

The Memory of Mission. Statues of Belgian Missionaries in their Native Places and Work Areas

Idesbald Goddeeris

Trefwoorden: missionarissen, koloniale geschiedenis, herinnering, openbare ruimte, dekolonisering

Mots-clés: missionnaires, histoire coloniale, mémoire, espace public, décolonisation

Key words: missionaries, colonial history, memory, public space, decolonisation

Samenvatting/Résumé/Summary

De meerstemmige herinnering aan missionarissen. Standbeelden in en buiten België

Missionarissen nemen in de Vlaamse publieke ruimte een grote plaats in. Tot in de 21^{ste} eeuw worden er nieuwe monumenten opgericht. Ondanks het proces van mentale dekolonisering en protestacties als Black Lives Matter krijgen die vandaag amper kritiek. Missionarissen zijn gesecculariseerd: eerder dan hun religieuze activiteiten worden nu waarden benadrukt als moed, zelfopoffering en solidariteit. Bovendien fungeren zij als helden die Vlaamse rurale gebieden een plaats geven in de geglobaliseerde wereld. Opvallend is dat missionarissen ook in hun voormalige missiegebieden met veel bewondering herinnerd worden, ook in de publieke ruimte. Tegelijk is er soms kritiek te horen. Alles bij elkaar toont dit dat de herinnering aan missionarissen heel divers is, en dat men geen eenduidig beeld kan geven over hun werk.

[Résumé français doit encore être corrigé par un francophone]

La mémoire polyphonique des missionnaires. Statues en et hors Belgique

Les missionnaires occupent une place prépondérante dans l'espace public flamand. Même au 21^{ème} siècle, de nouveaux monuments sont érigés. Malgré le processus de décolonisation mentale et les actions de protestation telles que Black Lives Matter, elles ne sont guère critiquées aujourd'hui. Les missionnaires se sont sécularisés : des valeurs telles que le courage, le don de soi et la solidarité sont désormais mises en avant plutôt que leurs activités religieuses. De plus, ils agissent comme des héros qui donnent aux zones rurales flamandes une place dans le monde globalisé. Il est frappant de constater que les missionnaires sont également commémorés avec une grande admiration dans leurs anciennes zones de mission, ce qui a également conduit à de nombreuses statues. Dans le même temps, des critiques se font parfois entendre. Au total, cela montre que la mémoire des missionnaires est très diverse et qu'on ne peut porter un image univoque sur leur travail.

The Multivocal Memory of Missionaries. Statues in Belgium and Beyond.

Missionaries take a prominent place in the Flemish public space. Even in the 21st century, new monuments are being erected. Despite the process of mental decolonization and protest movements

such as Black Lives Matter, they are subject to little criticism even today. Missionaries have become secularized: values such as courage, self-sacrifice and solidarity are now emphasized rather than their religious activities. Moreover, they act as heroes who give Flemish rural areas a place in the globalized world. It is striking that missionaries are also remembered with great admiration in their former mission areas, which has led to numerous statues as well. At the same time, they do not completely escape criticism. All in all, this shows that the memory of missionaries is very diverse and that one cannot make an unequivocal image about missionary work.

In June 2020, worldwide protest broke out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. It was triggered by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police and initially addressed racism in Western societies, but in many places also targeted monuments for historical figures involved in colonization. The movement likewise affected Belgium, where local authorities for the first time removed a number of statues and busts for Leopold II, inter alia in Mons, Ekeren (Antwerp), Leuven, and Ghent (Goddeeris 2020).

It was not the first time that the Belgian king had inspired public outcry. In the early twentieth century, fierce international criticism led to the take-over of his private property, the Independent State of the Congo (Congo Free State), by the Belgian state and its subsequent transformation into the Belgian Congo. One hundred years later, Adam Hochschild's bestseller *King Leopold's Ghosts* and Peter Bate's BBC documentary *Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death* revived public attention. As a result, monuments to Leopold II and his so-called Congo pioneers have since 2004 regularly been vandalized with red paint or graffiti. Apart from the city of Ostend, which did not restore a hand that had been sawed off from one of the statues of black people at the feet of Leopold's equestrian monument, authorities always fixed the damage. The only response they sometimes gave was the contextualization of a monument with an information plaque (Goddeeris 2021, p. 156-157).

Remarkably, monuments to missionaries active in Congo have not been contested. Over the past twenty years only one has been subject to public debate: the statue in Wilrijk, Antwerp, for Constant De Deken – a missionary who in 1881 left for China, in 1889-1891 participated as a translator in an expedition through Tibet, in 1892 moved to Congo and died there four years later. The statue represents the clergyman towering high above a half-naked African. From 2013 onwards, campaigners criticized the monument as racist and offensive because De Deken's knee seemed to rest on the black worshipper. Two years later, the local council put an interpretive panel near the statue. Yet, artists and activists have continued addressing the monument, which was also covered with red paint during the Black Lives Matter protest of June 2020. Interestingly, some protesters now not only stumbled over its iconography, but also denounced that "missionaries such as Father De Deken were not innocent souls who wanted to do charity. They were an essential link in the plundering of natural resources on the African continent" (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, 18 June 2020).

