

**Images of French Catholicism and Belgian Protestantism:  
The Mid-Nineteenth Century British Perception of Religion in France and  
Belgium**

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According to most mid-nineteenth century British travelers, France and Belgium in many respects strongly resembled each other. In other respects, however, they were perceived as fundamentally different. The degree of similarity between the British images of France and Belgium could reflect some profound similarities or differences between the two countries. It could also be a reflection of British expectations. British travelers simply expected or assumed both countries to be similar or different. The British perception of religion in mid-nineteenth century France and Belgium offers an excellent example of this second possibility. British views on religion in France and Belgium were built at the same time around some solid observations and historical facts, on the one hand, and reflected a strong British wishful thinking and, therefore, the British home-context, on the other. For the historian this second option is often more interesting and challenging. Whereas the religious situation in France and Belgium was relatively similar—Catholicism was in both countries the dominant religion—the travelers' interpretation of this situation was very different. Why, for example, were the French always included in the description of Catholicism, whilst the Belgians were most frequently absent in the image of Belgian Catholicism? Why was Catholicism seen as an essential part of the French national identity but considered as a hostile element to the “true” Belgian national identity? Why was France so readily identified with its Catholicism by British travelers, while they ignored, even denied, this link in Belgium's case? Many travelers even went one step further by claiming that the Belgian national identity was essentially a Protestant one and that Belgium would in the nearby future become a Protestant country.

In the mid-nineteenth century, travel to the continent, and especially to nearby France and Belgium, became popular with the British (upper) middle classes.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in a new type of travel which differed significantly from the travels of the already established upper class travelers. Generally the stays were shorter and the budgets smaller. On the other hand the railway had made the pace of traveling much

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<sup>1</sup> Besides France and Belgium, the Rhine valley, Switzerland and Italy were also popular travel destinations.

faster so that more could be seen in a shorter period. As a result the travels were often conducted in an energetic, or even restless, atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> New and efficient travel guides were published to help the ever-growing number of often-inexperienced travelers. These travel guides give us also an idea of the number of travelers. Retrieving the exact number of travelers is difficult as the passport system was only gradually becoming compulsory.<sup>3</sup> Popular travel guides such as *Murray's Handbook for Belgium and the Rhine* or *Belgium and Holland. Handbook for Travellers*, the English version of Karl Baedeker's famous travel guide, were both printed in approximately twenty editions during the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Even Henry Addison's *A week in Brussels*, a much less popular and influential travel guide, sold more than 10,000 copies in the 1840s.<sup>5</sup>

If travel guides played an important role in the preparation of travel, setting up a travel account played an essential part in preserving the travel experiences. A travel account was also an excellent way to share these experiences with relatives, friends or the wider reading public. By writing a travel account the middle class travelers believed they were taking part in an aristocratic tradition. Writing, and especially publishing, a travel account, therefore, also has to be seen as a lasting proof of the financial wealth that made the continental tour possible. Finally, many travelers, especially when they were the first travelers of their group of relatives and friends, were genuinely convinced they were undertaking a groundbreaking or even historical visit that deserved an official account. For contemporary critics of British middle class travel the omnipresent British traveler and his account were, however, a source of annoyance:

They have afflicted our generation with one desperate evil; they have covered Europe with Tourists, all pen in hand, all determined not to let a henroost undescribed, all portofolioed, all handbooked, all "getting up a Journal," and all pouring their busy nothings on the "reading public," without compassion or conscience.<sup>6</sup>

The many travel accounts (for Belgium alone there are a couple of hundred published accounts preserved and many more unpublished) does not only reflect the popularity amongst travelers to set up an account. The published accounts also give a clear indication of the popularity of travel literature as a genre. In the mid-nineteenth century travel accounts came second only to novels in popularity in Britain. Partly as a result of this popularity the travel guides and accounts are an excellent and representative source of the views, ideas and attitudes of the mid-nineteenth century British middle classes. Travel literature as a source of historical research always

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<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to nineteenth-century British travel on the continent, see: Rudy Koshar, "What Ought to Be Seen: Tourists' Guidebooks and National Identities in Modern Germany and Europe," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33.3 (1998): 323-340; Marjorie Morgan, *National Identities and Travel in Victorian Britain* (New York, 2001), 271; and Lynne Withey, *Grand Tours and Cook's Tours; A History of Leisure Travel, 1750 to 1915* (London, 1998), 401.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Morgan, for example, states that approximately 50,000 people crossed the Channel annually in the 1830s. By 1913 this number had risen to 660,000. Morgan, *National Identities*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *Murray's Handbook for Belgium and the Rhine; With Travelling Map* (London, 1852), 276; and Karl Baedeker, *Belgium and Holland; Handbook for Travellers* (Leipzig, 1875), 270.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous [Henry Addison], *A Week in Brussels; The Stranger's Guide to the Capital of Belgium; Containing a Variety of Useful and Entertaining Information for the Tourist and the Economist, by an Old Resident* (Brussels and London, 1846), 102.

