

Idesbald Goddeeris, *Missionarissen. Geschiedenis, herinnering, dekolonisering*

(Leuven: LannooCampus, 2021, 190 pp., ISBN 9401476624).

There has been a great deal written of late about the ways in which colonial ideas and monuments continue to haunt the twenty-first century and exactly how to address the issues that accompany these painful continuities. Very little of this scholarship, however, has explicitly addressed missionaries. It is here, then, that this book, which is principally about Flemish missionaries and their contemporary public memory during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, makes its intervention.

Idesbald Goddeeris argues that public anger about imperial criminality has been focused overwhelmingly on figures, such as Léopold II, who worked outside of overtly ecclesiastical institutions. As such, claims to decolonise public spaces have seen many statues of the former Belgian king defaced and toppled, for example, while mission statues have puzzlingly remained in place. The omission of missionaries from wider public critiques of colonialism continues in spite of the publication of a spate of important books by scholars such as Jules Marchal, writing under the pseudonym A.M. Delathuy, which have brought a string of harrowing missionary abuses to light (*Jezuïeten in Kongo met Zwaard en Kruis* [1986] and *Missie en Staat in Oud-Kongo, 1880-1914. Witte Paters, Scheutisten, en Jezuïeten* [1992]). The crimes committed by Eric Dejaeger remain some of the most obvious examples, but there are no shortage of others unfortunately. Such scandals, along with the rise of individualism and women's emancipation, have served to weaken the Catholic Church's power over the past half century yet, at the same time, missionary history continues to be presented largely uncritically in the public domain in Flanders.

To examine how missionaries are treated in Flemish public spaces and media, Goddeeris uses prosopography and to convincing effect. Helpfully, there is a list of public sites in which Flemish missionaries are memorialised that can be found in an appendix at the back of the publication and that forms the mainstay of the source material for the book. What this collection of sites tells us is that public representations of missionaries have played an important role in emphasising the more positive aspects of their work throughout the centuries while glossing over some of the more problematic aspects of their lives and utterances. While statues, such as the one of Victor Roelens (1858-1947) in Ardoie, are some of the most obvious of such public representations, with many being funded at least in part by the Belgian state, Goddeeris draws our attention to a wide range of others,

such as comics. Goddeeris is keen to state that such public remembrances are paradoxical, however. While they may have successfully installed a perception of missionaries as a general good in the public mind, few people in Flanders today can actually identify specific examples of individual missionaries. For example, when questioned, fifty young people did not know who Father De Smet was despite them being quizzed in the missionary's hometown of Dendermonde.

If few can remember the specifics of mission history such as the fact that Roelens made avowedly racist statements and entertained a very close relationship with Léopoldian imperialism, it is not surprising that many statues have not yet been felled. Yet, while toppling statues is one response to offensive statues from earlier periods, Goddeeris highlights a number of other solutions in this volume. For example, defenestrated statues could be put in a sculpture park, as is the case in Moscow and Delhi. It would also have been good to have added Szobor Park in Budapest to this list, given its potential utility in this regard. Goddeeris' suggestion of a museum constituted of toppled imperial statues might be useful in showing how such representations fashioned public perception of figures involved in the imperial era, such as missionaries. Aside from dealing in statues alone, another interesting means of dealing with difficult pasts in public places comes from the Netherlands, in which a number of cities have published richly illustrated booklets about all kinds of aspects of colonial heritage. Lucas Catherine has published a 'Decolonization Trail' with regard to Belgium's colonial past as well.

Altogether, Goddeeris promotes a 'polyphony of memory' in which 'society' is the ultimate arbiter of public memory. Goddeeris is not Panglossian about the conversations that society is currently having about issues of the colonial past. For example, he notes that participation in local discussions was disappointing in the case in Ghent and Halle. Given that even recent participation in conversations about imperial monuments can disappoint, it will be interesting to see if such discussions continue to hold media attention to quite the same extent as they did during the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Goddeeris rightly suggests Floyd's death was a catalyst for ongoing and widespread reappraisals of statues in Belgian public places and so, without other historic events, it might be we see another era of inertia as other topics, such as climate change, move further up the agenda. It would therefore be interesting to return to the memorials Goddeeris describes in the future if, indeed, they are still there.

Whatever happens in the future, this book, which is sumptuously presented and carefully argued, should be required reading for those interested in missionaries and their public memory. While this study concentrates principally on Flemish missionaries, his conclusions will doubtless inspire research questions on the part of those working on a variety of other religious groups. Not only that, but this book is also peppered with

invaluable statistics that will be extremely useful to any scholar interested in what David Maxwell has recently described as ‘religious entanglements’ (*Religious Entanglements: Central African Pentecostalism, the Creation of Cultural Knowledge, and the Making of the Luba Katanga*, 2022). For example, in absolute numbers, it might surprise some readers to learn that more Flemish missionaries who worked in China are publicly memorialised than those who proselytised Belgium’s largest colony: the Congo. Another interesting historical fact presented here is that Belgium, which represented 1.5 per cent of the Catholic world, contributed an incredible 4,930 or ten per cent of the Church’s missionaries. Over and above these important factual nuggets, Goddeeris has inserted missionaries – irrevocably I hope – into debates about the ongoing legacy of imperial cultures and their afterlives.

Reuben A. Loffman, Queen Mary University of London