emiel Lamberts (ed.), *De kruistocht tegen het liberalisme. Facetten van het ultramontanisme in België in de 19e eeuw*, Leuven 1984, 64–105.

¹⁸ Ginette Kurgan-van Hentenryk et al. (ed.), *Dictionnaire des patrons en Belgique*, Brussels 1996. It contains biographical notes on the Desclée Family (by René Brion, 215–17), Valère Mabile (Jean Puissant, 441–42), the Pirmez Family (Jean-Louis Delaet and Valérie Montens, 514–17), Léon Collinet (Nicole Caulier-Mathy and Eliane Gubin, 117–18), Jean Dallemagne (Caulier-Mathy, 137–38) and Omer Lambiotte (Brion, 412).

Féron (1831–1908)¹⁹ in Lille, Henri Bernard (1810–1889) of the same city, as well as Henri Bayart (1841–1890) in Roubaix, Alfred Dutilleul (1843–1893) in Armentières, Philippe Motte-Wibaux (1821–1906), Charles Tiberghien-Le-poutre (1825–1907) in Tourcoing, and Ferdinand de Bailliencourt (1856–1938) in Douai.

The writings of the Leuven jurist and professor Charles Périn (1815–1905),²⁰ a confidant of Pope Pius IX, offered an intellectual framework to these networks. Building on the ideas of Alaban de Villeneuve-Bargemont (1784–1850) and his mentor Charles de Coux (1787–1864), Périn's books *De la richesse dans les sociétés chrétiennes* (1861) and *Les lois de la société chrétienne* (1875) strongly argued the superiority of Christian social teachings on both Marxism and liberalism. «La question sociale, telle qu'elle s'offre à nous en ce temps d'audaces, d'impatiences et de divagations révolutionnaires», stated Périn in 1880, «ne peut s'expliquer autrement que par l'action persistante des conceptions impies qui affirment l'absolue souveraineté de l'homme sur lui-même, et qui prétendent substituer, dans l'ordre social, l'autorité de la raison à l'autorité de Dieu.»²¹ By placing the principle of renouncement at the core of his ideal of a Christian economy, and by stressing that only charity could offer a durable solution to the «question sociale», Périn somewhat redefined Catholic belief in economic terms. António Almodovar has even argued that he was building an analytical and doctrinal body of Catholic economics that was part of political economy.²²

Périn's already pronounced influence in entrepreneurial milieus would increase even further after his forced resignation from his professorship in Leuven

¹⁹ Louis Baunard, *Philibert Vrau et les œuvres de Lille 1829–1905*, Paris 1906; Id., *Les deux frères: cinquante années de l'action catholique dans le Nord: Philibert Vrau, Camille Féron-Vrau 1829–1908*, Paris 1910; André Mabile de Poncheville, *Deux maîtres d'œuvres: Philibert Vrau, Camille Féron-Vrau*, Paris 1945.

²⁰ Armand Louant, *Charles Périn et Pie IX*, in: *Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome*, 27 (1952), 81–220; Id., *Charles Périn*, in: *Biographie nationale de Belgique*, II, 1959, 666–670. A renewing biographical outline by Fred Stevens (KU Leuven) will shortly be published in the volume «Great Christian Jurists of the Low Countries», edited by Wim Decock and Janwillem Oosterhuis in the series «Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity». Alina Potempa (Ruhr Universität Bochum) is studying Périn as part of her PhD-project «Wie Katholiken die moderne Ökonomie entdeckten». See her contribution to this volume.

²¹ Charles Périn, *Les doctrines économiques depuis un siècle*, Paris 1880, V.

²² Pedro Teixeira/António Almodovar, *Economics and Theology in Europe from the 19th Century: from early 19th century's Christian Political Economy to modern Catholic social Doctrine*, in: Paul Oslington (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, Oxford 2014, 113–134; Id., *Catholic in its faith, catholic in its manner of conceiving science: French Catholic Political Economy in the 1830's*, in: *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 19 (2012), 2, 197–225.

in 1881.²³ He then retreated to his castle in Ghlin in the Hainaut region and became a much sought-after speaker at social Catholic conferences in France, often linked to the Catholic University of Lille (1877), the *Revue Catholique des institutions et du droit* and like-minded scholars such as Claudio Jannet (1844–1894).²⁴ Périn's book *Le Patron* (1886)²⁵ offers a coherent reflection of the message that he brought to those audiences. His unwavering ideas on State intervention in social matters («ceci est socialiste») and his belief that only the model of a «patronage libre et charitable» could secure harmonious social relations, would only slightly be adjusted after the publication of *Rerum novarum*.²⁶ In Belgium and Northern France, Périn's writings would remain the central ideological pillar of entrepreneurial social Catholic involvement until the First World War.²⁷

Jesuit apostolate and retreats

Although several of the above-mentioned Catholic entrepreneurs were involved in the Franciscan Third Order, it were above all the Jesuits who would take the lead in mobilizing the industrial and commercial elites to the Catholic cause. They had introduced the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and were involved in several patronage initiatives linked to the Vincentian conferences. Jesuits also stood at the cradle of the first regional and national federations of local Catholic workers' circles, youth patronages and other moralizing «œuvres ouvrières». In Belgium we can cite their involvement in the Archbrotherhood of Saint Francis Xavier (1854) and in the *Fédération des Sociétés Ouvrières Catholiques* (1867–1891).²⁸ In France they proved to be crucial actors in the *Union des Œuvres Ouvrières Catholiques* (1871) and especially the *Œuvre des cercles catholiques*

²³ Maurice Becqué/Armand Louant, Le dossier Rome et Louvain de Charles Périn, in: *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 50 (1955), 35–124.

²⁴ Catherine Fillon, La «Revue catholique des institutions et du droit»: le combat contre-révolutionnaire d'une société de gens de robe (1873–1906), in: Hervé Leuwers et al. (ed.), *Elites et sociabilité au XIXe siècle. Héritages identifiés*, Lille 2001, 199–218; Claudio Jannet, *Le capital, la spéculation et la finance au XIXe siècle*; Paris 1892.

²⁵ Charles Périn, *Le patron: sa fonction, ses devoirs, ses responsabilités*, Lille/Paris 1886.

²⁶ Charles Périn, *L'économie politique d'après l'encyclique sur la condition des ouvriers*, Paris 1891.

²⁷ Emiel Lamberts, De ontwikkeling van de sociaal-katholieke ideologie in België, in: Emiel Lamberts (ed.), *Een kantelend tijdperk/Une époque en mutation/Ein Zeitalter im Umbruch (1890–1910), De wending van de Kerk naar het volk in Noord-West-Europa/Le Catholicisme social dans le Nord-Ouest de l'Europe/Die Wende der Kirche zum Volk im nord-westlichen Europa*, Leuven 1992, 48–63.

²⁸ Jan De Maeyer, De Belgische Volksbond en zijn historische antecedenten, in: Emmanuel Gerard (ed.), *De Christelijke arbeidersbeweging in België 1891–1991 (KADOC-Studies XI)*, Leuven 1991, II, 19–65.

d'ouvriers (1871) of Albert De Mun (1841–1914) and René La Tour du Pin (1834–1924).