However, De Deken seems to be the exception that confirms the rule that missionaries are still widely admired. This is remarkable, since it goes against currents of secularization and decolonization. This article will check and explain this. It will analyze the memory of missionaries by painting a more comprehensive picture of their presence in the public space, rather than focusing on the contested monuments. It will work with the case of monuments for Belgian missionaries and examine their number, the places where they were erected, the time periods when this happened, and the people and motives behind the creation of the monuments. It will do so for both Belgium and the former mission areas, and in this way reflect on the different memories of missionaries, both in Belgium and beyond. All in all, it seeks to give the floor to several voices, from different places and eras in order to provide a more comprehensive idea of how missionaries are remembered. The analysis of Belgium is based on a complete list of missionaries' statues; the one of other countries on selected cases.

The article is based on extensive source research of local archives (e.g. of municipality council meetings, inter alia in Wilrijk), media (that often quoted involved people and in this way also reveal why monuments were erected), internet data, and field work (the monuments themselves). This research has resulted in a Dutch-language monograph (Goddeeris 2021; detailed references can be found there), of which this article presents some major conclusions. However, the article also

includes updated information, for instance on the most recent overview by Matthew G. Stanard of references to the colonial past in the Belgian public space.

An abundance of monuments

The sheer number of colonial statues in Belgium results from a deliberate propaganda campaign in the interwar period and the 1950s that sought to rehabilitate Leopold II and to find support for the colonial project. The American historian Matthew G. Stanard has studied this extensively in two monographs, the first on Belgian colonial propaganda (2011) and the second on the country's memory of its colonial past (2019). This second book highlights monuments and street names and has a link to an online spreadsheet of all markers (<https://lup.be/pages/digital-appendix-the-leopard-the-lion-and-the-cock>). In his most recent update of this overview, from July 2022, Stanard counts 559 markers that celebrate colonizers and/or the colony in general. He could confirm that 372 of them are still standing (and also lists 53 references to missionaries he found in my monograph but could not confirm; I include these in my counting).

Table 1 has the details. All in all, at least 108 monuments (including statues, busts, memorials and engravings on existing monuments), 84 plaques, 225 street names and 8 other markers (a building, a paving stone and tombs – Stanard indeed also counted funerary monuments) in Belgium refer to Congo (and Ruanda-Urundi). Of these, 233 are located in Flanders (the northern and Dutch-speaking half of Belgium), 116 in Wallonia (the southern and largely French-speaking part) and 76 in Brussels (the bilingual capital in the center). This difference between Flanders and the other regions in Belgium is entirely accounted for by references to missionaries (“miss.”): Flanders has 109 of these, whereas Wallonia only 7 and Brussels just 3. The gap is much smaller when it comes to markers to secular colonials (“sec.”) in the Belgian public space: 124 in Flanders, 109 in Wallonia and 73 in Brussels.

Table 1. Overview of confirmed references to the Central African colonial past in the Belgian public space (based on Stanard, July 2022)

	Flanders		Wallonia		Brussels		TOTAL
	sec.	miss.	sec.	miss.	sec.	miss.	
Monument	40	25	23	2	18	0	108
Plaque	9	30	35	2	8	0	84
Street name	73	52	49	3	45	3	225
Other	2	2	2	0	2	0	8
SUBTOTAL	124	109	109	7	73	3	
TOTAL	233		116		76		

This difference is confirmed when it comes to references to missionaries who worked in regions other than Congo, such as China, India, the United States, and Latin America. Whereas I retrieved only single examples of these in French-speaking Belgium (e.g. Rue Père Damien in both Braine-le-Comte and Mouscron, Rue Hennepin in Ath, and the Observatoire astronomique Antoine Thomas SJ in Namur), I found 157 markers for 102 missionaries beyond Congo in the Flemish public space. This number is amplified by the huge attention to Father Damien. Damien, who in 1863 sailed to Hawaii, in 1873 settled in the leprosy colony of Molokai, caught the disease himself, died in 1889 and was canonized in 2009, has at least 54 monuments and streets in Flanders. But even if we exclude him,

there are almost twice as many commemorative markers for missionaries (in Congo and beyond: $109+157-54=212$) than for secular colonials (124).

The vast amount of commemorative markers for missionaries in Flanders is explained by the fact that most Belgian missionaries came from that region. In 1948, for instance, Wallonia provided just 16.4% of the missionaries in Belgian Congo (Vellut 1980, p. 263). The two regions indeed differ: whereas Wallonia industrialized earlier and had a more socialist and less religious past, Flanders had a more rural and Catholic character until post-industrial transformations from the 1960s onwards. Also from an international perspective, Flanders stands out. Its number of missionary vocations was extremely high: in 1940, Flemings accounted for less than 1% of global Catholics, but provided almost 10% of the Catholic missionaries (Vanysacker 1996, p. 322-323). The huge presence of missionaries in the public space also seems unmatched in other countries.

