



**POLIN-  
INSTITUTET**

INEZ OCH JULIUS POLIN-INSTITUT FÖR TEOLOGISK FORSKNING

Åbo Akademi

# Mission and Colonialism

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Εθνικόν καὶ Καποδιστριακόν  
Πανεπιστήμιον Αθηνών

<https://polininstitutet.fi/>

# God's Mission and mission of the church



God's mission –  
Missio Dei

Mission of the Church

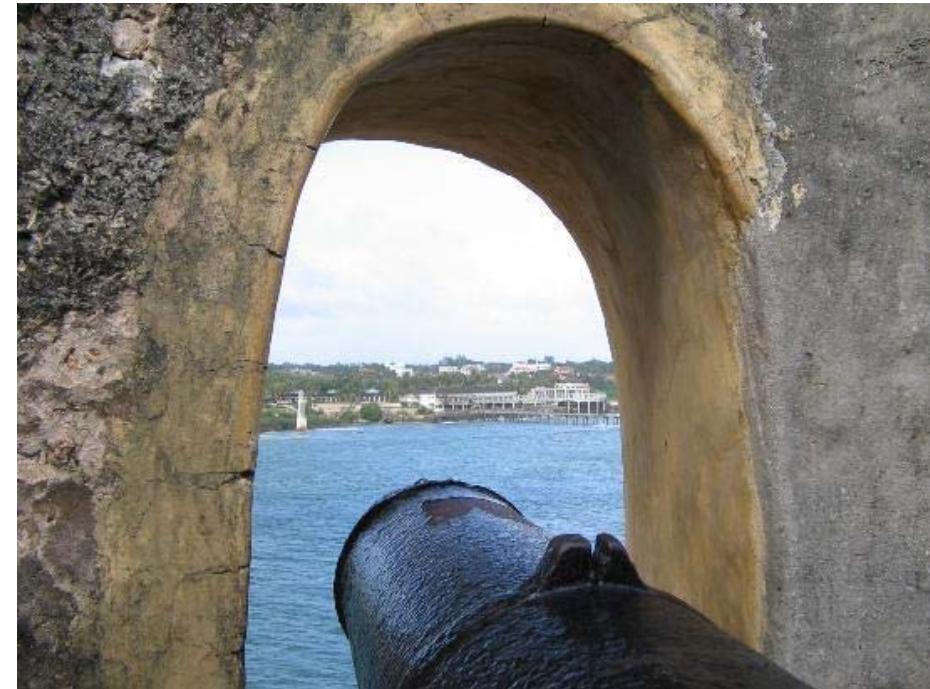
Mission of the church  
as an organization



- Here, we deal with the mission of the church as an organization (including para-church organizations)
- There is no generally accepted definition of mission
- In this lecture, western attempts at expanding their church organizations in non-western cultural spheres by missionaries of western background
- I count Orthodoxy in the West

# What is colonialism?

- Differing definitions:
  - First, founding of colonies (like Grecia Magna)
  - Occupation of areas long away from the "motherland" (cf. "les sciences d'outre-mer) – cannot a neighbouring country be a colony?
  - Political, military, economic, cultural and often even religious rule over another country
    - Who defines what is a country? What does "to rule" mean?
- This lecture: Colonialism as a conviction about the superiority of one's culture and an attempt to force it upon the others



Fort Jesus, Mombasa, Kenya



David Livingstone (1813-1873), a Scottish missionary and explorer carried the "last mile" to die in his home in Ujiji, Tanganyika.

# Types of colonialism

- Settler colonialism
  - Founding of colonies. Locals either pushed aside and/or murdered (USA) or enslaved (South Africa)
- Commercial colonialism
  - Economic interests superior, colony as business (the British East India Company)
- "Classic" colonialism
  - Faraway lands under political, cultural, economic occupation
- Nationalist or imperialist "neighbourhood" colonialism
  - Neighbouring areas occupied by a strong country with the idea of ethno-cultural fusion (nationalism, Russkij mir today) or hierarchical imperial system (the Russian Empire)
- Neocolonialism – a late modern form of commercial colonialism with formal independence of the colonies

# Ideological siblings of colonialism

- Hierarchy:
  - Colonialism needs a hierarchical organization of reality for its legitimization: peoples, cultures, individuals, social classes etc.
  - In Christianity, often a strongly hierarchical order: Child-woman-man-priest-bishop-patriarch.
- Holiness of the status quo
  - Political and economic structures want to legitimize themselves with religion: status quo comes from God – “the divine right of kings”