<sup>6</sup> "Modern Tourism," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 64 (August 1848), 185; quoted in Morgan, *National Identities*, 18.

contains information on both the observed and the observers and reflects both the French and Belgian context as well as the British one.

This article is divided into three sections. In the first section the general British perception of continental Catholicism and the way the travelers' judgments fit in this framework are analyzed. The second and third sections focus on travelers' interpretations of Catholicism in France and Belgium respectively. Both sections deal also with the perception of Protestantism in both countries, as this Protestantism played a crucial role in the British interpretation of French and Belgian Catholicism.

### **Travelers' views on Catholicism in France and Belgium**

Protestantism was a core element of British national identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> The self-perception of the British was built around the intertwined elements of Protestantism: the love of freedom, constitutionalism, local government, enlightenment, rationality, cleanliness, prosperity and industriousness. The continental other, most often the French, formed an integral part of this self-perception. They were associated with the exact opposite of British/English values: with authoritarianism, centralism, Catholicism, superstition, poverty, bad manners and dirtiness. Catholicism, as a result, was associated with the other, with foreign elements, and therefore, was condemned.

The long struggle for the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 enforced this anti-Catholicism even further. The consequences of this important legal breakthrough for British Catholics were rather negative in the short term. Public opinion on both sides had been mobilized and radicalized in the long years preceding the Emancipation Act. Anti-Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century was, therefore, more outspoken than in the preceding and following decades.<sup>8</sup> The travel accounts provide excellent examples of this forceful condemnation as the vast majority of the travelers had Protestant backgrounds. Both Anglican and non-conformist travelers were very common. The specific Protestant denomination did not result in different judgments of religion in France and Belgium. Travelers from all Protestant denominations condemned continental Catholicism equally forcefully. Moreover, in traveling through the Catholic parts of the continent the travelers rallied behind a common Protestant identity. Marjorie Morgan, in her analysis of British travelers on the continent in the nineteenth century, claims convincingly that as long as travelers traveled in Catholic regions Protestantism and Catholicism were viewed as two monolithic and opposing religions and that there was little room for further differentiation.<sup>9</sup> However, whilst visiting Protestant parts of the Continent, this dominant dichotomy was partly abandoned, and divisions between the specific Protestant denominations became apparent. As a result views on the observed religious situation split accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

The first and main observation of the travelers was, of course, the strength and dominance of Catholicism in both France and Belgium. Obviously the travelers did not approve. They brought forward three major points of criticism. Firstly, they claimed that Catholicism promoted superstition and idolatry whereas Protestantism

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons; Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London, 1996), 464.

<sup>8</sup> John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-1860* (Oxford, 1991), 2, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, *National Identities*, 271.

<sup>10</sup> Other sources, like the British press reports, also support the centrality of this dichotomy between Protestantism and Catholicism. Further diversifications are rare.

stood for education and rationality. Catholicism was seen as a synonym for spectacular rituals in an elaborate setting. Most travelers were impressed by the striking effect of the richly decorated churches or the beauty of the singing. At the same time they were convinced that this had nothing to do with true religion and that it remained, therefore, superficial. As a result unfamiliar aspects of the rituals were at the centre of their scorn. The traveler Grantham claimed, for example, that the high speed of the singing of the endless Ave Marias revealed that the unfortunate believers all wanted to go home quickly.<sup>11</sup> Another anonymous traveler targeted the rich church decorations by claiming he mistook the elaborate outfits of the gesticulating priests for moving tapestries, tapestries that were obviously intended as a last trick to keep the ignorant believers amazed.<sup>12</sup>

The negative effect of Catholicism on moral behavior was equally strongly criticized. The traveler Daniel Wilson, for example, denounced this lack of morals in the French Catholic Church forcefully:

And what is the general moral effect of this system? It neither sanctifies nor saves. A depth of vice, glossed over with outward forms of decency, eats as doth a canker. Voluptuousness, impurity, dishonesty, cunning, hypocrisy, every vice prevails, just as Popery has the more complete sway. The dreadful profanation of the Sabbath has by prescription become fixed. All the holy ends of it are forgotten, unknown, obliterated. It is the habitual season of unrestrained pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, British travelers perceived the French and Belgian Catholic Churches as essentially preoccupied with money and power. The wellbeing of the believers was not thought to be the central concern. This resulted in the image of an extremely greedy continental Catholic Church. The fact that travelers had to pay to see the finest pieces of art in the churches was considered proof for this view of a wealthy, greedy and complotting church. The disappointment resulting from the fact that these paintings and sculptures were covered during mass led to the strongest condemnations.