The chronology and geography of Belgian missionary statues

The oldest missionary memorial in the public space is the statue of the previously-mentioned Pieter Jan De Smet in his hometown Dendermonde. De Smet was a Jesuit who was active among Native Americans in the northwest of the United States between 1821 and 1873. The monument was inaugurated in 1878, barely five years after his death. In the following decades, other municipalities followed suit and erected monuments to native missionaries. Leuven installed a Father Damien statue in 1894, five years after his death (he was born in the nearby village of Tremelo, but entered his congregation in Leuven). Wilrijk did so in 1904 for Constant De Deken; Pittem in 1913 for Ferdinand Verbiest, the famous Jesuit astronomer at the court of the Kangxi Emperor; and Moorslede in 1929 for Constant Lievens, another Jesuit Father who had been active in British India in the late 19th century.

These five missionaries eventually grew up to become 'national heroes'. They have street names all over Belgium, including in places with which they have no direct link. Father Damien received a statue in his birth village of Tremelo in 1963, on the occasion of the centenary of his departure to Hawaii, and in several other cities and municipalities around the turn of the century in the context of his beatification in 1995 and canonization in 2009. This recognition also stretched further than the public space. Verbiest, De Smet and Father Damien are included in *The Country's Glory*, an iconic series of 550 colored drawings on Belgium's past made between 1949 and 1961. In the early 1960s, three of these five missionaries were the subject of biographical comics by the famous author Jef Nys.

After the inauguration of Lievens' monument in 1929, new statues were erected for other missionaries. In 1938, the city of Mechelen created a monument for the brothers Theotimus and Fredericus Verhaeghen, two Franciscans who were killed in China in 1904. In the early 1950s, four statues were put up for missionaries who had recently died. Father Victor Roelens (Ardoorie) was the first, long-serving vicar apostolic in Upper Congo from 1895 to 1941. Father Jozef Raskin (Aarschot), missionary to China between 1920 and 1934, was executed by the Nazis for his participation in the resistance. Petrus Vertenten (Hamme) had served in Dutch New Guinea from 1910 to 1925 and in Belgian Congo from 1927 to 1939. At last, the four brothers Adons (Hasselt) had all been missionaries in China.

More monuments appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, especially commemorating 'martyrs' who died in the violence after Congolese independence (Goddeeris 2022). The most iconic is the Kongolo Memorial in Gentinnes, a village in Walloon Brabant. The monument was conceived immediately after the murder of twenty Spiritan Fathers in 1962 and was inaugurated together with a large

memorial chapel in 1967. The honour wall contains 216 bronze names, including those of 81 Belgian and 75 foreign Catholic religious and 30 Protestants killed in Congo between 1960 and 1965. Similarly, the Crosiers in 1970 built a monument to their 23 murdered confreres in Runkst, near Hasselt. In addition, at least thirteen municipalities did the same for their native sons killed in Congo: Nossegem, Borchtlombeek, Opitter, Vielsalm, Eversel, Pittem, Ooigem, Ardoorie, Koersel, Lindelhoeven, Overpelt, Neerpelt and Paal.

Gradually, statues for other missionaries appeared again. In 1976, Ghent placed a copy of a statue to Pedro de Gante that had been given to Mexico a couple of years earlier. In 1981, the 'Eskimo Father' Franz Van de Velde himself attended the inauguration of a memorial stone in his honour placed in his native village of Landskouter. Amaat Vyncke, a Flemish nationalist activist who joined the White Fathers in Congo in 1881 and died there in 1888, was given a bust in 1988 in his former parish Dudzele. A year later, the roundabout at Father Damien's birthplace was decorated with a work of art.

Around the turn of the millennium, the number of newly built monuments continued to increase. At least five were installed in the 1990s, seven in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and another five between 2011 and 2020. Most of the honoured missionaries had died not long before. Two had worked in East Asia: Jozef Boutsen (1903-70; monument erected in Dilsen, 1995) in China and Clement Lemmens (1923-74; Heppen, 2004) in Indonesia. Three others had earned their praise in Congo: Edgar Cuypers (1919-2008; Nieuwerkerken, 2012), Gustave Bouve (1902-89; Lo-Reninge, 2005) and Urbain Morlion (1894-1985, Lo-Reninge, 2005). Martyrs also continued to receive memorial stones. Désiré Pellens (1920-62; Neerpelt, 2002) had been murdered in Congo; Serge Berten (1952-82; Menen, 2012) and Alfons Stessel (1929-94; 1999?) in Guatemala.

In addition, statues were erected for missionaries who had died much earlier. Adriaan Willems alias Joris van Geel (1617-52; Oevel, 1992) wrote the first dictionary of a Bantu language. Jan Mallet (1870-1900; Hechtel, 2000) was murdered during the Boxer Uprising. Paul Goethals (1832-1901; Kortrijk, 1996) was the first archbishop of Calcutta. Marie-Louise De Meester (1857-1928; Roeselare, 1999) had founded the congregation of the Missionary Sisters of De Jacht in 1910. And the Jesuit Jozef Van Wing (1884-1970; Herk-de-Stad, 2005) can be regarded as one of the most important missionary-ethnologists of the Belgian Congo.