But the Jesuit Order also explicitly targeted its apostolate towards entrepreneurs and their families. The growing network of Jesuit secondary boarding schools, their institutions for higher commercial education and the study circles linked to them were important bridges to that end. Through their network of current and former students, Jesuits became confidants of many Catholic bourgeois families. There they not only acted as spiritual counsellors and participated in salon life, but of course also sought and found new vocations. Spiritual guidance to the sons of these families was also offered during the so-called gentlemen's retreats, in which groups of young or adult businessmen and other professionals gathered for several days of conferences, spiritual introspection and joint prayer under the guidance of Jesuit priests. The Jesuit «apostolate of the retreats», embedded within Ignatian spirituality and largely sculpted on the models of the Belgian father Adolphe Petit (1822–1914) and his French fellow Henri Watrigant (1845–1926), proved to be extremely flexible. Specialized retreats were organized, targeting specific social and professional categories, not only employers, but also their engineers and foremen. From the mid-1880s onwards carefully chosen groups of industrial workers were also invited, sometimes together with their employers during so-called *retraites mixtes*. Supported by generous benefactors, the Jesuit order created the infrastructure to host these three- to four-day gatherings, in Northern France, for instance, starting in 1882 at Château Blanc in Wasquehal near Tourcoing, and from 1890 onwards in Notre-Dame du Hautmont in Mouvaux. Similar centres could be found in Belgium near Liège (Maison Notre-Dame de Xhovémont, 1901), Ghent (Our lady of Flanders in Drogen, 1894), Arlon (Saint-Francis Xavier, 1894) and Charleroi (Notre-Dame du Travail in Fayt-lez-Manage, 1891).²⁹

It was during the gentlemen's retreats that, from the late 1870s onwards, the foundations were laid for the regional Catholic circles of entrepreneurs already briefly mentioned in our introduction. The best-known one was certainly the French *Association Catholique des patrons du Nord* (ACPN). It was officially founded on 16 August 1884 during a retreat of 22 industrialists led by the Jesuit Victor Alet (1827–1890). However, the ACPN was clearly grounded in existing local networks of Catholic industrialists, some of them dating back to 1876–

²⁹ Kristien Suenens, Belgian jesuits and their labourer retreats (c. 1890–1914), in: Urs Altermatt/Jan De Maeyer/Franziska Metzger (ed.), *Religious Institutes and Catholic Culture in 19th and 20th-century Europe*, Leuven 2014, 161–176. The first workers' retreat in Belgium was organized in October 1890 by Jules Lechien (1844–1914) at the Jesuit college of Charleroi.

78.³⁰ The French example clearly inspired the Belgian Catholic industrialists to strengthen their collaboration. The *Union des Patrons en faveur des Ouvriers* in Liège, established after an explicit plea of local bishop Victor Doutreloux (1837–1901) at the first Catholic social congress of September 1886, offers a fine example.³¹ Other regional associations followed, particularly in the Hainaut region.³² In 1894 a Belgian *Association des Patrons et Industriels Catholiques* (APIC) was founded.³³

Amongst the Jesuits who would play a decisive role in forging a Catholic role model for industrial employers we can mention for northern France Eugène Marquigny (1836–1885), Paul Fristot (1833–1910), the already quoted Henri Watrigant and Victor Alet, ACPN chaplain François Doyotte (1841–1895), and in Belgium Auguste Lebrocquy (1847–1921) and especially Auguste Castelein (1840–1922), the main general and spiritual advisor of APIC in 1892–1896.³⁴ The particular preference of Catholic industrialists for Jesuit counselling was of course related to the familiarity of the Order with the business milieu. But there were also other reasons. Some Catholic industrialists considered their bishops politically too volatile and preferred the operational independency of the Order and its direct link with Rome and papal directives. Nonetheless, there were of

³⁰ Robert Talmy, *Une forme hybride de catholicisme social: L'Association Catholique des Patrons du Nord (1884–1895)*, Lille 1962. To accommodate its legal recognition under the law of 1884, the ACPN renamed itself in 1890 to *«Association Professionnelle Catholique des Patrons du Nord»*. Complying to the objections of the local Préfet, the attribute *«Catholique»* was dropped in April 1891. See also: Gustave Fagniez, *Corporations et syndicats*, Paris 1905, 162.

³¹ *Congrès des Œuvres sociales à Liège...1886*, Liège 1886, 1, 152–153 and 2, 157–173. The name referred to the *«Arbeiterwhol»*-circle founded by some German industrialists following the *Katholikentage* in Koln in 1881. Henri Doat, *Utilité des unions de patrons et moyens de les propager*, in: *Congrès des Œuvres sociales à Liège: troisième session, 7–10 septembre 1890*, Liège 1890, III, 1–4; *La Paix sociale: bulletin de l'Union des patrons en faveur des ouvriers, 1888–[1909]*. See also: *Les devoirs des classes dirigeantes. Discours d'ouverture par S.G. Monseigneur Doutreloux Evêque de Liège*, Liège 1886; *Les devoirs des patrons envers les ouvriers: discours de S.G. Monseigneur Doutreloux Evêque de Liège*, Liège 1887; *Léon et les questions ouvrières: discours d'ouverture par Mgr. L'évêque de Liège*, Liège 1890.

³² Reports of the *«Association des Patrons Chrétiens de Charleroi»* for 1890–1893 in: KADOC: Archives of the *Verbond van Kristelijke Werkgevers (VKW)*, 250; Isaac Isaac (sic), *Conseils pratiques sur les rapports qui doivent exister entre patrons et ouvriers: causerie faite à l'association des patrons chrétiens de Charleroi le 4 avril 1892*, Charleroi 1892.

³³ APIC, *Mémoire sur la situation de l'industrie en Belgique et sur la question ouvrière adopté par l'Assemblée générale des Patrons Catholiques*, Brussels 1894. In Liège a *«Ligue pour la Défense de l'Industrie et de la Propriété»* was created: Paul Gérin, *Catholicisme social et démocratie chrétienne (1884–1904)*, in: Emmanuel Gerard/Paul Wynants (ed.), *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier chrétien en Belgique*, Leuven 1991, 1, 101–102; Id., *Les origines de la démocratie chrétienne à Liège*, Brussels/Paris 1957/1958, 113.

³⁴ Joseph Schyrgens, *Le Révérend Père Casteleyn*, in: *Revue Générale* (1922), 339–348; Leopold Willaert, *Casteleyn, August*, in: *Biographie nationale*, II, suppl, 270.

course several diocesan priests who took up leading roles in the networks and associations of Catholic entrepreneurs, including Aimé Coulomb (1839–1908) in Armentières, philosophy professor and later canon Louis Alexandre Fichaux (1833–1916) in Tourcoing, and the future bishop of Tournai Charles Walravens (1841–1915). Diocesan priests were also at the forefront of the *Confrérie de Notre-Dame de l'Usine (et de L'Atelier)*, a devotional and apologetic association for factory workers and their employers, set up in the mid-1870s in the diocese of Reims, but quickly expanding throughout France and especially in Tourcoing, Lille and Roubaix.³⁵

A living role model: Léon Harmel (1829–1915)

In the summer of 1897 the Bruges lawyer and local municipal councillor Eugène Standaert (1861–1929) made a trip – one might even say a pilgrimage – to the medium-sized wool spinning mill (1840) of Léon Harmel in Warmeriville on the river Suipe near Reims.³⁶ In the ensuing publication Standaert offered his readers a systematic overview of the many social provisions and benefits, as well as the apologetic, devotional and charitable structures that the company harboured. But he above all underlined its unique atmosphere. Val-des-Bois was not an anonymous production facility, but a genuine «communauté industrielle marqué du signe de la croix». Standaert made it clear that this community clearly reflected the personality and convictions of its manager and owner. Léon Harmel was indeed an emblematic figure.³⁷ The way in which he and his father Jacques-Joseph (1795–1884) – to whom the attribute «Le Bon Père» originally was ascribed – had «Christianized» their factory by setting up catechetical initiatives, organizing social provisions and involving their workers in mixed or

³⁵ Talmy, *Une forme hybride* (cf. note 30), 74–79; *Institutions patronales et ouvrières d'un groupe d'usines du Département du Nord*, Lille 1898, 35–40. The confrérie admitted «toute personne s'intéressant au salut de la classe ouvrière». The first chapter in Lille was established in 1886–1887. Although references were made to local sections in the Belgian Hainaut, we were unable to substantiate them. The Confrérie de Notre-Dame de l'Usine, however, had a lot of supporters in Belgium. Its court conviction in July/November 1892 for violating the Waldeck-Rousseau law (1884) was closely monitored by the Catholic press.

