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Maps with a Message: Charting, Interpreting, and Disseminating of Knowledge about Missionary Cartography (c. 1850-1950)

Keywords: Missionary maps; printed maps; digitization; digital exhibition; Protestantism; Christianity.

Summary: Within Protestantism, missionary maps emerged with the establishment of the first professional missionary societies just before 1800. Their heyday was between about 1850 and 1950, but they are still relevant today, circulating amongst the thousands of organizations and NGOs that are active in global mission and humanitarian aid.

Among scholars, Protestant missionary maps have attracted very little attention. To this end, at Utrecht University a missionary map project was launched in 2019 to chart, interpret and disseminate knowledge about missionary cartography in Protestantism. In line with this project a digital exhibition was set up in 2021, presenting a selection of Protestant missionary cartography, mostly Dutch but also British, American, German and Belgian. The exhibition shows a variety of maps, such as world maps, maps for children, colonial maps, atlases and maps of exploration. All of these maps are in possession of the Utrecht University Library Special Collections Department. The goal is to extend the selection with maps from other institutions and create a more systematic overview of, mainly Dutch, Protestant missionary cartography. This will offer insights in the perceptions, usage, and even geopolitics of a genre, which is still alive and kicking.

Introduction

Is there a God? Nowadays a frequently asked question, but in the 17th century no one, at least not in the Western world, doubted His existence. The question was rather *how* to worship God properly. If it had been up to Jodocus Hondius, the Supreme Being was best served by adherence to the Christian faith. In 1607, this Amsterdam publisher published a pocket version of Mercator's *Atlas*, the *Atlas Minor* in which he included a thematic world map representing the spread of the various religions (Figure 1).¹ It is an early chorochromatic map which, by means of symbols or surface colours, indicates the spread of qualitative phenomena.

In the title Hondius only mentions Christianity; in the map legend, however, Islam ('Mahumetismus') and Judaism ('Judaismus') are also mentioned. Christianity is indicated by a cross, Islam by a crescent moon. In addition, the image-worshippers or idolaters (Buddhism, Hinduism and nature worshippers) are indicated by slanted arrows. According to the map legend, all over the world human beings worship God; the true God can be worshipped properly (Christianity) or improperly. False Gods are stars, animals, plants or spirits, either good or evil. Although mentioned by name, Judaism is not at all represented by symbols, possibly because they would interfere too much with the spread of other religions. Furthermore, the map shows an optimistic view of the spread of Christianity in Africa: for the

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¹ Van der Krogt (2003), paragraph 35, Map [0001H:351], *Designatio orbis Christiani*.



Figure 1: Jodocus Hondius, world map showing the spread of the main religions.
In: Gerard Mercator, *Atlas minor* (from 1607; Utrecht University Library, THO: WRT 101-213 (Rariora)).

Christian Empire of Abyssinia is shown as a very large area. An early example of deliberate geopolitics by Hondius. But whether he was aware of the fact that his map is one of the earliest forms of thematic

cartography is doubtful however.

The example of Hondius does show that early in the history of cartography there was interest in the visualization of religious distribution patterns. Thus, the manipulative power of maps for conveying a religious-political message was also immediately recognized. When thematic cartography began to flourish in the 19th century, missionary cartography also benefited. Within Protestantism, missionary maps emerged with the establishment of the first professional missionary societies just before 1800. Their heyday was between about 1850 and 1950, but they are still relevant today, circulating amongst the thousands of organizations and NGOs that are active in global mission and humanitarian aid.

Among scholars, Protestant missionary maps have attracted very little attention. To this end, at Utrecht University a missionary map project was launched in 2019 to chart, interpret and disseminate knowledge about missionary cartography.² In line with this project a digital exhibition was set up in 2021, presenting a selection of Protestant missionary cartography, mostly Dutch but also British, American, German and Belgian.³ The exhibition shows a variety of maps, such as world maps, maps for children, colonial maps, atlases and maps of exploration, accompanied by explanatory notes. All of these maps are in possession of the Utrecht University Library Special Collections Department. The goal is to extend the selection with maps from other institutions – possibly by the use of IIIF⁴ – and thus create a more systematic overview of, mainly Dutch, missionary cartography. This will offer insights in the perceptions, usage, and even geopolitics of these maps.

This article sheds light on the historical backgrounds of thematic cartography in general, and Protestant missionary cartography in particular. The discipline of Protestant missionary cartography developed during the 19th century as a form of mature thematic cartography, with distinctive features such as the use of specific colour patterns. Some striking examples from the digital exhibition will illustrate this development of a genre, which is still alive and kicking.

Missionary cartography in the light of thematic cartography

Missionary cartography can be considered as a form of thematic cartography. The Dutch *Kartografisch woordenboek* ('Cartographic dictionary') gives the following definition of thematic maps: maps on which the spread, nature and/or quantity of specific (groups of) phenomena or themes are represented on a topographical base.⁵ In the leading work in the field of the history of thematic mapping – *Early thematic mapping in the history of cartography* – Robinson defines the thematic map as follows: 'In contrast to the general map, the thematic map concentrates on showing the geographical occurrence and variation of a single phenomenon, or at most a very few. Instead of having as its primary function the display of a variety of different features, the pure thematic map focuses on the differences from place to place of one class of feature, that class being the subject or 'theme' of the map.'⁶ In other words, thematic maps are scientific products. After all, not the features of perceptible reality are shown,

² URL: <https://www.bluebelts.nl/> (all the mentioned URL's in this article were visited in June 2023).