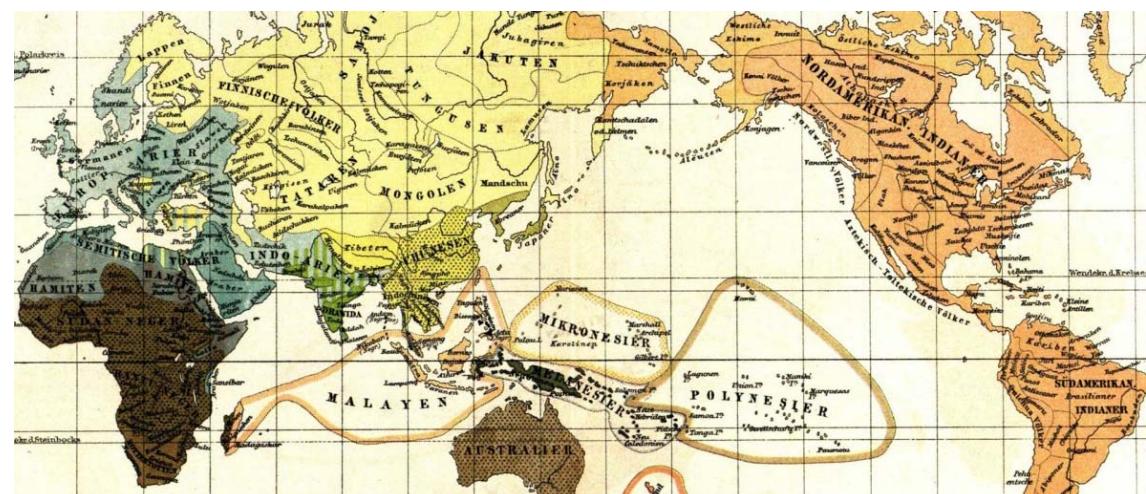


## Ideological siblings of colonialism

Racism (there are races which can be hierarchically ordered)

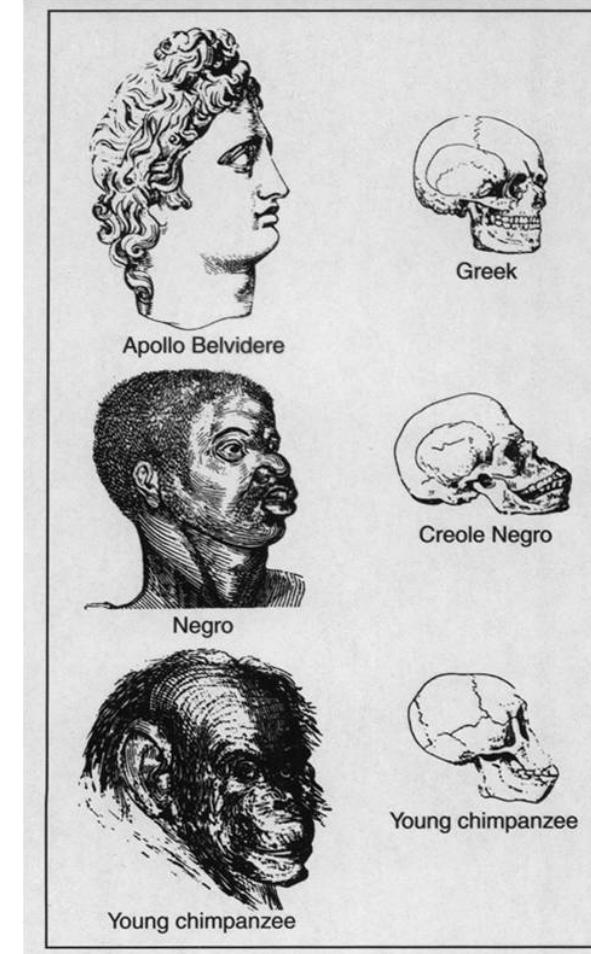
- Dominant scientific theory during the colonial times.
- “White man’s burden”.
- Many missionaries accepted it as biblical.
- The biblical foundation: Gen. 9: 20-25 (Ham’s/Canaan’s curse).

1885 race map



# Social, racial and cultural Darwinism

- The evolution of the humankind: higher social classes are genetically superior to the lower; lower races genetically inferior to the higher; high and low cultures
- Joseph Schmidlin (1876-1944): Urmonotheismus (original monotheism) + evolution of religions with Roman Catholicism as the summit
- Evolution theory worked as a legitimization for both mission and colonialism



# Social hierarchy legitimized by God

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful:  
The Lord God made them all.