³⁶ Eugène Standaert, *Chez le bon Père*, Gent 1898, reprinted in 1902. Harmel's factory counted about 300 workers in 1850, 700 at the end of the century. Jean-Pierre Marby, *Les Harmel*, in: Gracia Dorel-Ferré/Denis McKee (ed.), *Les patrons du Second Empire: Champagne-Ardenne*, Le Mans 2006, 57–64. See also: Léon Harmel, *Le Val des Bois et ses institutions ouvrières*, Paris 1890; *Le Val des Bois: situation actuelle*, Reims 1895.

³⁷ Joan L. Coffey, *Léon Harmel: entrepreneur as Catholic social reformer*, Notre Dame Indiana 2003; Georges Guitton, *Léon Harmel 1829–1915*, Paris 1927; Id., *La Vie Ardente et Féconde de Léon Harmel*, Paris 1929; Jacques Bellanger, *Léon Harmel, soldat du Christ au service des ouvriers*, Paris 1943; Pierre Trimouille, *Léon Harmel et l'usine chrétienne du Val des Bois (1840–1914): fécondité d'une expérience sociale*, Lyon 1974.

corporative deliberative structures, was widely considered a ground-breaking experiment. For many it also became a model worthy of imitation.

Since the mid-1870s Harmel had been propagating his ideas on «la restauration de la corporation ouvrière, appropriée aux conditions actuels du travail» through different channels. After numerous presentations and conference papers,³⁸ his *Manuel d'une corporation chrétienne* (1876/77) offered a first systematic overview of the many different initiatives at Val-des-Bois.³⁹ Harmel had read the main works by Périn but was also clearly inspired by the Leplaysian ideas on patronage.⁴⁰ In August 1873, during a workers' pilgrimage to Notre-Dame de Liesse near Laon, Harmel met De Mun and soon after got involved in his *Œuvre des cercles catholiques d'ouvriers* (1871). A year later he encountered Camille Féron-Vrau in Lyon and was invited by the latter to speak about his experiences in Lille.⁴¹ The «patrons du Nord» considered them interesting and even inspiring, but also underlined that Harmel's successes were partly due to the rural setting of his factory and that many of his initiatives would no longer be viable in an urbanized context where socialism had already gained a strong foothold.⁴²

Notwithstanding these reservations, Harmel rapidly became the figurehead of entrepreneurial socio-Catholic involvement, in France and also in Belgium. His *Manuel* was pre-published in the spring of 1876 in *L'Economie Chrétienne*, the periodical of the Belgian *Fédération des Sociétés Ouvrières Catholiques*. Contributions by Harmel or likeminded priests (some Jesuit) to socio-Catholic conferences in France, in particular those of the *Union des Associations Ouvrières Catholiques*, were diligently reported on by the Belgian Catholic press.⁴³ The «apostle of the factory» spoke at the Belgian Catholic social congresses in Liège and at several meetings of Catholic industrialists in the Hainaut region.⁴⁴ His re-

³⁸ See for instance: Léon Harmel, *Organisation chrétienne de l'usine selon un industriel*, Paris 1874, containing his first speech at the congress of the «Union des Œuvres Ouvrières Catholiques» in Nantes the year before.

³⁹ Léon Harmel, *Manuel d'une Corporation Chrétienne*, Tours 1877. See the laudatory reviews in *Le Bien Public*, 19 August 1877 and 9 September 1878. A Belgian pre-edition already appeared the year before: Léon Harmel, *Manuel de la corporation chrétienne*, Liège 1876.

⁴⁰ Le Play, *L'organisation du travail* (cf. note 15); André Gueslin, *L'invention de l'économie sociale: idées, pratiques et imaginaires coopératifs et mutualistes dans la France du XIXe siècle*, Paris 1998. See also: Claudio Jannet, *L'organisation du travail d'après F. Le Play et le mouvement social contemporain, précédé d'un avant-propos sur le pape Léon XIII et la question sociale*, Paris 1890.

⁴¹ Baunard, *Les deux frères* (cf. note 19), 258.

⁴² Talmy, *Une forme hybride* (cf. note 30), 54–58.

⁴³ *Fédération Belge des Œuvres Ouvrières Catholiques*, *Compte rendu de la XVIIe session tenue à Bruxelles le 1 et le 2 Déc. 1879*, Brussels 1879, 35–40; *Le Bien Public*, 13 May 1881.

⁴⁴ *Congrès des œuvres sociales à Liège...1886* (cf. note 31), 47–52; *Congrès des Œuvres sociales à Liège...1887* (cf. note 31), I, 53–57; *Congrès des Œuvres sociales à Liège...1890*

putation quickly extended throughout Europe and even far beyond. The devoutly Catholic Brazilian engineer Carlos Alberto de Menezes (1855–1904) for instance, had learned about Harmel's experiment through the periodicals of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. During a business trip to Europe in 1891 he eagerly made a detour to Val-des-Bois. In his *Companhia Industrial Pernambucana* in the region of Camaragibe, Menenez would set up similar structures and provisions, including a brass band and a *confrérie de Notre-Dame de l'Usine*.⁴⁵ Harmel introduced Menenez to his confidant Léon Dehon (1843–1925), leading to the establishment of his *Prêtres du Sacre Coeur* in the Recife region (1893/1901).⁴⁶

Harmel's growing renown was of course partly due to the enthusiasm in Rome for his ideas and realizations. The new pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) strove towards a *modus vivendi* with political liberalism and urged for a more explicit involvement of the Church with modern, industrialized society. As expressed in his brief *Aeterni Patris* (4 August 1879), Leo was confident that the clear and logical metaphysical matrix offered by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) would enable the Catholic elites to engage in a dialogue with the many social, cultural and scientific manifestations of secular modernity, striving towards a synthesis, but with respect for Church doctrine and tradition.⁴⁷ For Leo, Christian anthropocentrism offered a superior alternative to both the nominalist individualism of liberalism and the idealist collectivism of socialism. A God-given moral order preceded any other factual and normative framework and thus needed to underpin the political and economic order.

Supported by this Neo-Scholastic framework the Catholic Church moulded social activism as an instrument aimed at a restoration of its moral leadership

(cf. note 31), III, 19–24. For the Hainaut: Louis Brouwers, *Responsables chrétiens d'entreprises: cinquante ans d'histoire*, Brussels 1974, I, 6. Reports of the Association des Patrons Chrétiens Charleroi for 1890–1893 can be found in: KADOC: Archives of the Verbond van Kristelijke Werkgevers (VKW), 250; *Journal de Bruxelles*, 29 July 1890.

⁴⁵ Deivison Amaral, *Confessional associations in a transnational perspective: Catholic organizations in Camaragibe (Brazil) and Val-des-Bois (France)*. Paper presented at the KADOC-Seminaries on Religion, Culture & Society, 30 November 2017. Menenez and his son-in-law and successor Pierre Collier corresponded with Val-de-Bois at least until 1912.

⁴⁶ Other congregations such as the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Marists (1904) followed. On Dehon: Yves Ledure, *Rerum Novarum en France. Le Père Dehon et l'engagement social de l'Église*, Paris 1991.