³ URL: <https://www.uu.nl/en/special-collections/collections/digital-exhibitions-of-special-material/missionary-cartography>.

⁴ IIIF (International Image Interoperability Framework) is a set of open standards for delivering high-quality, attributed digital objects online at scale. It's also an international community developing and implementing the IIIF APIs. IIIF is backed by a consortium of leading cultural institutions. See: <https://iiif.io/>.

⁵ Bos (1991), 8.4.1.

⁶ Robinson (1982), p. 16.

but the interpretations of that reality. Thematic maps are based on systematically arranged perceptions. As a result, they mirror human curiosity about the nature of a great variety of geographical phenomena and their interrelations.

Thematic maps have a relatively short history. According to Wallis & Robinson (1987) the origin of this kind of maps dates back to the late 17th century.⁷ Before that time, thematic maps were rarely made, among which are some maps from the Low Countries as the one made by Hondius. Maps of the ocean currents by Athanasius Kircher (*Mundus subterraneus*, 1665) and Eberhard Werner Happel (*Mundus Mirabilis*, 1687) and the trade wind maps (1686) and maps of the variation of magnetism in the Atlantic Ocean (1701) by Edmond Halley mark the beginning of thematic cartography, according to Wallis & Robinson.⁸ The maps by Halley in particular proved to be important scientific documents. Both the wind map (a flow map) and the map of the variation of magnetism (a so-called isogonic map) became famous almost instantly and were used, revised and copied for a very long time (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Edmond Halley, map of isogones showing magnetic declination, around 1701 (Princeton Library Historic Maps Collection, HMC01.6613, CC BY 4.0, Retrieved from <https://maps.princeton.edu/catalog/princeton-4x51hm44p>).

⁷ Wallis & Robinson (1987), entry 1.202.

⁸ *Ibid.*, entries 3.151, 3.232, 3.031, and 5.0910.

Surprisingly enough, this thematic cartographic eruption was not fully continued. In the 18th century Halley's ideas were almost forgotten and only some geological maps received attention. Only in the early 19th century, when the first results of scientific geographical research were published, did the thematic cartography begin to flourish. Developments in the natural sciences and statistics, the rise of the census, the industrial revolution and the outbreak of epidemics made thematic mapping of these complex phenomena necessary. A strong wish was felt to gather knowledge about the nature and value of a certain phenomenon relating to the entire state surface. Also the development of the lithograph as a cheaper and quicker alternative to the copperplate contributed to the popularity of the coloured thematic map. And so it happened that the thematic map was commonly used in the middle of the 19th century, with international milestones like Alexander von Humboldt's introduction of the isotherm (1817)⁹ and especially the publication of various volumes of Heinrich Berghaus' *Physikalischer Atlas* between 1838 and 1848 (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Thematic map of Europe showing the spread of vegetation types in combination with isotherms and isochimenes, Heinrich Berghaus, *Physikalischer Atlas*, fifth volume, nr. 5 (Utrecht University Library, Kaart: *VIII*.A.a.18 (Rar)).

⁹ *Ibid.*, entry 5.0910g.

Around 1860, all the techniques, which are used nowadays to produce thematic maps, were already known: data collection, systematic arrangement of data, graphic design as means of communication. So in spite of the rather short history of thematic cartography, the discipline quickly reached a mature status.

Against this background, it comes as no surprise that during the 19th century Protestant missionary cartography was also able to flourish. This article is specifically concerned with missionary maps, which missionary societies used in particular to visualize their (potential) activities and organization.

Development of missionary cartography

The modern Protestant missionary movement emerged in the 1790s with the arrival of missionary societies in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands.¹⁰ It was strongly intertwined with colonialism.¹¹ Maps were part of propaganda campaigns from the beginning, but there is evidence that their significance and evocative power were not fully realized until the second quarter of the 19th century.¹² Maps were distributed by missionary societies to satisfy their constituents' need for information and to garner support. These missionary maps had both a temporal and a spatial dimension; they portray the spatial march through history of the kingdom of God toward the fulfilling of time.¹³ Besides that, the maps represent the 'field' metaphor – indicating the heathen souls that need to be harvest – as well as the 'kingdom' metaphor – the spiritual battle between the realm of darkness and the kingdom of God.¹⁴

Missionary maps developed within the niche discipline of missionary geography, a term that was coined around 1825 and gained currency in the 1840s. Both developed in parallel and were probably inspired by the rise of geography as a distinct discipline in the early 19th century. The world's oldest geographical society, the Société de Géographie, was established in Paris in 1821, followed by the Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin in 1828 and the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1830. The Dutch were late to follow in 1873 with the Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap. Cartography as a whole was never a politically neutral science but developed in tandem with the rise of the nation-state in the first quarter of the 19th century, which also aided its introduction into the school curricula.

Missionaries considered geography in general – and cartography in particular – as important. The Dutch reverend P.A. Koppius stressed the significance of missionary geography in 1856: 'Geography should be regarded as one of the most useful servants of Christendom. It can and must be a precursor to the Gospel, because it points to the places where a door is open to receive the servant of the Lord'.¹⁵ Missionary world maps offered a panoramic visualization of the idealistic enterprise of global conversion.

¹⁰ Onnekink (2023), p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27-30.

¹³ Onnekink (2021), p. 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁵ Koppius (1856), p. 160: 'Geografie moet worden beschouwd als een van de nuttigste dienaren van het christendom. Het kan en moet een voorloper zijn van het Evangelie, omdat het verwijst naar de plaatsen waar een deur openstaat om de dienstknecht van de Heer te ontvangen.'