Finally, new monuments were erected soon after the canonization of two missionaries. Sister Amandina (1872-1900), who had been beheaded by Boxers and canonized along with 119 other China martyrs exactly a century later, was venerated in her native village Schakkebroek (Herk-de-Stad). The same happened with Father Damien, beatified in 1995 and canonized in 2009. However, his veneration stretched much further than his native village. Inter alia Wilrijk, Aarschot, Lochristi, Koekelberg and Oostmalle erected statues in the public space, and many more parishes did so in churches.

Contemporary admiration of missionaries

In sum, there are at least 59 different monuments to missionaries in Flanders, 25 of which are for Congo missionaries. It is especially striking that new monuments continue to appear in the public space: at least 17 monuments were erected in the past thirty years. Moreover, there is a revived attention for missionaries who had earlier been celebrated with a monument. Whereas the 350th birthday of Ferdinand Verbiest in 1973 passed almost silently, the 360th birthday was celebrated with a live-screened jubilee mass and four exhibitions, and his 300th death anniversary in 1988 with the publication of his writings, a new exhibition, a mass spectacle and the restoration and reinstatement of his statue. The centenaries of the deaths of Father Damien (1989), Constant Lievens (1993) and Constant De Deken (1996) were also lavishly commemorated. On top of that, new museums were

added, such as the Verbiest visitor center in Pittem (2010), a new “contemporary and interactive experience center” in Tremelo (2017), and a permanent exhibition about Constant Lievens in the church of Moorslede (2018). Other museums also paid attention to missionaries. The Huis van Alijn in Ghent presented an exhibition about Franz Van de Velde in 2006, and Pieter Jan De Smet was the subject of two temporary exhibitions in Dendermonde and Ghent in 2016.

This continued attention is in sharp contrast to the actions against the statue of De Deken and shows that such protest is the exception confirming the rule that missionaries are generally approached in a positive way. Of course, they are also criticized, *inter alia* for cases of sexual abuse and for the involvement in snatching Métis children from their parental environment during the period of decolonization (for which the Belgian episcopacy has already apologized). But all in all, a benign appreciation predominates. This is remarkable, since it contrasts the many more critical voices in the past. In the first half of the twentieth century the Belgian parliament held fierce debates about missionaries in the colony, and the return of Father Damien’s mortal remains to Belgium in 1936 led to negative opinions in anti-church circles. In recent decades, however, such criticism has subsided. At the end of the twentieth century, Jules Marchal (under the pseudonym A.M. Delathuy) published three volumes about abuses in the early missions in Congo, but this did not stir people’s minds. The scandals surrounding the Jesuits’ chapel farms have been forgotten. Only the truncated hands – in which missionaries were not directly involved – remain etched in Belgian collective memory (see also Stanard 2019, p. 229 et al.).

This almost unanimous respect is paradoxical for two reasons. Firstly, it is at odds with the growing critical approach to the colonial past. Missionaries are hardly mentioned in this ongoing process. The iconoclasm against colonial monuments and street names almost exclusively focuses on Leopold II and his allies. Nadia Nsaiy’s recent book on decolonization devotes only one and a half page to the church (2020, p. 185-187). The extensive report by the experts of the federal Congo Commission that was released in October 2021 barely mentions the role of missionaries. In some circles, missionaries are even used today to condone colonialism. A Flemish nationalist ideologue found the tumult of Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020 one-sided: “The heroism and self-sacrifice of Flemish nuns who set up orphanages for leper children deep in the forests of Congo at the risk of their own lives, that was also Belgian colonization. It bothers me immensely that the debate is not conducted in a more objective and, above all, holistic manner.” (*Knack*, 17 June 2020).

The great admiration for missionaries is also paradoxical because Belgium has been secularized over the past half century. Due to all kinds of developments since the 1960s – including growing prosperity, emancipation of women, new youth culture, increasing individualism, and even a modest modernization of Catholicism – the church has lost its authoritative position within society. However, this is not only a paradox, but also an explanation for the contemporary positive discourse. On the one hand, secularization has dampened the polarization between Catholics and non-Catholics and, accordingly, muted the anticlerical criticism of the past. On the other hand, missionaries are also secularized. This is clear, for example, from the way in which non-Catholics speak of Damien today. In the context of the election of The Greatest Belgian – which Damien won in Flanders; in French-speaking Belgium he ended up with an equally impressive third place – the leading Brussels socialist politician Laurette Onkelinx spoke about his love, courage, efficiency and self-denial (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 27 December 2004). The mayor of Leuven Mohamed Ridouani – a socialist of Moroccan origin – praised Father Damien in 2019 because he “has done a lot of good and [is] a symbol of connectedness, solidarity and commitment” (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 14 October 2019). Ridouani’s predecessor Louis Tobback – who is notoriously latitudinarian – called Damien “the example of the ultimate just man” (*De Standaard*, 4 June 2005).

