

Dismantling the DOCTRINE of Discovery

Q: What is the “Doctrine of Discovery?”

The “Doctrine of Discovery” is a philosophical and legal framework dating to the 15th century that gave Christian governments moral and legal rights to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous Peoples. The patterns of oppression that continue to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their lands today are found in numerous historical documents such as Papal Bulls, Royal Charters and U.S. Supreme Court rulings as recent as 2005. Collectively, these and other concepts form a paradigm of domination that legitimates extractive industries that displace and destroy many Indigenous Peoples and other vulnerable communities, as well as harm the earth.

The Doctrine of Discovery can be seen as a “power and principality” based on the following ideas that grew out of Christendom:

THEOLOGIES OF ENTITLEMENT

Three main scriptural texts undergird the Doctrine of Discovery: The Great Commission “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”—Matthew 28:19-20, the divine mandate to submit to government rule “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”—Romans 13: 1, and the narrative of a covenantal people justified in taking possession of land as described in the Exodus story. Manifest Destiny in the U.S. grew out of the latter.

JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

Christendom empowered European governments to use coercion and violence, including genocide and enslavement. The theologies of entitlement legitimized their conquest of both people and land.

TERRA NULLIUS

(empty land) Terra Nullius is the theological and legal doctrine that “discovered” lands were devoid of humans if the original people who lived there, defined as “heathens, pagans and infidels,” were not ruled by a Christian prince.

Q: What have been the results of the Doctrine of Discovery?

These three “E’s” summarize the destructive results of the Doctrine of Discovery

ENSLAVEMENT

Because the Doctrine did not consider Indigenous Peoples to be human if they weren’t Christian, conquering nations were allowed to make slaves of the people they encountered. For example the 1452 Papal Bull *Dum Diversas* says that Christian sovereigns are empowered by the Church to “invade, capture, vanquish and subdue... all Saracens (Muslims) and Pagans and all enemies of Christ... to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery... and to take away all of their possessions and property.”

EXTRACTION

In many places around the world, the Doctrine of Discovery has legitimated mining, fracking, logging, water theft, plantation agriculture, and other extractive industries that take resources from Indigenous communities to benefit the wealth of those descended from Europeans and colonial or post-colonial nations.

EXTINCTION

Before Europeans came to North America, there were as many as 18 million Indigenous Peoples living on the continent. By the end of the 19th century, they numbered fewer than 250,000. Millions of people died because they did not have natural immunity to European diseases, nor could they resist the technologies of war the Europeans used to overpower and decimate native populations. So when European settlers arrived on the scene the country often appeared to be nearly empty or devoid of significant human activity.

Q: What does The Doctrine of Discovery have to do with us today?

The painful truth is that 500+ years of international policies that unfairly took advantage of Indigenous Peoples continue to give advantage to us (North Americans, Christian, or those of European descent). This situation extends to other continents as well.

In the country of Suriname (South America), gold mining companies given access to Indigenous land have poisoned the watersheds with mercury, threatening the lives of all beings dependent on water for survival—from fish to human communities.

Currently, the U.S. senate is considering a land swap in Arizona that trades reservation land sacred to the Apache Indians for copper mining interests owned by an Australian company.

Fracking for oil and natural gas and the threat of tar sands oil pipelines on or near Native land holdings threaten groundwater in North Dakota.

The list is long and continues to grow.

Here are some questions to explore how our lives today may be connected to the legacies of the Doctrine of Discovery: enslavement, extraction and extinction:

1. Do you know how the land where you live was originally acquired?
2. Can you trace the gems or precious metal in the jewelry you wear?
3. Do you know where the rare metals used to produce your smart phone, iPad, or laptop come from?
4. Where does the water bottled in the drinks you buy come from?
5. Do you eat foods or use products made with palm oil?
6. Do you think about using alternatives to driving or consider using mass transit if it's available?
Petroleum extraction continues to displace Indigenous Peoples in many parts of the world.

Bibliography and suggested resources:

Websites:

- Interview with Sarah Augustine, from Seattle Mennonite Church: http://www.breathingforgiveness.net/2023/03/anti-slavery-campaign-interview:series_28.html
- "Five Hundred Years of Injustice: The Legacy of Fifteenth Century Religious Prejudice." by Steve Newcomb, Indigenous Law Institute: http://li.nativeweb.org/sdrm_art.html
- UN Preliminary Study on the Doctrin of Discovery: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E.C.19.2010.13%20EN.pdf>

Video clips

- Chief Oren Lyons (15 min.): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVZDbqh7WgM>
- Steve Newcomb at Parliament of the World's Religions '09 conference on the Christian Doctrine of Discovery Panel (7 min.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bl9NAAIfock>

Books

- Vine Deloria, Jr. "Conquest Masquerading as Law," in *Unlearning the Language of Conquest*, (Texas University Press, 2006)
- Robert J. Miller, Esq., *Native America, Discovered and Conquered, Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark and Manifest Destiny* (Bison Books, 2008)
- Steven T. Newcomb; *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Fulcrum, 2008)
- Blake Watson, *Buying America from the Indians: Johnson v. McIntosh and the History of Native Land Rights* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012)



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