Missionary maps appeared in various forms.¹⁶ Missionary magazines often included maps – sometimes folded – to illustrate particular missionary journeys or activities of specific missionary societies. Starting in about the 1820s, wall maps began to circulate for use in Sunday schools and lecture halls. By the end of the 19th century, missionary cartography had even developed almost scientifically through the work of the indefatigable Reinhold Grundemann (1836-1924), a German preacher and missionary who produced several high-quality missionary atlases.

Concerning Dutch missionary cartography in specific we can distinguish between ‘first generation’ and ‘second generation’ maps. First generation missionary maps – published between around 1850 and 1890 – focus on global mission as a joint Protestant effort. Second generation maps from the period 1890-1930 mainly visualize the colonial paradigm, sometimes in relation to mission.¹⁷

Although the heyday of missionary cartography is now over, cartographic documents remain an effective tool of missionary societies. For example, the controversial *10/40 Window map* – a cartographic concept launched in 1989, on which the earth portion between the tenth and fortieth latitudes above the equator is designated as the main mission area – is used today by evangelical missionary societies to promote mission in Northern Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia (Figure 4).¹⁸

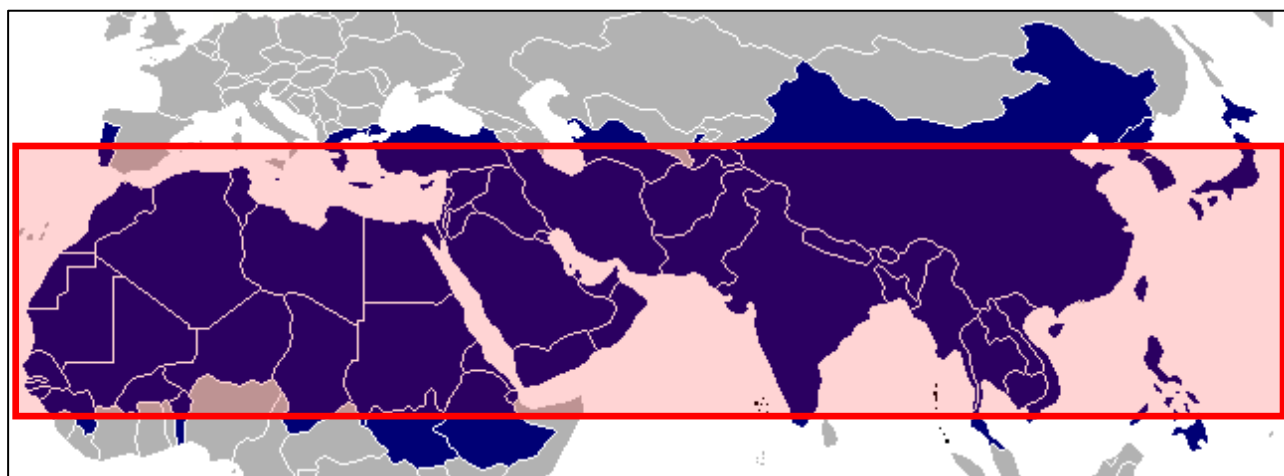


Figure 4. Countries with a mission focus according to the *10/40 Window map* (Wikimedia Commons; author).

This map is based on the idea that 37 of the world’s fifty least-evangelized countries lie within the ‘window’ of these latitudes. And those 37 countries comprise almost hundred percent of the total population in the fifty countries. It is argued that the *10/40 Window map* is a meta-geographical designation used by missionary societies to order their knowledge of the world.¹⁹ Furthermore, the cartographic concept can be seen as ‘a territorial strategy of the missionary movement, a visual way to lay claim on territory’.²⁰

¹⁶ Onnekink (2023), p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁸ De Korte and Onnekink (2020).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Perceptions and colour patterns

So, it can safely be said that missionary maps often were and still are far from objective and that they have a clear message. A fine example is John Gilbert's beautiful map of the world, published in 1861 (Figure 5). In this *Pictorial Missionary Map of the World*, he depicted the world's religions in striking colours. Except for the cartouches depicting 'heathen customs', the colours are indeed the most striking attributes of the map. Of course, the colour scheme is anything but random, as 'heathen territory' is depicted in ominous black and Catholicism in red, the traditional colour of that religion. Both colours have deep cultural significance and reflect the 19th-century attitudes of the Protestant missionary movement.

So, colour patterns are one of the most distinctive features of missionary maps.²¹ Whereas some of the early maps were in black and white, showing the names of missionary stations around the world, maps in which the distribution of world religions was shown in colours were far more attractive. The colours varied but there were recurring patterns. First of all, world religions were without much exception limited to Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and 'heathenism'. Sometimes the Orthodox churches were also specified. Protestantism was usually portrayed in yellow or blue, two colours associated in Western culture with positive values, such as hope and liveliness, Catholicism was usually red, and Islam yellow or green. The 'heathen' territories of the world were either white or black. Buddhism and Hinduism did not appear as separate world religions until the end of the 19th century.



Figure 5. *The pictorial missionary map of the world* by John Gilbert, 1861 (National Library of Australia, MAP RM 3764).

²¹ Onnekink (forthcoming); Onnekink (2021), p. 252, 253; Onnekink (2023), p. 13-23.

Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, thus assigned meaning to colours. In light of these cultural meanings, Protestant missionary cartographers' preference for blue (heaven) and green (hope) to designate Protestantism is understandable. Similarly, the designation of red or variations of red (orange, pink) for Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity can be traced to both Protestant culture and biblical symbolism. Green is a preferred colour for Islam itself, reflected in various national flags. Yellow is the colour of light and movement, which can be considered a positive attribute, but also highlights the expansive and restless nature of Islam in the eyes of Western Christians.

While the monotheistic Abrahamic religions are depicted in colour, 'heathendom' is referred to exclusively in shades of black and white. Black clearly has racist connotations and is an expression of cultural superiority of Western cartographers. This is especially evident in Gilbert's map, which depicts 'heathen' territories in pitch black and where cartouches illustrate the many vices of non-Christian cultures. Yet it also has a more pronounced theological meaning.²² Darkness refers to the absence of the 'light' of the gospel. 'We colour our missionary maps black there where the church of Christ has not yet been established and the gospel had not penetrated. Thus we indicate that the realm of darkness exerts unlimited power here,' according to the Reformed theologian Hoedemaker.²³

The colours on Protestant missionary maps thus tell a differentiated but clear story about the necessity and desirability of spreading the gospel worldwide. Evidence from the missionary literature shows how ordinary Christians knew how to 'read' these colours and their meaning on missionary maps. At the same time, the colours on these maps were deeply intertwined with colonial and racist views that were rampant in Western culture.

Digital exhibition

Examples of this deliberate use of colour in missionary maps are included in the digital exhibition *Maps with a message: missionary cartography c. 1850-1950* (Figure 6). This exhibition aims to generate more scholarly attention to the discipline of missionary cartography. The virtual selection of missionary maps is part of the new website of the Special Collections of the Utrecht University Library, launched in 2021.

The new website is now part of the general website of the university and has the advantage of technical development and continuity. An effort has been made to give the Special Collections site a clear navigational structure, so that users can quickly find their way around. In addition, the service towards education and research has been facilitated in particular: how can students, teachers and scientists make optimal use of the one and a half million documents of the Special Collections in their studies and lectures?

Worth mentioning from a cartographic point of view are the digital exhibitions. These thematic exhibitions present a series of digitized documents in their interconnectedness. Often, the distinguished items are provided with explanations, scientific or otherwise, that go into the content and context. And, of course, each map part can be viewed in detail in the viewer.

²² Onnekink (2021), p. 252.

²³ Hoedemaker (1903), p. 16.

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Maps with a message: missionary cartography ca. 1850-1950

Missionary maps have great exhortative power. At a single glance, they do not just offer an attractive image or geographical information: they are a call to arms, appealing to the observer to support the propagation of the gospel. This makes missionary cartography a fascinating topic: maps contain a message. Old missionary maps carry with them the heavy load of the history of mission, the mixed heritage of imperialism, suppression and racism as well as education, development and medical care. Therefore, their historical significance is not limited to the expansion of Christianity, but also connects to the development of global relations and imperialism more general. The maps in this exhibition are a lens on Western attitudes with regard to the non-Western world.

[READ MORE ABOUT THE BACKGROUNDS OF THIS DIGITAL EXHIBITION](#)

The digital exhibition of missionary cartography is thematically arranged and has the following sections respectively:

- [World maps](#)
- [Colonial maps](#)
- [Exploration maps](#)
- [Atlas maps](#)
- [Educational maps](#)
- [Thematic maps](#)

World maps

'The Protestant missionary map of the world', 1846
A cartographic showpiece!

'De wereld', by T.M. Looman, 1850
The spread of protestantism

'Wereldkaart der christelijke zendingsposten', 1851
The global ambition of the missionary movement!

Figure 6. Home page of the digital exhibition of missionary maps.

The digital exhibition on missionary maps offers a selection of relevant cartographic documents in the field of Protestant mission. There are examples of the four formats in which missionary maps have been published, namely illustrations in books and magazines, folded maps in books and magazines, missionary atlases and wall maps.

The digital exhibition of missionary cartography is thematically arranged in the sections of world maps, colonial maps, exploration maps, atlas maps, educational maps, and thematic maps.

A showpiece is for instance *The Protestant missionary map of the world*, published in London in 1846 by Edward Gover (Figure 7).²⁴ In this map we can clearly see the distinctive use of colour on missionary world maps.

