

# The Christian Doctrine of Discovery

By Dan Whitemore, *Denver, Colorado, USA*

For centuries, indigenous peoples around the world have suffered the disastrous impact of European colonization. As a Christian, descended from Europeans, I am remorseful and repentant because I am complicit in this problem. Undoubtedly some of my ancestors helped create the situation that has resulted in discrimination and prejudicial and derogatory concepts of the original inhabitants.

Broken contracts, ignorance of native culture and spirituality, and illegitimate appropriation of lands have contributed to poverty and psychological damage that persist. We are challenged to examine the root causes and make corrections.

The centuries-old Christian Doctrine of Discovery, if repudiated, could initiate justice for all indigenous people. The Doctrine of Discovery is the premise that European Christian explorers who “discovered” other lands had the authority to claim those lands and subdue, even enslave, peoples simply because they were not Christian. This concept has become embedded in the legal policies of countries throughout the world. This is an issue of greed, oppression, colonialism, and racism.

The doctrine’s origins can be traced to Pope Nicholas V, who issued the papal bull<sup>1</sup> *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455 CE. The bull allowed Portugal to claim and conquer lands in West Africa. After Christopher Columbus began conquering newly “found” lands in the Americas, Pope Alexander VI granted to Spain the right to claim these lands with the papal bull, *Inter caetera*, issued in 1493.

The Treaty of Tordesillas settled competition between Spain and Portugal. It established two principles: 1) that only non-Christian lands could be taken, and 2) that potential discoveries would be allocated between Portugal and Spain by drawing a line of demarcation.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a concept of public international law expounded by the US Supreme Court in a series of decisions, most notably *Johnson v. M’Intosh* in 1823. Chief Justice John Marshall justified the way colonial powers claimed lands belonging to sovereign indigenous nations during the Age of Discovery. Under this ruling, title to lands lay with the government whose subjects explored and occupied a territory where inhabitants were not subjects of a European Christian monarch.

The doctrine primarily has been used to support decisions invalidating or ignoring aboriginal possession of land in favor of colonial or post-colonial governments. The 1823 case resulted from collusive lawsuits in which land speculators made claims to achieve a desired result. John Marshall explained the court’s decision, based in part, on the supposedly inferior character of native cultures.

---

<sup>1</sup> A papal bull is a specific document by a pope of the Catholic Church. It is named for the lead seal (*bullae*) used to authenticate the pope’s edict.

In the USA, for example, this doctrine was used to justify the Mexican-American War, the War of 1812, the Indian Removal Act, the American Indian reservation system, the Indian residential schools, and federal control preventing tribes from owning their own lands. Effects continue today in the poverty and degradation suffered by indigenous people, the deplorable conditions found on many reservations, and federal policy that frequently preempts Indian sovereignty. In the USA, the poorest counties invariably include communities on reservations.

Many in dominant cultures deny the far-reaching effects of racism against indigenous people today. It seems we want to forget what our ancestors did, though their actions privileged many of us today in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific. We don't want to feel guilty. Many believe we are *not responsible*, as it wasn't *us* drafting racist and genocidal laws calling for the relocation and often murder of an entire race. It wasn't *us* sending thousands of First Nations children to residential schools, where they were subject to many abuses. A substantial number of the children died while attending these boarding schools, with some estimates as high as 25 percent in the USA.

Many individuals find themselves emotionally detached from the historical record of severe injustices that continue to be inflicted upon indigenous people. The ethical reflection is lost when history is taken as an accomplished, untouchable, and unquestionable fact. This Doctrine of Discovery is the elephant in our midst for those of us with European ancestry living in colonized lands. We know it is there but don't feel impelled to correct the situation. History from the viewpoint of those who colonized—without understanding, analysis, and emotion—becomes distorted, oppressive, and inhumane.

We cannot forget that for many, privileged lives are built on the foundation of these human-rights abuses. Everyone in the dominant society personally benefits in Australia, New Zealand and the Americas from the inhumane treatment of indigenous people. We live on stolen land. We have the best portions of the land and its natural resources. The federal government in the USA continues to exploit its position of trust over Indian lands by granting corporations the right to use, restrict, and destroy indigenous property and sacred sites.

Several organizations have approved resolutions to address the critical issues the Doctrine of Discovery has caused. They include the World Council of Churches, the Catholic Sisters of Loretto Community, Episcopal Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association, various groups of the Friends (Quakers), the United Church of Christ (Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries), Rocky Mountain USA Mission Center (Community of Christ), and the Colorado Council of Churches.

Rejecting and repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery is to look forward to a time when generations of indigenous people will have improved self-image with self-empowerment. This examination of the history of injustice will help bring healing, forgiveness, and hope for current and future generations.

All Christians are called to action. We all can do something, such as:

- Learn how the Doctrine of Discovery affects all indigenous people throughout the world.

- Recognize the doctrine’s impact in news stories concerning indigenous people.
- If one has European ancestry, examine one’s possible “colonial mindset” and that of your society.
- Recognize indigenous people in local communities and learn their history.
- Support them by advocating for national and international issues and for local educational programs.
- Visit Indigenous Peoples cultural centers and attend open events, such as art exhibits, powwows, celebrations, and performances.
- Reject the Doctrine of Discovery and its rationale.

The goal is to participate in restorative justice. The first step is to gain understanding, followed by some kind of repentance. Then one can be prepared for forgiveness and reconciliation. Upon opening a Chinese fortune cookie, I found the words, “forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.” I look to the time when more indigenous people have a healthy assessment of their self-worth. It will take time. Problems and issues that evolved over 500 years cannot be resolved within one generation. Plan steps that can make positive change for generations to come. Together in Community of Christ we can do something by making a beginning in becoming more aware!

## Further Resources

### Online Articles

- “Discovery Doctrine,” [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery\\_doctrine](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine)
- “By the Authority of Almighty God,” [http://fcnl.org/resources/newsletter/nov15/by\\_the\\_authority\\_of\\_almighty\\_god](http://fcnl.org/resources/newsletter/nov15/by_the_authority_of_almighty_god), Steve Newcomb, “Five Hundred Years of Injustice: The Legacy of Fifteenth Century Religious Prejudice” [http://ili.nativeweb.org/sdrm\\_art.html](http://ili.nativeweb.org/sdrm_art.html)
- Sarah Augustine, “The Doctrine of Discovery,” <https://mcc.org/stories/doctrine-discovery>

### Books

Robert J. Miller, Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt, and Tracey Lindberg, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2008)

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States (ReVisioning American History)*, paperback, August 11, 2015 (Beacon Press: Boston 2014)

### Documentary DVD

*The Doctrine Of Discovery—Unmasking The Domination Code*, [www.38plus2productions.com](http://www.38plus2productions.com)