⁴⁷ Jean-Dominique Durand, *Léon XIII, Rome et le monde*, in: Vincent Viaene (ed.), *The papacy and the New World Order. Vatican Diplomacy, Catholic Opinion and International Politics at the Time of Leo XIII, 1878–1903*, Leuven 2005, 55–67; Patrick De Laubier, *Un idéal historique concret de société: le projet de Léon XIII*, in: *Revue thomiste*, 78 (1978), 385–412; Carlos Steel, *Thomas en de vernieuwing van de filosofie: Beschouwingen bij het thomisme van Mercier*, in: *Tijdschrift voor filosofie*, 53 (1991), 44–89; Kaat Wils, *De omweg van de wetenschap. Het positivisme en de Belgische en Nederlandse intellectuele cultuur 1845–1914*, Amsterdam 2005, esp. 326–341.

within (and no longer against) modern society.⁴⁸ The Catholic press, the Church-linked associations and popular organizations, public manifestations and congresses would demonstrate the power and militancy of Catholic opinion. Prominent laymen, industrialists in particular, were called upon to take the lead. Leo was briefed on Harmel's «communauté industrielle chrétienne» in Val-des-Bois by Archbishop Benoit Langénieux (1824–1905) of Reims. As early as in April 1879 he sent the latter a papal brief inviting «all the masters and workers of big factories» to follow this example.⁴⁹ Leo's pastoral message to the French bishops of 8 February 1884 summoned Catholic entrepreneurs to create associations. Two months later, his encyclical *Humanum Genus* urged them to join the Church in its struggle against Freemasonry, for instance by involving their workers in mixed deliberative structures or corporations. In February 1885, Harmel would also lead a pilgrimage to Rome of 128 French industrialists, including Féron-Vrau. Two and half years later, in October 1887, Harmel and De Mun brought the first of many «pélérinages ouvriers» to the Holy City, mobilizing several thousand participants.⁵⁰ In 1889, after a lengthy consultation of both French and Roman theologians, Harmel published his *Catéchisme du Patron*, offering all employers «soucieux de remplir chrétiennement leur mission, un sommaire des devoirs que leur imposent la religion et leur vocation spéciale».⁵¹ This book was widely applauded. «Si nous savons pratiquer les préceptes contenues dans ce petit catéchisme, nous n'aurions pas besoin d'une législation sociale bien compliquée», concluded reviewer Jules Angot de Rotours (1859–1941) in *La Réforme Sociale*.⁵²

The heated social climate in these years, leading for instance in April 1886 to strikes and deadly riots in Belgian Wallonia, increased the sense of urgency in ecclesiastical midst to deal with the «question sociale». The Catholic social congresses in Liège (September 1886, 1887 and 1890), with 2000 participants at every edition, proved to be crucial in light of the further development of Catholic social doctrine. When in May 1891 the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* was

⁴⁸ Vincent Viaene (ed.), *The papacy and the New World Order. Vatican Diplomacy, Catholic Opinion and International Politics at the Time of Leo XIII, 1878–1903*, Leuven 2005; Lamberts (ed.), *Een kantelend tijdperk* (cf. note 27).

⁴⁹ Guitton, Léon Harmel (cf. note 37), 115.

⁵⁰ Talmy, *Une forme hybride* (cf. note 30), 48–51.

⁵¹ Léon Harmel, *Catéchisme du Patron*, élaboré avec le concours d'un grand nombre de théologiens, Paris 1889. The draft manuscript was finished in August 1885. After a thorough review on the French level, involving for instance François Perriot (1839–1910) in Langres and the bishop of Angers Charles-Emile Freppel (1827–1891), the text was revised in August 1887. Then it was sent to Rome where it was again analysed by several theologians, e.g. the Jesuits August Lehmkühl (1834–1918) and Julius Costa-Rossetti (1841–1900). On 6 January 1889 Harmel could finally write his preface.

⁵² *La Réforme sociale*, IX (1889), July-December, 365–66.

released, it contained ground-breaking passages regarding fair wages, independent workers' organizations and the need for social legislation and thus State intervention.⁵³ Particularly in Belgium and Northern France, the way in which the papal brief needed to be interpreted and put into practice led to profound discussions amongst socially involved Catholics, laymen and clergy alike. Historiography has tried to provide transparency by discerning two opposing schools.⁵⁴ Because it subscribed to social legislation – for instance fixing minimum wages – and pleaded for independent Christian labour organizations, the school of Liège-Fribourg was labelled as «democratic», «progressive» and even «emancipatory». The opposing «school of Angers», linked to the *Revue Catholique des institutions et du droit* and the *Association des juristes catholiques*, was sometimes nicknamed the «école de la liberté». It was, however, more often characterised as «non-interventionist», «corporatist» and «conservative». The *Ecole d'Angers* underlined that *Rerum Novarum* above all advocated a strong rejection of socialist collectivism, that the Pope remained far from condemning big business culture and had clearly stressed the pre-eminence of property rights.⁵⁵

A large majority of the Catholic entrepreneurs in Northern France and Belgium supported these last positions. They held on to the model of mixed or corporative labour associations, fiercely rejected a role for the State in social matters, contended that employers facing financial problems were not obliged to pay minimum wages and that the reciprocal rights and duties of employers and workers could not (merely) be defined by a contract.⁵⁶ They urged for political unity and heavily contested emerging Christian democracy. Harmel however showed himself inclined to follow the ideas of Liège-Fribourg, even its striving towards independent Christian trade unionism. After some years of growing tensions and imputations, the conflict came to a climax in 1894–95. And although

⁵³ Paul Gérin, *Les congrès des œuvres sociales tenus à Liège en 1886, 1887 et 1890*, Liège 2002, 61–87; Id., *Catholicisme social* (cf. note 33).

⁵⁴ Paul Gérin, *Les écoles sociales belges et la lecture de Rerum Novarum*, in: *Rerum Novarum: écriture, contenu et réception d'une encyclique*, Rome 1997, 267–289. The division in the Jesuit Order on the issue has never been studied properly.

⁵⁵ Roger Aubert, *L'encyclique Rerum novarum, une charte des travailleurs*, in: Françoise Rosart/Guy Zelis (ed.), *Le monde catholique et la question sociale*, Brussels 1992, 13–28; Albéric Belliot, *Manuel de sociologie catholique*, Paris 1911, 300–301.

⁵⁶ See for instance: Claudio Jannet, *L'organisation chrétienne de l'usine et la question sociale: conférence faite à Mons le 3 juillet 1892 à l'assemblée générale des œuvres sociales chrétiennes*, Brain-le-Comte 1892; Auguste Castelein, *Le problème social et l'encyclique «Rerum novarum»*, in: *Revue Générale*, August 1891, 165–187; Id., *Le problème social et l'encyclique «Rerum novarum» avec un appendice sur la théorie du salaire et de la participation aux bénéfices*, Rapport du Congrès des catholiques du Nord, à Lille, Brussels 1892.

even the pope intervened to reconcile both parties, Harmel and the *Patrons du Nord* would go their separate ways.⁵⁷

The impact of the discussions amongst socially involved Catholics on the disputed passages in *Rerum novarum* should not be minimized or dismissed as rear-guard actions by a conservative faction that soon would become outdated. Victor Brants (1856–1917), Périn’s successor in Leuven, would equate the conflict with the debates 60 years earlier, following the publication of *Mirari Vos*.⁵⁸ We do not wish to offer a detailed analysis here. Let us merely stress that there were several intermingled conflict zones and that the lines between the different parties were often blurry. Moreover, the positions also evolved. The dispute was somewhat appeased by later papal texts, for instance the encyclical *Graves de Communi* (1901), but was never genuinely settled. Catholic industrialists and the young Christian labour movement in both France and Belgium would keep on arguing about the ways in which the encyclical needed to be read and implemented, on the appropriateness and limits of State intervention, or (in short) on how in social relations a «balance between justice and charity» could be reached.⁵⁹ There were even efforts made to «sanctify» the conflicting interpretations. In 1912 the archdiocese of Cambrai introduced a causa for the beatification of the «two brothers» of Lille, Philibert Vrau and Camille Féron. A dossier on behalf of Léon Harmel followed soon after his death in 1915.⁶⁰