Religious aspects have thus been erased from the collective memory of missionaries, who have become exemplary figures denying themselves a comfortable life in order to help others. Belgian society sees them as development workers instead of proselytizers, and emphasizes the schools and hospitals they built rather than the churches.

The church has long ceased to be the primary initiator of new monuments, but here and there she is still involved. For instance, Omer Tanghe, the head of the diocesan mission center Kontinenten in the province of West Flanders, still in the 1990s wrote many books about missionaries and initiated the erection of new statues. Cities and municipalities, however, played a much greater role than church institutions and often partly financed the creation of new statues. They did not always have a religious agenda, and the councils of Tremelo (1963), Oosterzele (1981), Dudzele (1988) and Lochristi (2014) had coalitions without Christian Democrats.

The initiative to pay tribute to a missionary often came from family members of the honoured missionary or other citizens from his birthplace. Relatives were, for instance, involved in the erection of the statue for De Meester in Roeselare, the bust for Van Wing in Herk-de-Stad and the monument for Cuypers in Nieuwerkerken. Even more important were local history clubs. It is not surprising that amateur historians show a great fascination for missionaries: they are a concrete study object, with a clear link to local history and at the same time have an international dimension that broadens their relevance. Moreover, missionaries lend themselves perfectly to local historical research since the different phases and relocations in their lives can easily be reconstructed through institutional sources. Missionaries' many adventurous stories and exotic testimonies can be quoted verbatim from letters and other ego-documents. Local circles disseminated their knowledge about missionaries not only through publications, but were often the driving force behind new markers in public space.

Most of these relatives, friends and amateur historians fit a common profile. They were locally ingrained, had reached a certain age and shared a traditional view of society. Their initiatives to erect statues for missionaries were not coordinated, unlike the campaign for colonial monuments and commemorative plaques in the interwar period and the 1950s, but came about spontaneously. Yet they are so numerous and the circumstances in which they came about show so many similarities that one can speak of a social phenomenon. Missionaries help older people cope with the rapid changes in society. Their commemorations are forms of 'glocalization': an interweaving of 'global' and 'local' that has been used since the 1990s for the adaptation of globalization to one's own society and culture.

This local character is also mirrored in the fact that many of the more recent monuments were erected in rural areas, often even in the peripheral parts of Belgium. It seems that those villages have few other heroes to place in the limelight and that they even may have inspired each other (and triggered a domino effect across neighboring places). At the same time, this local character also accounts for the fact that the markers remain under the radar. Fewer people visit those rural places and the local population is still much more white than in urban or semi-urban areas, where people with a migrant past ignited protests against colonial monuments. The new centers of praise of missionaries are far less affected by secularization, multiculturalism and decolonization.

Statues for Belgian missionaries in other countries

Belgian missionaries do not only have monuments in Belgium. We actually find them all over the world. In India, the founding father of the Belgian Jesuit mission, Henri Depelchin received a statue in Kurseong near Darjeeling, where the Society from 1889 to 1971 had a theological college to train priests. Paul Goethals, the first archbishop of Calcutta, was honored with a memorial stone in the city's cathedral and also gave his name to the library of St. Xavier's College. There are many

memorials to Constant Lievens in Chota Nagpur, especially in Barway, the area west of Gumla where he was active. We find statues on public squares (Birri and Bendora) as well as on school campuses (Manjatoli, Mahuadar, Lohardaga and Soso).

In addition, a striking number of monuments have been erected for the youngest (and last) generation of Flemish Jesuits in India. Hindi expert Kamiel Bulcke is the most celebrated missionary in Ranchi (the centre of the mission and the capital of the Indian state of Jharkhand), both with monuments on Jesuit territory and with a street name, and is also gaining recognition elsewhere in the country, such as in Wardha, Maharashtra. Michael Van den Bogaert is cherished with at least five markers on the campus of the Xavier Institute of Development Action and Studies (XIDAS) in Jabalpur, the institution he founded himself. Pieter-Paul Van Nuffel has a statue at St. Ignatius' High School in Gumla, where the seat of his NGO Animation Rural Outreach Service (AROUSE) was located. Vic Van Bortel was given a mural near his grave in the 'boys town' of Kishor Nagar that he founded near Ranchi in 1969. Joseph Moens has been immortalized in the name of the sports complex of St. Mary's High School in Samtoli.

All in all, there are more monuments to missionaries in India than to their colleagues in Congo. Yet, Belgian missionaries are also commemorated in the public space of the former colony. Whereas the statues of Leopold II, Albert I and Stanley in Kinshasa have long been removed, the one of Emile Van Hencxthoven, the first head of the Jesuit mission, is still standing in Kisantu, a hundred kilometers to the south. Raphaël de la Kethulle de Ryhove, who was the driving force behind the development of schools, youth movements and sports clubs in Leopoldville in the interwar period, is remembered in the Congolese capital with a statue, a bust and the Stade Tata Raphaël (see also Coppieters 1967: 360). Two missionaries who developed academic institutions recently received busts in Kinshasa: the Walloon Luc Gillon – the first rector of the University of Lovanium – in 2018 on the campus of the Université de Kinshasa and the Fleming Alfred Vanneste – the first dean of the theological faculty – a year later at the new campus of the Université Catholique du Congo. There are also memorials in places where missionaries were murdered in the early 1960s. And here and there we find street names that refer to missionary work, such as the Avenue Mgr Jean Félix de Hemptinne in Lubumbashi and the Avenue de la Mission in Kinshasa.