...

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
He made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

...

Cecil F. Alexander 1848



The White House, Washington D.C.

# Black Sarah and the white teacher



In heaven there is no anguish, no tears, no night sang the little black Sarah, a poor negro child...

She had heard only once the white teacher, about the blood that can cleanse, about Jesus, children's friend...

Without a friend, alone on the hard and cold bed she lies in joyous expectation of what is to come...

Now she plays clear harp tones with happy mood – oh, see how the little black Sarah is white and shiny in the Lamb's blood

(Approximate partial translation from Swedish, Lina Sandell 1832-1903)

# The military mindset

- Even Christians used military symbols and modes of organization – European armies had proved to be more effective than most of the other organizations
  - Salvation Army
  - Mission as spiritual occupation of territories; China Inland Mission missionaries as God's "infantry" (cf. Spiritual warfare today; Russki mir...)
  - Background in the Bible (e.g. Paul's military metaphors)
  - "Onward Christian soldiers"



The Cypriot archbishop Chrysostom (+2022)

# Preconditions for the modern missionary movement

- Political-social-economic preconditions
  - Pax Britannica (Gallica/Lusitanica etc.)
  - Industry and capitalism
  - Monetary economy
  - Mission as women's project
  - Population explosion in Europe
- Technical preconditions
  - Printing press
  - Caravel – clipper – steam engine (ships and trains)
  - Quinine, penicillin
  - Telegram – telephone
  - Cartography
  - Arms technology



Ruth Rouse  
1872-1956

Cutty Sark  
1869



Maxim –  
The first  
machine gun  
1884



# Models mission-colonialism

- Religious nationalism
  - Requires a national cultural-religious unity & will to expand
    - Especially, Protestantism & Orthodoxy, Catholics often too multinational
  - Mission as the spiritual dimension of colonialism
  - "The chosen people", "manifest destiny", "covenant", "the Third Rome"
- Colonial mission
  - David Livingstone (1813-1873) as the prime example
    - 3 Cs: Christianity, civilization, commerce
    - His explorations benefited both mission and (benevolent) colonialism – anti-slavery campaign central
    - Worked partly as a missionary, partly for the Royal Geographic Society, partly for the state – no clear boundaries
    - "Opened" large areas for the three Cs



# Models mission-colonialism

- Symbiosis between mission and colonialism
  - Mission not directly a part of the colonial project but benefits from it
    - Through direct support like "grants in aid" to missionary schools and hospitals (which were the prime ways of getting converts)
    - Through indirect support like
      - Military protection (e.g. Arusha)
      - Monetary economy
      - Increased job opportunities for the schooled
      - Christianity a status symbol in the colony
      - Legislation supporting Christianity (family, religion, education, political rights...)
  - The colonial administration benefits from getting cheap education and health care for the colonized, their pacification and legitimization for mission through protection of the missionaries



# Models mission-colonialism

- Tensions between mission and colonialism
  - The colonial administration does not want to have missionaries in the area because of cultural and political reasons. Missionaries tolerated only to the extent they do not cause unrest among the colonised.
  - Especially when the missionaries did not come from the "motherland" and its majority church
- Acolonial mission
  - Mission rejects protection from and contact with the colonial power not to be involved in politics (e.g. CIM) – requires a marginally colonial situation
- Anti-colonial mission
  - Mission supports directly the fight for freedom

# Random effects

- The expansion of Christianity under colonialism was not always by design, and not always a result of positive developments
  - "Bad cop, good cop"-effect: local population sought for an asylum from extreme colonial violence at the mission stations (Igbo; Congo Free State)
  - Help from missions made colonial violence softer
    - Through direct help (like Norwegians in Northern Cameroon)
    - Through pressure towards the colonial administration (e.g. Protestants in the Belgian Congo; Lutherans in the Meru Land Case in Tanganyika)
    - Through direct action (some Finnish missionaries in Namibia – residence permits rejected)



Mount Meru

# Concluding thoughts

- Question on mission and colonialism is multifaceted:
  - Different Christianities
  - Different colonialisms
  - Different historical contexts
- Christian mission challenges and wants to change the target peoples and cultures - whether that is acceptable depends on the one who judges
- Western mission both served and undermined colonialism (1st generation African national leaders from mission schools)
- Today most Christians non-western – the western missionary movement contributed to the beginning non-westernization of Christianity
- Is theology one of the last bastions of Christian colonialism?