Authority and responsibility

This bickering amongst social Catholics is however not essential for comprehending the model of the *«bon patron catholique»* as it was expressed in many different texts throughout the last decades of the 19th century. This idealized vi-

⁵⁷ Pierre Trimouille, Léon Harmel et les patrons du Nord: la crise de 1893–1894, in: *Revue du Nord*, 73 (cf. note 16), 271–282; Guitton, Léon Harmel (cf. note 37), II, 62–65; Talmy, *Une forme hybride* (cf. note 30), 172–77. On the debate in Belgium: Jan De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen 1847–1917: de rode baron*, Leuven 1994, 278–281; APIC, *Mémoire sur la situation* (cf. note 33); APIC, *Défense du mémoire sur la situation de l’industrie en Belgique en réponse à une lettre des évêques belges du 24 septembre 1894*, Liège 1895; KADOC-KU Leuven, *Archives of the Society of Jesus in Flanders*, 1434.

⁵⁸ Victor Brants, *Charles Périn: notice sur sa vie et ses travaux*, in: *Annuaire de l’Université Catholique de Louvain* 1906, Leuven 1906, XLIV.

⁵⁹ Jo Deferme, *Uit de ketens van de vrijheid: het debat over de sociale politiek in België 1886–1914*, Leuven 2007.

⁶⁰ For the dossiers of Vrau and Féron numerous testimonies of workers were compiled. The process continued in Rome during the 1930s, but was paused in the 1950s. In recent years *«Les Amis de Philibert Vrau»* have taken up the task to reinvigorate it. See *«www.philibert-vrau.com»* (accessed 14 June 2019). On the lives of both Harmel and Vrau comic books were published: Didier Cardez/Francis Carin, *Philibert Vrau dit le Saint de Lille*. Durbuy 2014; Guy Lehideux, *Léon Harmel, apôtre de la doctrine sociale*, Paris 2009.

sion of good Catholic entrepreneur- and employership was so encompassing that it transcended the discussions on matters such as social legislation or minimum wages. The model above all advocated the need for a (re-)Christianization of factories and workshops, or as Marquigny phrased it, a reconciliation of labour with the fundamental laws of the Godly order.⁶¹ It urged a spiritual regeneration of the business milieu. Entrepreneurs were called upon to overcome the growing inclination of their professions towards individualism and neutrality. They needed to openly reject liberalism, which Périn had stigmatized as sensual and utilitarian. Catholic businessmen were required to profess their Catholic identity, testify to their beliefs and live in accordance with them. They should place their entire life «en conformité avec leur foi», as it was formulated during the Jesuit retreats in Tourcoing. Religious opinions were no mere private matter, but had to be expressed in all their actions and relations. The model above all invited entrepreneurs to lead virtuous Christian lives, to dutifully fulfil their Catholic obligations (regular mass attendance and confession, individual and family prayer, etc.) and to renounce ostentatious luxury. In the account of his visit to Val-des-Bois in 1895 cited earlier, Eugène Standaert devoted several pages to describing the surprisingly sober interior of the Harmel family's small villa. He also referred extensively to Harmel senior's admonishments on that matter: «Le luxe ruine les familles, souvent les désunit, et offense Dieu ... Que le ton de votre maison et de vos habitudes soit simple et toujours bien en dessous de votre position.»⁶²

Becoming a «bon patron catholique» was, however, far from a formal matter. By openly professing their Catholic identity, industrialists would become better, more decisive and vigorous men. «L'industriel qui possède Jésus-Christ sous son toit», stated Harmel, «ressent les bienfaisantes influences de sa présence, sans même s'en apercevoir; il devient plus pieux, et il reçoit en son cœur une charité ardente qui lui fait franchir tous les obstacles.»⁶³ The urgency of their apostolate was clear, not only for their proper salvation, but in essence for that of the entire society. Charles Périn considered the Christianization of the entrepreneurial class a way «à sauver la société en se sauvant eux-mêmes».⁶⁴ «C'est le salut de la société qui est en cause», as it was phrased by Féron-Vrau, «ce sont les âmes de nos frères, le relèvement de notre pays.»⁶⁵ The growing religious indifference of the entrepreneurial class and the way in which factory owners neglected their God-given charitable duties, were often portrayed as one

⁶¹ Baunard, *Les deux frères* (cf. note 19), 272.

⁶² Standaert, *Le Bon Père* (cf. note 36), 8–11.

⁶³ Congrès de l'Union de Oeuvres Ouvrières Catholiques, Angers, in: *Courrier de l'Escaut*, 8 September 1879.

⁶⁴ Périn, *Le Patron* (cf. note 15), 13.

⁶⁵ Baunard, *Les deux frères* (cf. note 19), 258.

of the main causes of the social crisis that had struck contemporary society. Indeed, writings on the apostolic calling of entrepreneurs often depicted the moral state of modern society in a gloomy, sometimes even pessimistic tone. Pauperism was considered a by-product of industrialization without religion. Material misery going hand in hand with moral abasement was at the core of the malady of modern society. Only Christianity could provide enduring answers. True solidarity required the exercise of justice, complemented by charity. Given the gravity of the social, cultural and moral crisis facing contemporary society and private enterprise in particular, the industrial elite could no longer stay uninvolved. For all these reasons a Catholic entrepreneur had a clear mission to fulfil. «C'est vers lui que tout converge dans l'œuvre industrielle», wrote the ever-eloquent Périn. «Dans ses mains le capital et le travail viennent se réunir. Grâce à leur concours, toutes les forces de la nature peuvent être mises en valeur.»⁶⁶

Fraternal peace and paternal love

The model of the <usine chrétienne>, especially as propagated by Harmel, presented a rather utopian vision of <family-like> social harmony and peace within factory walls. In this closed professional environment the ills of modern society (individualism, poverty, alcoholism, socialism...) could be ironed out by religious education, a stable family life and a harmonious professional environment offering workers security but also enhancing their sense of responsibility. In a Catholic factory entrepreneurs and their workers would live together «dans une paix fraternelle, inaltérée, inaltérable, parce que les uns et les autres conforment leur esprit et leur conduite aux obligations respectives que leur prescrit leur foi».⁶⁷ Their relationship would be dictated by mutual Christian respect and love. «Messieurs», as was it phrased by Camille Féron-Vrau, «il faut aimer l'ouvrier, l'aimer quelquefois malgré lui, l'aimer dans le cœur de Celui qui a dit, pour le pauvre aussi bien que pour le riche, cette divine parole: <Je ne vous ai point appelés des serviteurs, je vous ai appelés des amis.»⁶⁸

Most of the authors promoting the model, however, also made great efforts to underline that entrepreneurs would not undermine their social pre-eminence or managerial authority by explicitly professing their Catholic identity. Employers possessed the unquestionable power to form and lead their <famille ouvrière> following the Catholic principles of wisdom, prudence, justice and charity. Their authority and prestige as leaders of an industrial facility were anchored in property rights, and these in turn were grounded in natural law and the Reve-

⁶⁶ Périn, *Le Patron* (cf. note 15), 21.

⁶⁷ *Courrier de l'Escaut*, 15 January 1910.