There is also a monument for Theofiel Verbist in the Congolese capital, namely within the walls of Notre Dame de Fatima, the seat of the Provincialate of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the congregation Verbist founded in the early 1860s. These Scheut missionaries – as they are commonly known – likewise left traces in China, their original destination, although the communist regime has erased a lot. In Laohugou, the place where Verbist died, one can find a memorial in the church, a statue outside in the church grounds, a small museum in the former Scheut residence and a well-maintained cemetery. Ershisiqingdi, where the Nijmegen bishop Ferdinand Hamer was murdered during the Boxer Rebellion, has a museum with a portrait gallery, memorabilia and relics. In addition, there is Scheut heritage, such as monasteries and graveyards, in Xiwanzi (the former Scheut headquarters) and Hohhot (the capital of Inner Mongolia). A penitential chapel that the (imperial) Chinese government erected in memory of Désiré Abbeloos in Sanhecun was recently demolished.

In Central China memorials were built for Belgian Franciscans. A photo album from 1908 shows “la maison St. Joseph à Kin tcheou fou [Jingzhou] établie par ordre de l'empereur Juan Siu [Guangxu] en mémoire du massacre de Mgr. Theotime Verhaegen et des PP Frederic [Verhaeghen] et Florent [Robberecht] à Cha tse ti [Shazidi] le 19 juillet 1904” (KADOC Album KFH2006). The three were also given a chapel and a triumphal arch in Yichang. For Marcel Sterkendries, who during the 1911 revolution kept the peace in Jingzhou, a statue was erected in 1912 “by thirty thousand Chinese,

whom he had saved and who melted their idols to pay him their tribute" (*Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 13 December 1912).

It is not clear whether those tributes still exist. Yet, memorials for the Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest are still present in Beijing. His grave has been preserved and 'his' observatory is now a museum. Founded in the thirteenth century, it expanded in the fifteenth century and was modernized by Verbiest who ran it from 1670. It contains, among other things, the Verbiest globe, of which the Chinese government donated a reproduction to KU Leuven in 1989, three hundred years after Verbiest's death.

In North America, the memory goes even further. Several place names refer to Belgian missionaries. The Vandersteene Lake in Alberta, Canada is named after Roger Vandersteene. The town of Nerinx in Kentucky owes its name to Karel Nerinckx, who is also buried there and has a statue. Churchville, Pennsylvania, was renamed Bally in 1883, after the Jesuit Augustin Bally who had died there the year before. The most present missionary, however, is Pieter Jan De Smet, who is immortalized in the name of a lake in Wyoming and of three towns in South Dakota, Montana and Idaho. De Smet is also remembered in many other ways, including a memorial column, a statue and bust, an entrance hall, a stained glass window, a mosaic, a tapestry and exhibitions. In addition, Louis Hennepin is worth mentioning. This Franciscan, born in Ath, accompanied the French explorer René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle in 1675-1680 on his exploration of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. He lives on in toponyms in Illinois, Oklahoma, and Minnesota, has a statue and a major avenue in Minneapolis, and is honored with streets in at least four other cities (Buffalo, New York; Ottawa, Ontario (Canada); Chicago, Illinois; and Winthrop, Minnesota).

Father Damien is also commemorated in the United States. His original grave still exists in Hawaii, he was also given a memorial column on Molokai in 1894, and there are now statues at churches in Honaunau and Kalawao and at the Hawaii State Capitol in Honolulu (a copy of which is in the Capitol Building in Washington DC, see below). On Waikiki Beach one finds a Damien Museum and a Damien and Marianne of Moloka'i Education Center. Last but not least, Damien's death anniversary is recognized in Hawaii as a public holiday, Father Damien Day.

Latin America also has its share. In Mexico, 'Fray' Pedro de Gante is widely known. He is honored with statues in Mexico City and nearby Texcoco, streets in at least three cities and educational institutions in at least six other cities, including the Universidad Pedro de Gante in Monterrey. Ecuador has a similar case with Joos de Rijcke. In the capital Quito alone, one can find a statue on Plaza de San Francisco, a commemorative plaque in the nearby Franciscan friary, and a street, school, college, and 'escuela fiscal mixta' named after him. There are also references elsewhere in the country, such as the Parque Fray Jodoco Ricke in the southern city of Cuenca.

In other Latin American countries, the memory of Belgian missionaries is more local. In Guatemala there are commemorative plaques on the places where Serge Berten was kidnapped and Walter Voordeckers was murdered. In Brazil, 'Padre Julio Maria de Lombaerde' continues to live on in various cities where he was active: in Macapá via a cultural center and in Manhumirim via a 'memorial histórico'. The latter grew into a kind of pilgrimage, where 'PJM' is worshiped with holy statues.