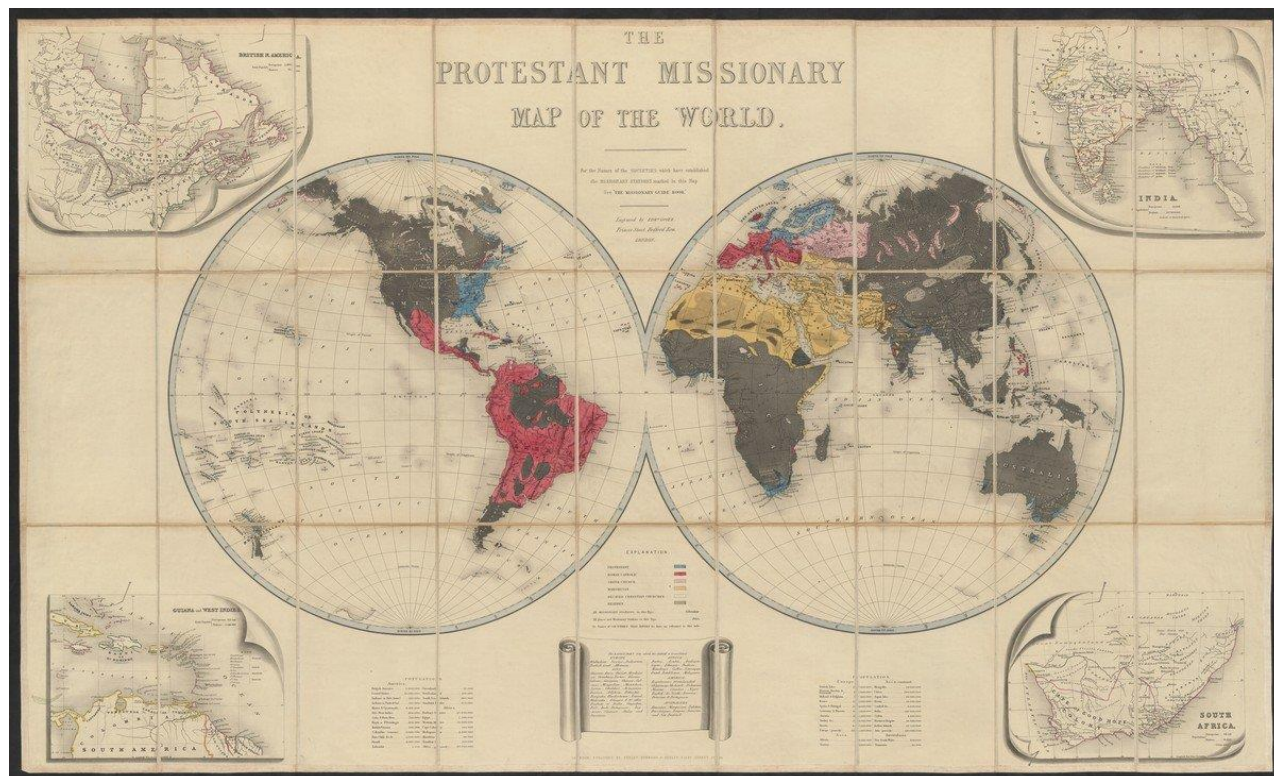


Figure 7. *The Protestant missionary map of the world*, published in London in 1846 by Edward Gover (Utrecht University Library, MAG: PKF 14).

Another, fine Dutch example is the map by Cornelis Elisa Koetsveld ((1807-93) from 1854 making it one of the first Dutch world mission maps (Figure 8).²⁵ It is an unusual projection, because the Pacific Ocean and not Europe is depicted in the centre. Again, the world religions are indicated by colours: yellow for Protestant, red for Catholic and orange for Orthodox. Blue refers to Islam and white to 'heathen' countries. Protestant missions are marked by Greek letters: α (American), β (Dutch), γ (French), δ (German) and ϵ (English); Catholic stations are indicated by \dagger and mission to Jews with the Hebrew character shin (ψ).

²⁴ Digital version: <https://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/viewer.php?obj=1874-401418&pagenum=3&lan=en>.

²⁵ URL: <https://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/viewer.php?obj=1874-385408&pagenum=9&lan=en>.