⁶⁸ Baunard, *Les deux frères* (cf. note 19), 259.

lation. «Ce n'est pas des lois humaines, mais de la nature qu'émane le droit de propriété individuelle: l'autorité publique ne peut donc l'abolir», as Auguste Castelein put it.⁶⁹ Harmel, quoting chapter 13 of Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, contended that «quiconque est revêtu de l'autorité est ministre de Dieu pour le bien».⁷⁰ Respect for the paternal authority proscribed by the fourth commandment was not limited to family fathers, it had to be extended to all those who were superior to someone for reasons of power, character, position and «good works». «L'usine est une famille», dictated Harmel in 1890, «les devoirs du patron sont les mêmes que ceux du père de famille qui connaît tous ses enfants.»⁷¹ Other voices nuanced this equation. The Belgian APIC for instance argued that «les devoirs du patron à l'égard de la famille ouvrière» were merely «semblables et analogues à ceux du père, sans être identiques».⁷² In addition to this it was also underlined that the paternal authority of the employer also had its limits and, for instance, needed to abide by local customs and conventions.

Above all, however, it was stressed that entrepreneurial authority was closely linked, even intertwined with responsibility. The concept of Christian stewardship was of course often used. Man was only the safe-keeper, the steward of creation; even the factory needed to be considered as «a gift from God».⁷³ The economy served general material prosperity, for all social entities, safeguarding their independence and according to their specific aptitudes. Socio-economic harmony could only be achieved by justice, with respect for personal dignity and the material interests of all those involved. If employers wanted to durably re-affirm their legitimate authority within the modern, industrialized context, they needed to update their sense of social responsibility and accept their accountability towards society and especially to God. How could one expect workers to trust and acknowledge their employer, so it was often phrased, if he did not radiate a high moral authority and was religiously indifferent? After all, not only their authority but also their charitable obligations were rooted in natural law and thus divine in origin. «Plus on est haut placé, plus on doit imiter Dieu: faire le bien sans attendre de retour», so it was phrased by the Belgian Jesuit Arthur Vermeersch (1858–1936).⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Castelein, *Le problème social* (cf. note 56), 32. See also: Gerard Cooreman, *L'encyclique Rerum Novarum et les industriels*, Ghent 1891; Pierre Guilleminot, *Léon XIII et le devoir social*, Bruges 1891.

⁷⁰ Harmel, *Catéchisme* (cf. note 51), 41 nr. 35.

⁷¹ *Congrès des Œuvres sociales à Liège...1890* (cf. note 31), III, 22.

⁷² APIC, *Mémoire sur la situation* (cf. note 33), 52–53.

⁷³ See for instance the (rather concise) «Manuel des patrons» of banquier Jules Frésart (1821–1900) and Louis Selpuchre (1845–1930) in: *Congrès des œuvres sociales à Liège...1886* (cf. note 31).

⁷⁴ Arthur Vermeersch, *Manuel social. La législation et les oeuvres en Belgique*, Leuven/Paris 1904, 507.

Moral reorganization of the factory

A somewhat obvious way for industrialists to answer this pressing appeal was to confront the traditional individualism and indifference in the business milieu and to foster more unity amongst Catholic entrepreneurs, for instance by creating their own networks and associations. «Il faut donc renoncer à l'égoïsme, en prendre le contre-pied, chercher le remède dans le rapprochement, le groupement, l'association», so it was voiced at the social congresses in Liège.⁷⁵ In such networks businessmen could exchange their experiences and collectively confirm that entrepreneurial goals should never conflict with the laws of God and his Church. But above all, these circles could operationalize their striving towards a moral and religious reorganization of the factory. The *Association des Patrons Chrétiens*, founded in the Belgian Hainaut in February 1892, phrased its mission as «la réorganisation chrétienne du travail par l'étude de l'accomplissement des devoirs des patrons et des actionnaires à l'égard de leurs ouvriers». The solicitude of employers towards the material, moral and religious welfare of their workforce was indeed considered paramount. The group of Lille industrialists that published a first *Appel aux patrons chrétiens* in January 1873 clearly prioritized their rapprochement with the Catholic workers above finding a common understanding with the many other (and often not so militantly Catholic) industrialists of the city. «Il ne nous suffira pas», so they wrote, «de nous unir avec d'autres patrons; il faut que sans tarder, nous nous unissions aussi avec les ouvriers chrétiens; il faut qu'ils sachent qu'il y a des patrons associés pour travailler à la restauration chrétienne de l'atelier».⁷⁶

The loyalty and commitment of the workforce were considered the key success indicators of socially involved Catholic entrepreneurship. «Il nous semble que nos ouvriers et nos ouvrières trouvent satisfaction chez nous à leurs intérêts de toute nature», contended Féron-Vrau. «S'ils n'étaient contents de vivre avec nous, resteraient-ils si longtemps chez nous? Nous n'en pouvons donner un argument ni produire un fait qui soit plus significatif et plus heureux.»⁷⁷ In any case, it was in their fidelity that the *«bon patron catholique»* would find his main reward. Stories on how workers, more or less spontaneously and sincerely, had expressed their gratitude and affection towards their employer, were eagerly exchanged during network meetings. For the same reasons, entrepreneurs also had to recruit their workers carefully, preferably in close consultation with the clergy. Regular churchgoers living in the vicinity of the factory were clearly favoured. These families were described as an important investment, offering an

⁷⁵ Doat, *Utilité des unions de patrons* (cf. note 31), 3.

⁷⁶ Quoted by Talmy, *Une forme hybride* (cf. note 30), 19.

⁷⁷ Camille Féron-Vrau, *La Maison Ph. Vrau et C^o*, communication faite à l'association des patrons du Nord, Lille 1891, 33.

incubator for an apostolic worker elite that would lead the way towards the re-Christianization of the entire working class.⁷⁸ Large families deserved special attention.

Often inspired by Harmel's books, the networks of Catholic entrepreneurs drew up concise checklists of initiatives and practices to which employers had to pay particular attention while working towards the Christianization of their factories. Industrialists were of course advised to place crucifixes, religious statues and pictures within their workshops and to stimulate an absolute respect for Sunday rest and its associated religious duties. In order to encourage the religious and moral education and supervision of their workers, employers could of course invoke the help of parish priests and other members of the clergy. Several older sister congregations, for instance the *Sœurs de la Providence de Portieux* (1762) or the *Sœurs de Notre Dame de Saint Erme* (1816), were engaged by factory owners to take on the supervision of their female workforce. Other religious institutes, such as the *Petites Sœurs de l'Ouvrier* (1880) or the Belgian *Aumôniers du Travail* (1894) considered the «apostolate of the factory» one of their central missions.⁷⁹ Nonetheless it was clear that these male and female religious were merely «auxiliary forces» and that the main responsibility resided with the entrepreneur, his family and staff. The «bon patron catholique» was expected to regularly lead his workers into prayer and procession. As a real father he was expected to instruct and guide his «famille ouvrière». A Catholic employer, as well as his wife and children, needed to be accessible, opening their ears and hearts to the concerns, needs and problems of their workers. Gaining their workers' trust and respect, required a just and fair, sincere and straightforward commitment. But, it was argued, neither should Catholic employers be afraid to reprimand workers and, for instance, admonish them against violence, alcoholism and concubinage. Above all they needed to avoid making the impression of being capricious, untrustworthy and arbitrary. According to Vermeersch being a «bon patron catholique» was no less than an art form, clearly distinguishable from more calculated or all-too-authoritarian practises of

⁷⁸ La question sociale et l'apostolat de l'ouvrier: comment tous nous pouvons travailler à l'apostolat de l'ouvrier, Brussels/Leuven 1891.