Interestingly, missionaries who are almost forgotten in Belgium – and do not have any presence in the Belgian public space – are being kept alive in their new places of residence. This certainly applies to Walloons. The Jesuit Gustavo Le Paige, from Tilleur, Liège is known as the father of Chilean archaeology and has a statue at the museum he founded in San Pedro de Atacama. The Scheut

Father Jules Sepulchre, from Herstal, Liège, has a monument in Bontoc, the capital of Mountain Province, Philippines.

Foreign initiators and motives

This kaleidoscope of memorials may suggest that missionaries around the world are receiving recognition and praise. However, we should avoid jumping to this conclusion. The references were created at very different times and in very different circumstances. The toponyms in the United States date from the nineteenth century and are examples of the colonial method of appropriating a place. Statues for Van den Bogaert in Jabalpur, Bulcke in Ranchi and de la Kethule de Ryhove in Kinshasa actually function as funerary monuments. The markers abroad can therefore not be lumped in easily with those in Belgium.

The vast majority of the monuments are located on the grounds of monasteries, schools and other buildings of the congregations to which the honored missionaries belonged. They should be seen as tributes by Christian communities to their spiritual fathers. Such admiration also manifests itself in other ways. For example, both Brazilian and Congolese church leaders have recently started the beatification process of Jules De Lombaerde and the martyrs of Kongolo. And in 2020, the body of the Belgian missionary bishop Joseph Hagendorens, who had died in Belgium in 1976, was reburied in the cathedral of Tshumbe at the request of his Congolese successor.

Some monuments were erected at the initiative of spiritual superiors. Belgian Jesuits already in the 1940s made Bendora a place of pilgrimage because Constant Lievens had built a chapel there. On the occasion of the centenary of his arrival in Choga Nagpur in 1885, their Indian successors placed a statue. Other monuments are erected at the request of believers. When I asked in Barway who is behind all those statues for Lievens, the Jesuit Peter Jones told me that his confrère Christopher Dung Dung had made several specimens. He added that “the Provincial tries to stop him, since he’s supposed to look after his parish. But parishes want such a statue, since it’s prestigious” (interview at Mahuadar, 18 January 2019).

In the West, such tributes can easily be interpreted as the result of the conversion zeal of missionaries and thus as the effect of colonial indoctrination. However, such a critical response implies paternalism and a sense of superiority. It suggests that the secularized West is further ahead than the religious South. It assumes that all missionary work took place in the same way, and neglects that local groups played an active role as intermediaries in the spread and adaptation of Christianity. And it ignores that in many contemporary non-European societies the church is the institution with the greatest confidence and moral authority.

In addition, secular governments – of independent countries, not colonies – also honor Belgian missionaries. The statue for Joos de Rijcke in Quito was built in 1932 at the request of the city council. Arnold Boghaert, the bishop of Roseau, Dominica was given a state funeral in 1993. Some missionaries were honored even while alive. Father Damien became Commander of the Royal Order of Kalakaua in 1882. Kamiel Bulcke was awarded the Padma Bhushan, one of India’s highest civilian honors, in 1974. Jozef Bessemans received a memorial plaque and the honorary citizenship of Alto Garças in 1992. And Etienne Alliet was appointed Special Resident of El Salvador in 2008 by parliamentary decree.

These same five missionaries – de Rijcke, Boghaert, Bulcke, Bessemans and Alliet – are also honored in the Belgian public space. Many others who are not, however, are nevertheless recognized in their new homelands. Willem Grootaers was elevated by the Japanese emperor to commander in the

Order of the Sacred Treasure. Jan Couvreur received the Fr. Neri Saturn Award for Environmental Heroism. José Comblin was given an honorary doctorate from the Universidade Federal da Paraíba in Brazil. And Gerda Van Dooren was honored with the Gaanman Gazon Matodja Award, a prize that is based on an institution of (Surinamese) Maroons in the Netherlands.

All these examples show that not only local churches, but also governments and non-religious communities have a positive attitude towards individual Belgian missionaries. On the other hand, some of the markers abroad came into being due to Belgian initiatives. The statue of Pedro de Gante in Mexico City is a gift from the province of East Flanders. Two Belgian friends made a work of art in honor of Hubert Gillard for the technical school in Cali, Colombia which Gillard had built himself. The statue to Pierre Paul Van Nuffel in Gumla, India was financed by three family members. This, of course, casts a very different light on the 'foreign' admiration of missionaries.

Foreign criticism of Belgian missionaries' statues

Some of these statues have received criticism over the past few years. In May 2015, exactly the same month as an information plaque was mounted near Father De Deken's statue, a monument to another Belgian missionary, Pieter Jan De Smet, was removed from the campus of Saint Louis University in Missouri. The monument depicted him with two Native Americans in an arrangement that many felt as colonial and racist, De Smet raising his crucifix over the others. After repeated complaints from students and staff, the university authorities put the statue in the adjacent university museum.