In the description of the French and Belgian Catholic Churches the similarities outnumber the differences vastly. The only major difference is that the British condemnation of Belgian Catholicism is even more forceful. Flanders especially was perceived as one of the most Catholic regions of Europe. Besides the enormous strength of Catholicism in Belgium, it reflects in the first place that religion in Belgium was a very crucial issue for the British travelers, that there was much more at stake. Whereas the interpretation of French Catholicism is a relatively straightforward one, the travelers took great pains to construct an original interpretation of Belgian Catholicism. The great similarity in observation and description of Catholicism was, therefore, abandoned the moment the travelers tried to make sense of Catholicism.

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<sup>11</sup> Lewes: East Sussex County Record Office, *Grantham family of Barcombe Place*, ACC 4789/86, 128-129 (1855).

<sup>12</sup> T. Brightwell, *Journal of a Tour made by a Party of Friends in the Autumn of 1825, Through Belgium, Up the Rhine, to Frankfort and Heidelberg, and across the Eastern Side of France to Paris* (Norwich, 1828), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Wilson, *Letters from an Absent Brother, Containing Some Account of a Tour Through Parts of The Netherlands, Switzerland, Northern Italy, and France, in the Summer of 1823*, vol. 2 (London, 1824), 252.

## French Catholicism

The travelers' interpretation of French Catholicism was relatively straightforward. As France was still seen as the most important contrast to Britain, it was by definition associated with everything to the opposite of what was considered typically British. Besides being perceived as authoritarian, corrupt and ignorant, France and the French were obviously also Catholic. Catholicism was believed to be an integral part of the French national identity. Not surprisingly French Catholicism was perceived by the travelers as a monolithic power with few internal differences and subdivisions. Furthermore, the image underwent few changes during the nineteenth century. Changes in the religious situation had only a limited impact on the travelers' image of French Catholicism. The same stereotypical elements were repeated time after time. More forceful condemnation in the mid-nineteenth century was also in tune with a general increase in anti-Catholicism.

The existence of French Protestantism was not considered problematic to the claim that Catholicism was a core element of French national identity. In fact, the image of French Protestants played an instrumental role. It was incorporated in such a way that it actually strengthened the image of a Catholic French national identity. Most travelers contrasted the French Protestants very favorably with their Catholic compatriots. Matilda Betham-Edwards, for example, frequently compared her experiences in ultra-Catholic Brittany with those in the Protestant enclaves in Eastern France:

We find a toleration here absolutely unknown in most parts of France, and a generally diffused enlightenment equally wanting where Catholicism dominates. Brittany and Franche-Comté, offer a striking contrast; in the first we find the priest absolute, and consequently superstition, ignorance, dirt, and prejudice the prevailing order of the day; in the last we have a Protestant spirit of inquiry and rationalistic progress, consequently instruction making vast strides on every side, freedom from bigotry, and freedom alike from degrading spiritual bondage and fanaticism.<sup>14</sup>

According to the British travelers this existence of a Protestant minority meant that the French were familiar with religious alternatives. The fact that the French chose Catholicism overwhelmingly therefore, could not be attributed to ignorance. As a result the travelers believed strongly that Catholicism was deeply engraved in the French national identity. This specific image of the Protestant minority reinforces, therefore, the close association between France and Catholicism.

## Belgian Protestantism

The travelers' unique framework for interpreting Belgian Catholicism can only be understood against the background of the generally very favorable British view of Belgium and the Belgians in the mid-nineteenth century. As a result of the crucial role Britain played in the independence of Belgium after the 1830 Revolution, British public opinion considered Belgium as their own creation and, increasingly, as their prosperous child on the continent. Belgium was perceived as a "little Britain" or "little

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<sup>14</sup> Matilda Betham-Edwards, *Holidays in Eastern France* (London, 1879), 106-107.

England” on the continent<sup>15</sup> and all typical British/English qualities were attributed to Belgium. For travelers, the Belgians loved freedom, constitutionalism, local government and enlightenment. Belgian history was read as a continuous struggle for freedom, and the Belgian monarch King Leopold was praised in the first place for his close ties with Britain. Furthermore Belgium seemed to follow Britain on the path of industrialization. Only the final British quality, Protestantism, seemed lacking.

