

# On Imperialism

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In his last important book, Reinhold Niebuhr drew attention to the fact that city-states, not nations, constitute the core of empires.<sup>1</sup> Nation-states were later arrivals on the historical scene, usually as earlier empires disintegrated, leaving autonomous provinces and emancipated peoples in their wake. Now long established nation-states themselves are threatened with disintegration, as newer and smaller nationalisms prevail over older and larger nationalisms, almost to the point of forming new city-states. The number of sub-nations into which a nation like Yugoslavia (or Canada?) conceivably could split is as great as ethnic diversity, linguistic difference and historical consciousness are prepared to press their claims. Should this pattern continue, the stage would be set for the eventual rise of new empires through the consolidation of innumerable mini-states under the aegis of whichever one achieves dominance over its neighbours. Although Niebuhr believed in freedom as well as necessity, he did not regard the fate of particular nations and empires as pre-determined. While history never repeats itself exactly, it does repeat itself, and only a fool would ignore its lessons. Moreover, the rapid changes of the 1990s (which, unfortunately, Niebuhr is not alive to observe) lend credibility to his speculations.

It is a truism that successful empires flourish by virtue of powerful religious or quasi-religious ideologies as well as by force of arms. Conquest alone is never permanent, and purely military imperialisms rarely survive the first generation of conquerors. There must be an imperial idea, what Niebuhr described as “the conjunction of the imperial impulse with the religious and philosophical idea of the ideal community,” to bind the new political order together.<sup>2</sup> Stoic universalism played this role for pagan Rome after the collapse of the old gods and pantheons in the fourth century; this was followed by Christianity combined with Stoicism. Imperial ideas serve to justify the rule of the rulers, and, if the idea (or ideology, since ideologies are extended ideas) contains noble elements—as both Stoicism and Christianity obviously did—it also humanizes this rule. If the ideology lacks noble elements, as, for example, in the Nazi empire with its principles of race and *Lebensraum*, the result is unmitigated savagery. Empires,

consequently, are not merely bad; the great empires of history have been creative as well as destructive, humane as well as exploitive, good as well as bad. We are all their children, from whatever continent or culture or society we come.

Since ideas lay claim to truth, and since national and imperial ideas invariably weave themselves around stories and myths, and since story and myth is the stuff of religion, every imperial system, even self-styled anti-religious ones (like the now defunct Soviet empire with its Marxist-Leninist ideology), has a religious dimension. The conviction of a higher mission, whether to enlighten the barbarians by raising them from their moral and spiritual as well as social and cultural darkness, is the driving force of imperialism when conceived in religious terms. Christian empires have spoken of divine providence; other empires have substituted other themes—the Mandate of Heaven, in the case of imperial China—but all have couched their authority in some form of cosmic or universal language.

In modern times, when science rather than religion has been hallowed as the medium of truth,<sup>3</sup> this language has tended to assume a scientific or pseudo-scientific character, usually borrowing from the evolutionary categories in vogue during the late-nineteenth century. Thus, both the British and French imperialists could speak of the evolutionary *telos*, or the advancement of humanity from backwardness to progress, from barbarism to civilization, from ignorance to knowledge, from immorality to morality, from childhood to adulthood, from tyranny to democracy, from lawlessness to the rule of law, etc., which they of course identified with their respective empires. Evolution, in other words, was equated with providence, with or without God; it was possible to justify imperialism either way but the scientific imperialists, no less than the religious imperialists, drew on myths as well as science to depict their imperial visions.

Moreover, these myths were racial. All imperialism, whether ancient or modern, occidental or oriental, rests on feelings of superiority. The ideologies of race, however, is an invention of the West; although its antecedents are older, it acquired its distinctive form during the latter half of the last century, when the Aryan myth, the great race myth of the white Europeans, became popular and widespread. This myth of "noble origin," to cite Mircea Eliade, was secular in its composition, being a compound of the new life sciences of the age, and religious in its meaning. It was a tale of good and evil, and of their perennial conflict. It was a tale of creation—the sacred time of the beginning—and a tale of redemption. The