Five years later there was a new fuss about a statue of a Belgian missionary in the United States. In the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest, U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounced 'patriarchy' and the 'culture of white supremacy' by referring to Father Damien. More specifically, 'AOC' lamented that so many white men are honored in the National Statuary Hall Collection, a kind of Capitol pantheon where each state is allowed to place two statues (and Damien has represented Hawaii since 1969). Her demarche sparked fierce reactions, both among Republicans in the U.S. and among Flemish nationalists in Belgium, who were remarkably strongly supported by Flemish media. They all opposed Ocasio-Cortez's alleged iconoclasm of Damien. However, she had not called to remove the statue, but only used it as an example of the underrepresentation of female and non-white historical figures in collective memory.

Damien was not the only missionary that found himself in the eye of a storm in the summer of 2020. In California, anti-racist activists inspired by Black Lives Matter drew attention to the Spanish Franciscan Junípero Serra, who had spread Catholicism in the region in the 18th century (and was canonized in 2015). Serra was accused of having destroyed the culture of the local populations. His statues in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sacramento were torn down by protesters, the one in Ventura was removed as a precaution by the city authorities, and the statue in Palma, Spain, on his native island of Mallorca, was defaced with red paint and the word 'racista'.

In neighboring Mexico, a 'Belgian' missionary was indirectly affected by the Black Lives Matter campaign. In October 2020, the administration of Mexico City removed a number of statues of figures who had played a role in the Spanish conquest and occupation. Officially, it did so because the monuments were in dire need of restoration after the 1992 earthquake. In reality, however, it anticipated social media calls to storm the statues on the anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World. Among the removed monuments was the statue of Pedro de Gante, a Franciscan who had been active in New Spain (Mexico) between 1523 and 1572.

Conclusion: the polyphony of the memory

It is clear that one cannot make a single conclusion. Even in the Black Lives Matter summer of 2020, there was ambiguity. While many statues were taken down on both sides of the Atlantic, residents of the Greenlandic capital Nuuk voted to preserve the statue of Danish missionary Hans Egede. It had been vandalized with red paint and the inscription 'decolonize' both in the previous weeks and in earlier years.

Moreover, there is disparity within groups that are usually regarded as homogeneous. For example, some Native Americans in the northwest of the United States have different memories about Pieter Jan De Smet. Some among smaller tribes, such as the Nez Perce and the Coeur d'Alene, look back to the missionary past with few misgivings. Their exhibitions mirror admiration and their guides talk about the European missionaries with appreciation. Others in the Coast Salish tribes are actively grappling with the missionary legacy, particularly in regards to education. Larger tribes, such as the Sioux, are also generally more critical. For example, the curator of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC is very negative: "They took everything from us" (<https://blog.associatie.kuleuven.be/lucvints/2015/05/>).

Similarly, my own research yields ambiguous opinions. Sometimes respondents are particularly nostalgic. For example, in January 2019, during a campfire in a village near the Jesuit parish of Tongo, memories were recalled of Walter Pillen, who had died seven years earlier. Someone said with respect that this Jesuit from Bruges spoke Kurukh (the local tribal language) much more beautifully and correctly than most Oroans do (one of the ethnic groups in Jharkhand). But other Indians rage against mission and modernization. Even an Adivasi Jesuit in Ranchi once railed against what had happened to his country, in the same way as the curator in Washington: "They destroyed everything".

Scholars also disagree. Karen Vallgård in an article with the telling title "Were Christian missionaries colonizers? Reorienting the debate and exploring new research trajectories" (2016) emphasizes the inextricable links between mission and empire. Colonialism went far beyond political, economic or military dominance and included cultural, social and psychological hegemony. Missionaries were crucial actors in achieving the latter. They spread a discourse of European and Christian superiority that portrayed local populations as childish, primitive and backward. They reinforced racial classifications and created rifts between pagans and believers. They transformed social structures by introducing new concepts (such as the nuclear family) and moral standards (such as chastity). They separated children from their environment and turned them into controllable subjects. And in the metropole, they were key actors in the mobilization for and legitimation of the colonial project.

In contrast, researchers from Africa or Asia often approach missionaries positively, sometimes even hagiographically. During the first session of MiMoRA, the annual Mission and Modernity Research Academy organized at KADOC in Leuven, Kenyan researcher Mary Chepkemai presented her oral history project. She had been talking to compatriots who had been ripped out of their traditional communities by missionaries in the 1920s and 1930s and were raised as Christians. Chepkemai shows that these elderly Kenyans nevertheless are still grateful for the missions. The Indian professor Parimala Rao did not criticize missionaries during the MiMoRA meeting either. She built a whole key note lecture around the idea that missionaries and colonials invariably opposed each other and that missionary and colonialism cannot be lumped together (Goddeeris et al. 2021).

My Leuven colleagues and I immediately had reservations. "Those Kenyan women were brainwashed by their educators." "The exaltation of missionaries by left-wing thinkers in India is a reaction against the Hindu nationalist government that is increasingly attacking Western imperialism and

Christianity". But who are we to make these declarations and assumptions? To write off other opinions as brainwashing or instrumentalization? Would it not be better to be open to those visions and accept the polyphony of memory?

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