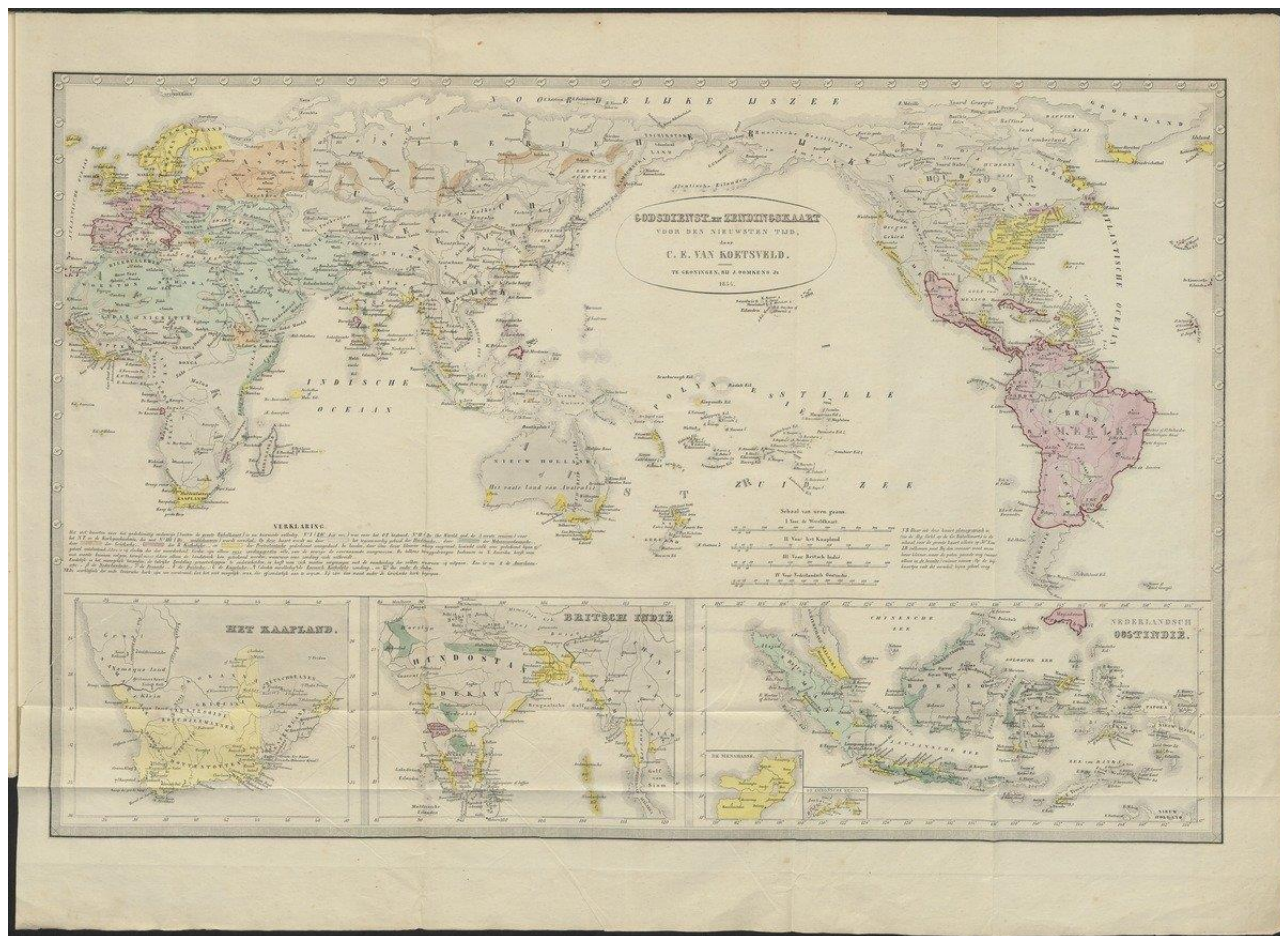


Figure 8. *Godsdienst en Zendingkaart voor de nieuwe tijd*, by C.E. van Koetsveld, 1854
(Utrecht University Library, Kaart: *VII*.A.116).

For the purpose of the digital exhibition, several missionary atlases have also been digitized. These include the previously mentioned atlas by Grundemann, the *Allgemeiner Missions-Atlas* from 1867-1871 (Figure 9).²⁶ Typical of Grundemann is the more scientific approach and precision of his maps. Where earlier maps, for example, only marked 'heathen' territory, Grundemann distinguishes eight variants of natural religions. A last, striking and scientific example is the *World Missionary Atlas*, published in 1925 in New York by the Institute of Social and Religious Research (Figure 10).²⁷ This atlas marks that the collecting of data on culture, geography or socio-economic aspects of local populations has played a major role in mission. As a result of the process of globalization, more and more knowledge was bundled and missionary cartography thus acquired a more statistical character. The generalization of cultural characteristics and the division of the world into heterogeneous blocks was often the result. These missionary maps of the geographical distributions of missions, ethnicity, and religion actually show the history of colonial expansion, Western influence, and exploitation in a nutshell.

²⁶ URL: <https://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/viewer.php?obj=1874-401843&pagenum=1&lan=en>.

²⁷ URL: <https://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/viewer.php?obj=1874-401779&pagenum=1&lan=en>.

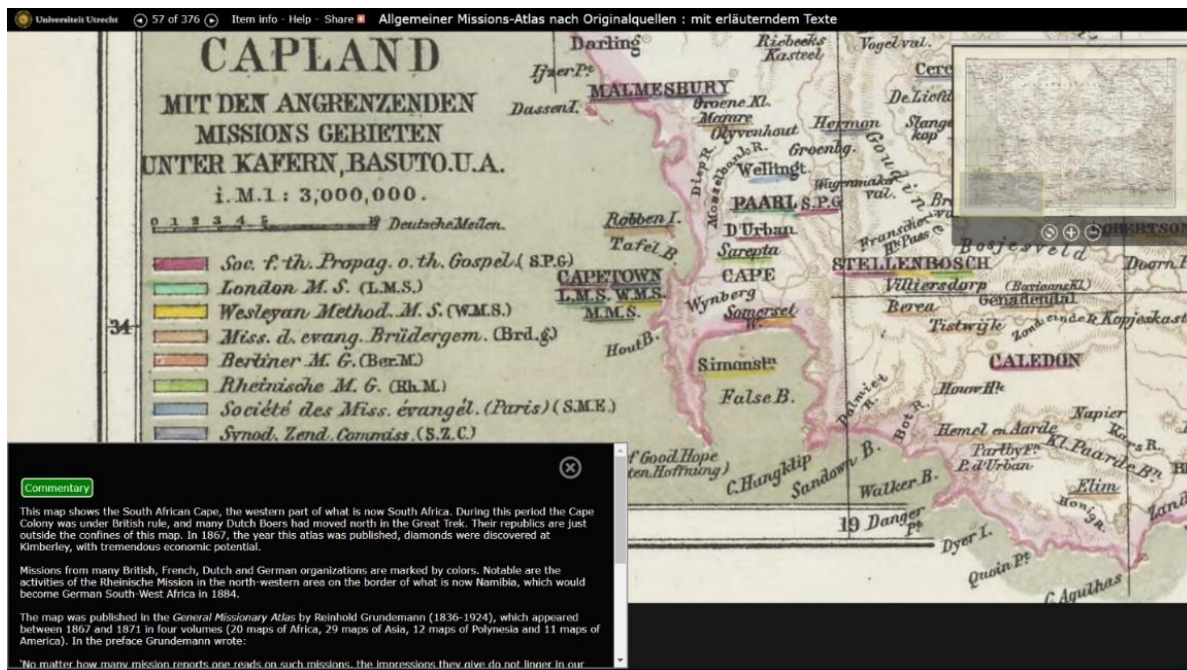


Figure 9. Detail of the missionary map of South Africa by R. Grundemann, *Allgemeiner Missions-Atlas*, 1867, shown in the viewer of the Utrecht Special Collections. Bottom left the explanatory text. (Utrecht University Library, MAG: T qu 376).