From 1830 onwards, British travelers were often surprised to see that Belgium was Catholic and that nothing of what they called “the Protestant legacy of the sixteenth century” had survived.<sup>16</sup> This strong Belgian Catholicism was highly problematic for general British sympathy for Belgium. British travelers, however, made use of two important strategies to make sense of the religious situation in Belgium. These strategies enabled them to play down the apparent Catholic outlook of the country. Firstly, they depicted the Belgian Catholic Church as foreign to the true Belgian society. The Catholic Church was not seen as an essential part of the Belgian national identity but as imposed upon the Belgians by force of arms since the sixteenth century. The Belgian Catholic Church was perceived as governed by the Pope who made good use of the Jesuits to implement his policy in Belgium. It is striking that the Belgians as a people were often absent in the most negative descriptions of the Belgian Catholic Church. If travelers visited a French city one day later, the same criticism of Catholic ritualism was repeated, but this time Catholic rituals took place in a church packed with believers.

British travelers were familiar with the concept of a foreign Catholic Church, and they borrowed extensively from the existing language and concepts to describe Catholicism in Britain.<sup>17</sup> The dichotomy between a “true” national identity and a foreign Catholic Church was, therefore, a familiar and plausible framework of interpretation for the travelers. Not all problems however, were solved by this dichotomy. In fact the main problem was simply taken to another level. How could this foreign Catholic Church so easily dominate Belgian politics if it was not part of the Belgian national identity? Travelers were convinced that Belgian national identity was still in process of awakening. It was only in cities that a sense of national identity was beginning. The countryside lagged behind and was considered by the travelers as backward. Only the “modern” Belgians in the cities were compared with the British and could count on their sympathy. For the traveler John Trotandot this division of Belgian society was evident:

Here and there I had peeps of real Belgian life and of quaintly dressed old Belgian people in all their picturesqueness of costume and primitiveness of habits. But modern Belgium is a second edition of England. The people are thoroughly English in appearance.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Both the concepts of “little Britain” and “little England” were used interchangeably; however, referring to political elements “little Britain” was more popular, while “little England” was more frequently used when referring to cultural values.

<sup>16</sup> In the 1840s, for example, there were only fifteen thousand non-Catholic believers in Belgium of which half were of foreign nationality. See H. Heugh, *Notices of the State of Religion in Geneva and Belgium* (Glasgow, 1844), 169.

<sup>17</sup> Sheridan Gilley, “The Roman Catholic Church in England, 1780-1940,” in Sheridan Gilley and W.J. Sheils, eds, *A History of Religion in Britain; Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 346.

<sup>18</sup> John Trotandot, *Roaming Abroad, being Recollections of a Run through parts of France, Switzerland, Belgium and the Vaterland* (Crewkerne, 1878), 104-105.

Whereas the cities were believed to be ready to overthrow Catholic dominance, the countryside was believed to be firmly in the grasp of the Church. This countryside elected, however, the majority of the parliamentary representatives and was, therefore, perceived as one giant rotten borough in the hands of the priestly party.

The second important strategy was to depict the Belgians as resistance fighters. The travelers, and the British press, were extremely sensitive to any form of opposition to the Catholic Church. This resistance received much attention and the amount of upheaval was greatly over-estimated. Not surprisingly anti-clerical resistance in Belgium caught also the attention of Punch:

The faithful Belgian clergy have been cast—not by any means having got themselves—into the hot water of persecution. They have been hissed and hooted, and subjected to other atrocious torments. An infuriated mob has outraged those venerable fathers with horrid cries of “A bas les couvents!” and “Vive la Constitution” and still more barbarous shouts and yells.<sup>19</sup>

One important reason why the British believed they were witnessing the birth of an anti-Catholic resistance was their inability to interpret Belgium's strong and complex liberal-Catholicism. Furthermore travelers confused anticlerical resistance with anti-Catholicism. For travelers this resistance and the strength of liberal Catholicism were further proof of their belief in a Protestant Belgian national identity. This Protestant national identity however, had been suppressed by consecutive governments of the Catholic Spanish and the Austrians. The Belgians had, however, remained “hidden” Protestants, and the travelers believed that after the 1830 Revolution this Protestantism would awake in no time. Travelers saw anti-clerical resistance in the Belgian cities from this perspective. Whereas John Trotandot had claimed that the “modern” Belgians looked English, George Sala, journalist, travel writer and art critic, went one step further and claimed that the Belgians had “a Protestant look:”