Aryan was really an Adamic figure, the embodiment of essential humanity, a type of noble savage as well as the founder of true civilization, the primordial ancestor of the modern white race from whom the tired and devitalized children of modernity must gather strength and inspiration in order to renew themselves: the "exemplary model that must be imitated."<sup>4</sup>

Many writers, especially in Britain, Germany, France and America, fell in love with the Aryan ideal.<sup>5</sup> Attaching itself to older national and racial myths in these countries, it became the spiritual centre of much of the imperialism of the nineteenth century, sometimes in a blatant, and sometimes in a subtle, guise. If one believed in evolution (as almost everyone did), such doctrines as the survival of the fittest could be employed to explain and warrant the sway of the "Aryans" over the dark-skinned peoples of the earth—in other words, imperialism. Political liberalism was no barrier. The British philosopher Herbert Spencer told the Americans, as their armies were engaged in destroying the Indian confederacies of the western plains, that they were the best Aryans, and would, for this reason, breed in the course of time "a finer type of man than has hitherto existed."<sup>6</sup> During the same era, an entire school of French anthropologists, "all radical republican, anticlerical, evolutionary materialists," incorporated their own political values into the evolutionary scheme of things, while claiming that only the more highly developed white race could bring them to fruition.<sup>7</sup> They meant, of course, the French empire.

Republicanism was closely, although not exclusively, associated with the Anglo-Saxon variant of the Aryan myth, which flourished in both Britain and the United States (and, incidentally, Canada) within living memory. Since the seventeenth century, political liberty had been identified with the Saxon or Germanic origins of the English nation; in English legend, the Saxon chieftains Hengist and Horsa carried the sacred torch of freedom—the rough democracy of the Rhineland tribes who elected their kings—from Germany to England after the withdrawal of the Roman legions. Puritan sectarians such as Gerrard Winstanley inscribed this view in non-conformist history with their idealization of pre-Norman (Saxon) England, and their interpretation of the civil war as both a class war and a race war between a Norman monarchy and a Saxon populace.<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth century, a disgruntled Scot, Robert Knox, racialized the legend further by describing the Saxons as "nature's democrats," and by glorifying "Saxon" rebellion in America (the American revolution) and Upper Canada (the Mackenzie rebellion of 1837) against the "Norman" dynasty in Britain

with its "sham constitution."<sup>9</sup> Another English republican, Charles Wentworth Dilke, coined the term "Saxondom" (later amended to Anglo-Saxondom) and wrote in glowing terms of the impending dominance of the Saxon (i.e., English-speaking) nations over the "cheaper peoples" of the earth: according to Dilke, Saxon liberty and Saxon political institutions (on the American, not the English, model) soon will arise everywhere.<sup>10</sup> In the United States, much ink was spilled in paeans to the Anglo-Saxon racial genius and its culmination in American republicanism. Evolution, moreover, was employed to embellish these themes. If the Anglo-Saxons are producing superior political institutions, they must be evolving at a faster rate than the other races, which have either completed their evolutionary course or are hopelessly behind in the cosmic contest. In this manner, the advance of Anglo-Saxondom was equated with the advance of humanity as a whole, creating a powerful rationale for American expansionism as well as (non-republican) British imperialism, although neither "manifest destiny" nor the "white man's burden" were unaccompanied by passionate idealism, including, especially in the case of Great Britain, a genuine concern for the conquered races.

The religious dimension in American expansionism emerged strikingly in the social gospel movement in American Protestantism. Josiah Strong, one of its leading figures, and a man of liberal convictions, nevertheless was infected with the "burgeoning pride in Anglo-Saxondom" that swept post-bellum America.<sup>11</sup> Since liberal Christianity was liberal by virtue of its receptivity to philosophy and science, it exposed itself to the racial aspects of contemporary evolutionary thought, particularly the "synthetic philosophy" of Herbert Spencer. As a result, Strong, and to a lesser extent the other exponents of social Christianity in America, adopted the notion that the Anglo-Saxons were the mostly highly evolved race, which they Christianized by relating evolution to divine providence. Only the "fire of liberty burning in the Saxon heart," according to Strong, could have ignited the Protestant Reformation (Luther, of course was a Saxon). America, and not Britain, was the land of hope and glory because the American type of Anglo-Saxon man possessed a "finer nervous organization," and the finer nervous organization always produces the higher civilization.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, God had prepared the American Anglo-Saxons for a glorious destiny by carefully directing their racial evolution, moulding together in American humanity the best characteristics of earlier races, including Greek individualism, Roman organization and Hebrew spiritual-

ity.<sup>13</sup> Like “a ring of Saturn—a girdle of light—around the globe,” this new species will inaugurate a new age in world history: “a single supreme civilization . . . the perfection of which will be the Kingdom fully come.”<sup>14</sup>