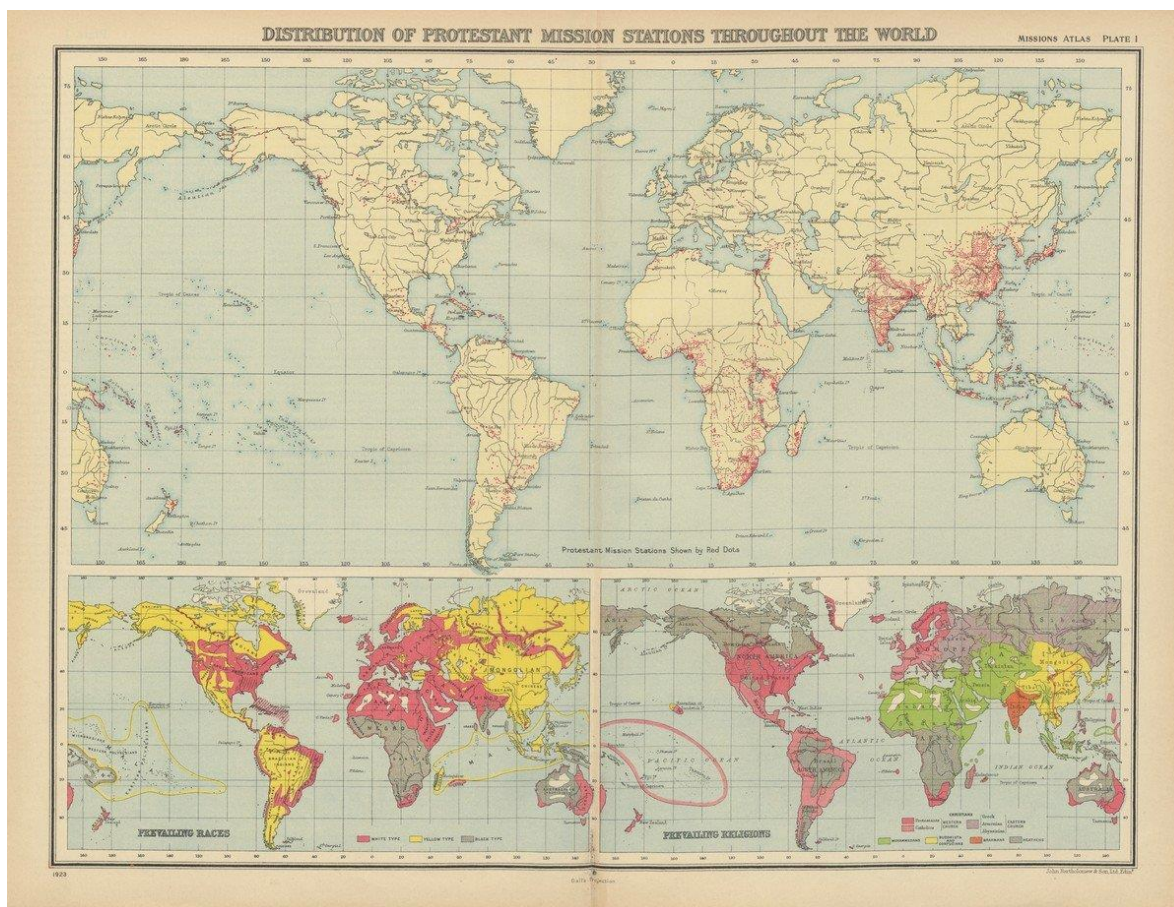


Figure 10. 'Distribution of protestant mission stations throughout the world', *World Missionary Atlas*, 1925 (Utrecht University Library, MAG: PKZ 1).

Future plans and epilogue

Besides creating scholarly attention for the phenomenon of missionary cartography, we hope that the digital exhibition will also lead to a broader inventory and presentation of this type of cartographic documents. Now the overview is still largely limited to the collection of the Utrecht University Library. In the future, the selection may be extended to the collections of other institutions. To this end, databases of relevant map and atlas material will be created and maintained. Based on these databases, a new digital exhibition or specific website may be set up in the future. Opportunities in this regard are strongly attributed to the IIIF protocol, an exchange manifest for digital images. This will allow researchers to work beyond the boundaries of local applications and viewers.

The Utrecht University Library now makes its digitized special collections available according to the IIIF manifest. This allows this material to be presented in IIIF viewers and, among others, compared with scanned documents from other institutions (Figure 11).