⁷⁹ The sisters of Saint-Erme (Soissons) had a community in Brussels since 1883 and worked in the Legrand lace factories in Vilvoorde from 1890 to 1918. The Petites Sœurs de l'Ouvrier were founded following a resolution of the congress of the Union des Œuvres Ouvrières Catholiques. Around 1900 they were active in about 17 factories in Northern France: «Elles font le catéchisme aux enfants de moins de 10 ans, surveillent les ouvrières et leur apprennent la couture, pansent les blessés, visitent les malades, portent du secours aux familles nécessiteuses, assistent aux funérailles, dirigent des associations pieuses, aident à régulariser les unions illégitimes et à préparer aux premières communions tardives»: Institutions patronales (cf. note 45), 145.

socially involved employership, which he respectively labelled as «pseudo-patronage» and «patronage maladroite».⁸⁰

Amongst the «priest-like»⁸¹ responsibilities attributed to the <bon patron catholique>, securing the morality and diligence of their workers and ensuring their family happiness was seen as paramount. The principle of equivalence was to determine prices and wages. Salaries needed to be paid in cash and in full. However, vigilant planning of paydays could help to avoid alcohol abuse. Philibert Vrau started the Christian reform of his factory in 1871 by abolishing some custom-based holidays that had a bad reputation in this respect. Catholic entrepreneurs were also advised to minimize the number of female and infant workers in their workshops. If this proved to be impossible, they needed to carefully limit the opportunities that could foster unchaste relationships between the two sexes, for instance by clearly separating male and female workspaces and organizing different schedules for their male and female crews, as well as by providing separate canteens and restrooms. Infant workers, especially the young girls, needed to be supervised by carefully chosen staff members, preferably by members of the religious congregations mentioned above. The moral welfare of the workforce also required particular attention to the hygiene and security of the workplace, by for instance investing in infirmaries, refectories and washing areas.

The networks of Catholic entrepreneurs in Belgium and Northern France in the early 1890s showed a particular interest in the social provisions that a factory owner could organize or support, both within his walls or in workers' communities close by. Although opinions on this matter clearly differed, for instance between Harmel and the <patrons du Nord>, it was more or less agreed upon that workers should have a say in the establishment and management of these <oeuvres sociales>, since this involvement encouraged their sense of responsibility and commitment. Books and articles extolling the model of the <bon patron catholique> often listed the many different existing structures and devoted a lot of pages describing the experiences of their founders. Many different social initiatives were also introduced, and their impact, cost and effectiveness evaluated, at meetings and congresses. Although they of course did not neglect the somewhat older and already widely applied patronage initiatives such as Sunday school, day-care centres, libraries, choral societies and brass bands, Catholic entrepreneurs in Belgium and Northern France in the 1880s and 1890s clearly showed a preference for initiatives with a modern, innovative, somewhat emancipatory outlook, but that nonetheless stimulated the workers' morality, diligence and individual responsibility: factory stores, savings and pension funds,

⁸⁰ Vermeersch, *Manuel social* (cf. note 74), 505.

⁸¹ Baunard, *Les deux frères* (cf. note 19), 178: «presque sacerdotale».

mutual-aid societies, total abstinence leagues, allotments (jardins ouvriers), social housing provisions, etc. The support for these *«œuvres de patronage»* amongst industrialists can help to explain their remarkable persistence over the next decades, even long after the Second World War.

Finally, it must also be underlined that Catholic discourses on good employership did not remain blind to the profound changes to the way business was structured and operated in those decades. The traditional model of family enterprise and its link between ownership and management was in decline. The size and geographical scale of corporations increased, and multi-stakeholdership was facilitated by new company forms such as the *«société anonyme»* (limited liability company). Companies were becoming so big and multi-layered that it was impossible for one man or family unit to oversee the whole. New bureaucratic hierarchies were introduced. The model of *«le bon patron catholique»* clearly responded to these manifest evolutions in the entrepreneurial landscape. The day-to-day management of industrial facilities was increasingly turned over to professional managers and foremen. Could one really expect these actors as well to embrace the harmonious model of the *«usine chrétienne»* and devote themselves to a comparable apostolate? The answer to this question was outright positive. *«Par patron il faut entendre dans la grande industrie: le propriétaire ou le gérant de l'établissement, son état-major d'ingénieurs, chefs de service, agents commerciaux et en général tous ceux qui sont chargés de diriger des ouvriers»*, so contended the founding manifesto of the Belgian APIC.⁸² The model of the *«bon patron catholique»* even seemed applicable to company shareholders or board members, although it was also admitted that the same level of commitment could not be expected, as they only seldom had contact with the workforce. Special attention, however, was given to the intermediate social role that industrial engineers could play in fostering a Christian social climate within factory walls, sometimes even referring to the concept of social engineering.⁸³ The Church explicitly called upon their social and technical expertise to arrange for modern and up-to-date social provisions, guarantee optimal working conditions and avoid social conflicts. *«L'ingénieur catholique se trouve à l'heure qu'il est, en face d'une question menaçante et subversive de tout ordre social, la question ouvrière. C'est lui qui doit et peut seul la résoudre. [...] L'ingénieur catholique doit donc se proposer avant tout autre but, l'établissement du règne de Dieu dans l'usine: il doit l'organiser chrétiennement et, selon l'expression d'un homme dévoué aux classes ouvrières,*

⁸² APIC, *Mémoire sur la situation* (cf. note 33), 43.

⁸³ Vermeersch, *Manuel social* (cf. note 74), 505; Antoine Savoye/Frédéric Audren (ed.), *Frédéric Le Play et ses élèves. Naissance de l'Ingénieur social: les ingénieurs des mines et la science sociale au XIXe siècle*, Paris 2008.

la transformer en une œuvre de foi et de moralisation», as the engineering students at the Catholic University of Leuven were instructed in the mid-1870s.⁸⁴

Concluding remarks

Our contribution highlighted the remarkable discourse community on good, Catholic entrepreneur- and employership that emerged in Belgium and Northern France during the last decades of the 19th century. We merely introduced the propagated model as a normative framework, and conducted no analysis of how its guidelines were put into practice. Neither did we evaluate how they were perceived by the workers themselves, by other entrepreneurs or by broader society. These and many other elements can be considered valuable perspectives for further research.

Nonetheless we dare to state that the genesis of this model constituted an important phase in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the business milieu. It encouraged Catholic entrepreneurs to openly profess their religious identity and to become actors in a specific, factory-bound form of social apostolate. An immediate motive was of course the growing secularization and the rise of socialism amongst the working classes. For the businessmen who embraced it, the model also seemed to offer an alternative social strategy that could help to avoid or postpone a further intrusion of the State on the socio-economic domain. Moreover, the model proved to be extremely flexible: its cocktail of ideas, strategies, practices and instruments could easily be adapted to specific (regional, sectoral, etc.) contexts. Ultimately it was the entrepreneur himself, based on his uncontested authority, who decided on their implementation, intensity and balance.

The model could build on the deeply rooted traditions of patronage in the Belgian and French business world and the connected imagery on entrepreneur- and employership. Furthermore it was aligned with older charitable discourses and practices by which the Church, from the 1830s onwards, had mobilized the bourgeois laity to deepen its social apostolate and thus to restore its ethical pre-eminence within modern industrial society. The father-like attitudes attributed to entrepreneurs could be compared with the roles played by Vincentians when visiting their indigent families. Considered in its entirety, however, the model of the <bon patron catholique> implied a much higher level of commitment. It ex-

⁸⁴ Rapport sur les travaux du Cercle Industriel pendant l'années 1873–1873 et 1873–1874, in: *Annuaire de l'Université Catholique de Louvain 1874*, Leuven 1875, 188–189; Pieter Raymaekers, *Makers van een nieuwe wereld. De socioprofessionele geschiedenis van ingenieurs in België 1850–1914*, PhD-dissertation KU Leuven, 2013.

plicitly linked Catholic entrepreneurship with the voluntary acceptance of an active social responsibility for the material and moral well-being of the workforce. This priest-like vocation of the Catholic entrepreneur constituted a specific form of Catholic social activism. After *Rerum novarum* and the rise of the Christian labour movement the commitment of industrialists and other employers to the «œuvres sociales» was often labelled as outdated and deviant. Nonetheless it became a durable component of multi-layered social Catholicism throughout the 20th century.