And I have never been able to get rid of the idea that, after all, Roman Catholicism is an exotic in Flanders; that its redundance—for there is no country where it is so repulsively prominent—is forced and artificial; and that in this temperate, methodical, cabbage-bearing, cattle-breeding land, the hips and haws of Protestantism should have been indigenous. The people have a Protestant look.<sup>20</sup>

The strength of the British confidence in the ultimate Protestant victory is striking. The traveler Lundie was, even as late as 1880, very optimistic about the prospects:

[Y]et when the gospel is preached, it becomes evident that the villagers have no great confidence in their own superstitions, or in those who have encouraged belief in them. Romanism has flung a blight upon the moral life of Belgium: but conscience is awakening, liberty is beginning to assert itself. A death-struggle is now in progress between the power of Ultramontanism and the power of which the nation is beginning to feel conscious with itself. There may be wavering in the lines of the true and the brave, but it cannot be doubtful on which side victory will ultimately be secured.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Punch, or the London Charivari* 32 (1857), 235.

<sup>20</sup> George Augustus Sala, *From Waterloo to the Peninsula; Four Months' Hard Labour in Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Spain* (London, 1867), 99.

<sup>21</sup> R.H. Lundie, *Seed-corn in Belgium, being a Visit to the Belgian Churches* (London, 1880), 16.

By 1850 the initial optimism was dented. Travelers no longer believed that victory would be effortless, the logical outcome of an awakening Protestant national character. British support was increasingly seen as an essential factor for success. There was a great need for precise knowledge of the religious situation in Belgium. The many tours made by clergy from the late 1840s onwards and their detailed accounts of religious affairs must be understood from this perspective. They were well aware that these original views were too optimistic and that the Catholic Church was much stronger than expected.<sup>22</sup> The idea that the Belgians could be converted to Protestantism and the language in which these attempts were formulated were, once again, not new. British travelers could copy the attitudes and views on the Irish religious situation of the 1820s to the Belgian situation.<sup>23</sup> Both the naivety of an easy mass conversion to Protestantism and the growing frustration and disappointment afterwards were very similar.

By the 1860s, and certainly by the 1870s, the vast majority of British travelers no longer believed in the Belgians as “hidden” Protestants or in a Protestant Belgian national identity. This shift, however, was not in the first place the result of a growing incongruence between the actual religious situation in Belgium and the British perception of it. This incongruence was already highly visible in the 1830s. What did change, however, was the general framework in which Belgium was understood. Whereas in 1830 Belgium could count on general British sympathy, by 1860 this was replaced by a strong British feeling of disappointment in Belgium. Belgium was increasingly perceived as the political and economic pawn of France. During the 1860s Belgium, therefore, lost its unique place in the British imagination and fitted from that date neatly in the “normal” continental perception. The Belgian constitutional system was no longer considered a perfect copy of the British and the freedom loving character of the Belgians was questioned. In short, Belgium was seen increasingly as an authoritarian, centralistic and bureaucratic state, and of course, a Catholic one as well.

## Conclusion

The British travelers’ perception of religion in France and Belgium differed fundamentally. The condemnation and rejection of French Catholicism is a reflection of strong Victorian anti-Catholicism. As France was still considered the most important contrast to Britain, its Catholicism was contrasted unfavorably with Britain’s own Protestantism. The perception of religion in Belgium should be understood from a different perspective. The image of Protestant citizens in a Catholic country was determined by general British attitudes towards Belgium. This image enabled the travelers to praise Belgium and the Belgians and condemn, at the same time, Belgium’s Catholicism. As a result the travelers’ interpretation of a relatively similar situation was completely different once they crossed the border between France and Belgium. The travelers’ perception of French Catholicism was relatively stable throughout the nineteenth century. The perception of religion in Belgium,

<sup>22</sup> The following travel accounts reflect this new attitude: Heugh, 250; Benjamin Webb, *Sketches of Continental Ecclesiology or Church Notes in Belgium, Germany, and Italy* (London, 1848), 593; E. Morgan, *Voice from the Continent; or, Interesting Observations on Remarkable Places, Health, and Religion, in Belgium, Germany, and on the Rhine* (London, 1861), 76; and Lundie, *Seed-corn in Belgium*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> For an excellent introduction to British attitudes towards religion in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, see Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 366.

however, made an important u-turn. For political and economic reasons the main motive to perceive the Belgian national identity as Protestant disappeared in the 1850s and 1860s, and travelers perceived Belgium increasingly as just another Catholic continental country. From the 1860s onwards travelers' perceptions of religion in France and Belgium was once again very similar.