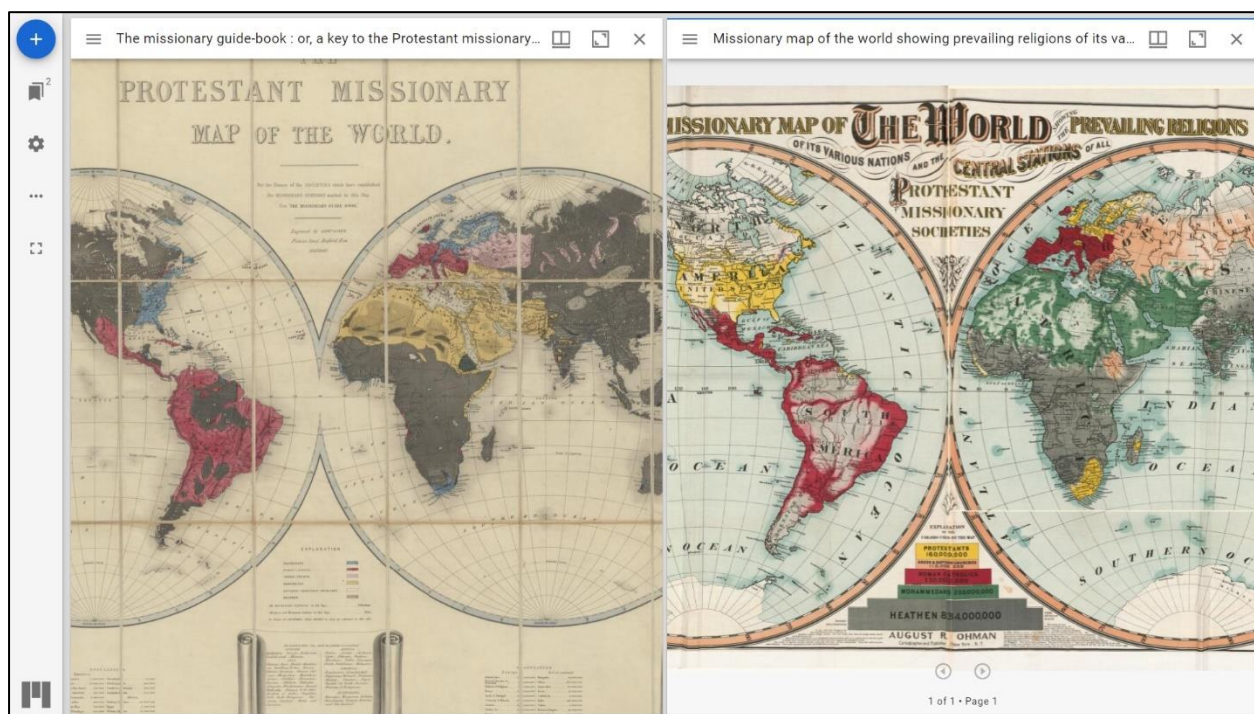


Figure 11. Two missionary world maps compared in a IIIF viewer (Mirador); left a missionary map owned by the Utrecht University Library (MAG: PKF 14) and right a missionary map from the collection of the Library of Congress, Washington (G3201.E424 1902 .O6).

Finally, let us now compare a current map of the spread of religion to the 400-years-old map by Hondius (Figure 1 again and Figure 12).

It is obvious that both maps belong to the chorochromatic type, however, the data on the youngest map are clearly better visualized using colours. If Hondius was still alive today, how would he value our current religious world view? Although unhappy with the advancing secularization in Europe, he would probably be moderately optimistic. After all, almost all of America and Australia, which was not yet

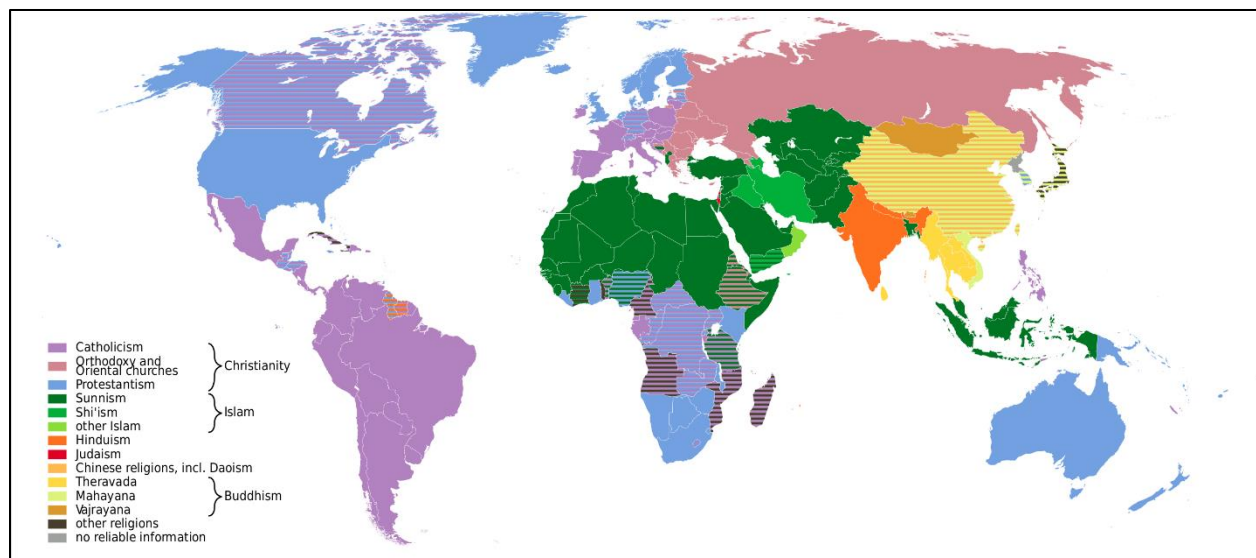


Figure 12. Current map of the world religions (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/en:GNU_Free_Documentation_License).

discovered in his days, are christianized (the areas in blue and pink). On the other hand, Christianity in Abyssinia or Ethiopia has lost considerable ground to Islam (green areas).

In our days, Hondius, probably to his great regret, would have had to show more modesty in putting the country on the map as a Christian nation. And there is no geopolitics that can change that!

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