The pathos of these sentiments, when resuscitated a century later, can scarcely be magnified. Not only were Strong’s expectations utterly false, but their racial and religious trappings were also utterly at variance with the universalism and cosmopolitanism that informed the great empires of antiquity, and even the Christian Middle Ages. As a spiritual descendent of the Hebrew prophets, the modern apostle of the social gospel should have recognized the dangers of idolatry in this apotheosis of his own country and countrymen. What else can describe a writer for whom “to be a Christian and an Anglo-Saxon and an American” was to “stand on the very mountaintop of privilege”?<sup>15</sup> Intoxicated by the rarefied air of this mountaintop, Strong sanctified a charter for conquest: “what if it should be God’s plan to people the world with better and finer material?”<sup>16</sup> That such a vision could command great popularity during the ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon nations—the anticipated Pax Anglo-Americana—is not surprising; that it could co-exist with a profound commitment to the principles of biblical Christianity, conceived in terms of God’s kingdom of love and brotherhood, is still surprising, long after Short’s death. But ideologies are ideologies because they blind the eyes.

The Aryan myth perished effectively with the German Third Reich, and only extremist organizations—the so-called Church of the Aryan Nations, for example—dare to invoke the language of Aryan superiority in the post-Holocaust world (although the contemporary neo-Nazi threat in Germany and elsewhere should not be minimized). Its Anglo-Saxon variant, and the evolutionary frame in which the Anglo-Saxon visionaries arranged their ideas, lingered longer, partly because of American hegemony in the latter half of the twentieth century. But failed dreams and vanished empires have sounded its death knell, as well as the resurgence of the supposedly backward peoples condemned to evolutionary oblivion by previous generations of North Americans and Europeans. History is full of irony, and the pride of old imperial nations has turned to dust.

The dissolution of the great empires of the nineteenth century, however, and the gradual decline of that non-imperial imperial power, the United States of America, does not mean that the imperial impulse has disappeared from the earth (despite the proud boast of the American

imperial ideas cannot be born. Imperialism, as Niebuhr pointed out, need not mean territorial aggrandizement; it can take the more benign form of cultural (especially economic) strength impinging on cultural weakness.<sup>17</sup> Canada, as Canadians frequently lament, is in this sense a victim of American imperialism (one remembers George Grant's classic *Lament for a Nation* [1965]). A new Japanese imperialism arising out of post-imperial Japan, of which the United States and even Europe may become victims, threatens to rout its rivals in the current economic wars. What other imperial configurations, either cultural or political, await the post-modern world in the next century cannot be predicted, but the maps of today almost certainly will not be the maps of tomorrow. The age of empire has not ended; it may never end.

### Notes

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires: A Study of the Recurring Patterns and Problems of the Political Order in Relation to the Unique Problems of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 69.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
3. "Myth," as Paul Tillich wrote, "is believable on autonomous soil only in scientific guise" (see *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman [New York: Harper & Row, 1977]), p. 41.
4. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 183.
5. See Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London: Sussex University Press, 1974).
6. Herbert Spencer, "The Americans," in *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, 3 vols (New York: Appleton, 1892) 3: 480.

7. Michael Hammond, "Anthropology as a Weapon of Social Combat in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 16 (1980): 126.
8. Gerrard Winstanley, *The True Leveller's Standard Advanced* (1649).
9. Robert Knox, *The Races of Men* (London: Renshaw, 1862), p. 11.
10. Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Greater Britain* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1869), p. 348.
11. See H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972), p. 262.
12. Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1885), pp. 160, 168.
13. Josiah Strong, *The New Era: or, The Coming Kingdom* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1893), pp. 69-70.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 354.
16. Strong, *Our Country*, p. 177.
17. Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, p. 66.