Of course the model also had its limitations. It was particularly designed for medium-sized and big industrial companies with a considerable and concentrated workforce. Authors only occasionally referred to examples and practices in commercial and other service-providing firms. By focusing on good and responsible employership and on the family-like relationship between the industrialist and his employees, the promoters of the «bon patron catholique» somewhat neglected the many other ethical questions and dilemma's that entrepreneurs faced while reconciling their religious convictions with business decisions and practices. And although the «bon patron catholique» was clearly embedded within the culture of family-based, small and medium-sized enterprise, where as we know the involvement of women was quite prominent, the model was almost exclusively masculine.

Nonetheless, its imagery provided a detailed character model. Catholic entrepreneurs were depicted as decisive and vigorous men of high moral authority, determined and stable, somewhat detached and austere but also generous and above-all accountable. This flattering profile matched perfectly with how many authors since Richard Cantillon (1680–1734) had tried to offer an encompassing definition of the concept «entrepreneur». But the model also entrusted faithful industrialists and their managers with a huge responsibility. It contended that they, as key-actors of capitalist business, could amend, adjust and even change the system from within, somewhat acting as the yeast in the dough. All this provided a bedrock on which, in later decades, the Church and its social teachings entered into a more intricate dialogue with the business milieu, addressing many other social issues and entrepreneurial concerns. In this way the model would shape the social discourses of the Catholic industrialists in Northern France and Belgium during the next decades. This helps to explain why they only slowly developed a more structural vision on social relations. This would, however, not prevent them from playing a crucial role in designing the post-war welfare state and its structures for interest mediation, collective bargaining and social security.

Imagining the «bon patron catholique»: Industrial Entrepreneurs in Belgium and Northern France, and their Apostolate of the Factory (1870–1914)

This article highlights how during the last decades of the 19th century in the border-transcending industrial region of Belgium and Northern France, a communal discourse was created, subscribing to a more or less coherent normative framework on good Catholic employership. This model advocated the voluntary acceptance by entrepreneurs of an active social responsibility for the moral and material well-being of their workforce. In this article, the main features of this imaginary *«bon patron catholique»* are reconstructed. The remarkable involvement of the Jesuit Order in promoting and intellectually underpinning the entrepreneurial *«apostolate of the factory»* is demonstrated. Although the neo-logism *«familialism»* was sometimes used, this model has predominantly been labeled as paternalist and conservative. The intellectual and entrepreneurial elite that propagated it during the last decades of the 19th century only reluctantly embraced the emancipatory turn in Catholic social teachings initiated by *Rerum novarum* (1891). Nevertheless, the model proved to be a durable component of the multi-layered Catholic social thought throughout the 20th century.

Religion – entrepreneurship – paternalism – corporate social responsibility.

Vorstellungen zum «bon patron catholique». Industrielle Unternehmer in Belgien und Nordfrankreich und ihr Fabriksapostolat (1870–1914)

Dieser Artikel zeigt auf, wie in den letzten Jahrzehnten des 19. Jahrhunderts in der grenzüberschreitenden Industrieregion Belgien und Nordfrankreich eine Diskursgemeinschaft entstanden ist, die sich einem mehr oder weniger kohärenten normativen Rahmen für gute katholische Arbeitnehmer verschrieben hat. Dieses Modell befürwortete die freiwillige Übernahme einer aktiven sozialen Verantwortung für das moralische und materielle Wohlergehen von Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeitern durch Unternehmer. In diesem Artikel werden Hauptmerkmale dieser imaginären *bon-patron-catholique* Konzeption rekonstruiert. Das bemerkenswerte Engagement des Jesuitenordens bei der Förderung und intellektuellen Unterstützung des unternehmerischen *«Fabriksapostolat»* wird dabei deutlich. Obwohl manchmal der Neologismus *«Familialismus»* Verwendung fand, wurde dieses Modell überwiegend als paternalistisch und konservativ gesehen. Die intellektuelle und unternehmerische Elite, die es in den letzten Jahrzehnten des 19. Jahrhunderts propagierte, nahm die von *Rerum novarum* (1891) initiierte emanzipatorische Wende in der katholischen Soziallehre nur widerwillig an. Dennoch erwies sich das Modell als dauerhafter Bestandteil des vielschichtigen sozialen Katholizismus im gesamten 20. Jahrhundert.

Religion – Unternehmertum – Bevormundung – soziale Verantwortung von Unternehmen.

Imaginer le «bon patron catholique». Les entrepreneurs industriels en Belgique et dans le Nord de la France, et leur apostolat de l'usine (1870–1914)

Cet article met en évidence comment, au cours des dernières décennies du 19^{ème} siècle, dans la région industrielle frontalière de Belgique et du Nord de la France, une communauté de discours s'est créée, souscrivant à un cadre normatif plus ou moins cohérent sur la bonne conduite de l'employeur catholique. Ce modèle préconisait l'acceptation volontaire par les entrepreneurs d'une responsabilité sociale active pour le bien-être moral et matériel de leur personnel. Dans cet article, les principales caractéristiques de ce bon patron catholique imaginaire sont reconstituées. L'engagement remarquable de l'Ordre des Jésuites dans la promotion et le soutien intellectuel de *«l'apostolat entrepreneurial de l'usine»* est démontré. Bien que le néologisme *«familialisme»* ait parfois été utilisé, ce modèle a surtout été qualifié de paternaliste et de conservateur. L'élite intellectuelle et

entrepreneuriale qui l'a propagé au cours des dernières décennies du 19^{ème} siècle n'a adopté qu'avec réticence le tournant émancipateur des enseignements sociaux catholiques initiés par *Rerum novarum* (1891). Néanmoins, le modèle s'est avéré être une composante durable du catholicisme social à multiples facettes tout au long du 20^{ème} siècle.

Religion – esprit d'entreprise – paternalisme – responsabilité sociale des entreprises.

Rappresentazioni del «bon patron catholique». Imprenditori industriali in Belgio e nel Nord della Francia e il loro apostolato di fabbrica (1870–1914)

Questo articolo mostra come durante le ultime decadi del 19^{esimo} secolo nelle regioni industriali transfrontaliere del Belgio e del Nord della Francia si diffuse un discorso di comunità, che sosteneva un quadro normativo più o meno coerente per datori di lavoro che fossero buoni cattolici. Questo modello sosteneva l'accettazione volontaria degli imprenditori di una responsabilità sociale attiva per il benessere morale e materiale dei loro lavoratori. In questo articolo sono ricostruite le caratteristiche principali di questa immagine del buon padrone cattolico. Viene quindi mostrato il notevole coinvolgimento dell'ordine dei Gesuiti nella promozione e nel sostegno dell'«apostolato della fabbrica». Anche se a volte veniva utilizzato il neologismo imprenditoriale di «familismo», questo modello era prevalentemente percepito come paternalista e conservativo. L'élite intellettuale e imprenditoriale che lo promuoveva nelle ultime decadi del 19^{esimo} secolo, sosteneva con riluttanza la svolta emancipatoria dell'insegnamento sociale cattolico cui aveva dato inizio la *Rerum novarum* (1891). Tuttavia, nel corso del 20^{esimo} secolo, il modello mostrò di essere una componente duratura del pensiero sociale cattolico complesso.

Religione – Imprenditoria – Paternalismo – Responsabilità sociale corporativa.

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