

## THE HAUDENOSAUNEE (IROQUOIS) GREAT BINDING PEACE

*Philip P. Arnold and Sandra L. Bigtree*



**W**hat kind of worldview or religious orientation does it take to make an entire planet uninhabitable? While many think it is our dependence on fossil fuels and the population explosion that has brought us to this point of human destruction, our contention is that these problems have religious foundations which were created and continue to be used by empires as a means to hold dominion over people and the Earth. Opposition to this path of self-destruction is something Indigenous Peoples have been trying to communicate since first contact, to not jeopardize their traditions of regenerative reciprocity which had thrived for tens of thousands of years.

We are very fortunate to live in the lands of the Onondaga Nation. Against all odds, they have retained their precolonial matrilineal clan-based form of democracy, which since its inception at Onondaga Lake, has operated for thousands of years, continuing through today under the Great Binding Peace.<sup>1</sup> It is with the Onondaga Nation's perseverance in keeping these traditions alive, and having upheld their position as Firekeepers (the Central Fire or capital) of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy over several centuries, that we are now able to collaborate at the site where the Great Binding Peace was founded, and share these ancient protocols. We hope to reverse the destructive path on which we currently find ourselves. In 2012, our collaborative efforts helped create the

---

<sup>1</sup> Although this is most often referred to as "The Great Law of Peace," recent reflections on this English translation have made several to reconsider the use of the word "law" because historically that has been used to regulate behavior. "Binding" imparts a better sense of the reciprocal inclusivity of this Indigenous protocol of democracy with the natural world.

Skä·noñh - Great Law of Peace Center.<sup>2</sup> This educational center is located on Onondaga Lake near present day Syracuse, New York, and tells the story of the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Skä·noñh means ‘peace,’ but as Tadodaho Sid Hill more profoundly explains, peace can only be obtained when human beings are in proper relationship with the natural world—inclusive of human and non-human beings.

The Creator’s original instructions were delivered by the Peacemaker and presented to Jikonhsaseh who, with the help of forest beings, established the matrilineal clan system; Hiawatha, who through the process of condoled grief, regained his clear mind; and Tadodaho, the most wicked of all, was persuaded by five united nations to accept the peace—his title<sup>3</sup> would come to represent and oversee all beings. This established the Great Binding Peace. The Onondaga Nation is the capital, or “Central Fire,” of what is now a six-nation confederacy (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora, and Seneca) and where the Grand Council meets. Matrilineal clans are overseen by titled clan-mothers who determine which male will best represent their clan family. These titles are non-hierarchical and come with a lifetime assignment, unless the Clan Mother determines the clan is threatened. The men and women are called “loyani,” which loosely translates to those of the “good mind.” The Haudenosaunee inherit the clan of their mother, and this establishes their matrilineal clan relationship with the natural world.

The Great Binding Peace, representative of this ancient Longhouse tradition, has survived through the incursions of European and American colonial assaults on their identity, land, and culture, with Christianity used as justification. Of the 574 Native American “tribal nations” currently recognized by the US federal government, there are only a handful that still govern themselves independent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).<sup>4</sup> Of these few nations outside the BIA, three are from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy—Onondaga, Tuscarora, and Tonawanda Seneca. They have retained their precolonial sovereign status and still abide by the Great Binding Peace, or “Longhouse” tradition of clan representation with the natural world. Today, Longhouse Clan title holders travel

---

<sup>2</sup> See Philip Arnold, *The Urgency of Indigenous Values* (Syracuse University Press, 2023) for an in-depth look at the ways that we formed the collaborative Two Row Wampum method in the development of the Skä·noñh - Great Law of Peace Center.

<sup>3</sup> [“Tadodaho”] has come to refer to the chief who chairs the council of Onondaga. Wikipedia contributors, "Tadodaho," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tadodaho&oldid=1253505340>

<sup>4</sup> This was a tactic of the United States to use Christian Indians who had gone through the forced assimilation of the boarding school system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to create puppet governments of the United States so Indian lands and resources could be better managed based on colonial standards.

internationally on their own passports. They are as deeply committed today, as they have been for millennia to Skä·noñh—a peace established through building proper relationships with each other and the natural world.



Photo by William Alexander Drennan, Iroquois, 1914, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Historically, Haudenosaunee male and female clan “loyani” interacted regularly with colonists, including meetings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Albany, New York. They instructed early British colonists who later became the Founding Fathers of US democracy in diplomacy around the Great Binding Peace.<sup>5</sup> They exchanged wampum belts of peace to help illustrate the inherent equity that exists between human beings and their non-human relatives. The Founding Fathers were unable to fully comprehend these teachings, and they took whatever could be applied to ensure that patriarchal interests were not diminished in controlling the land and its inhabitants. Most obviously overlooked in considering peace was the centrality of women and that Skä·noñh requires proper relationships with the natural world.

The Founding Fathers came to this country with deeply imbedded British colonial ideologies that emanated from 15<sup>th</sup> century Papal Bulls called the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. These dogmas set Christian superiority above all Indigenous traditions with labels like “barbarians,” “savages,” “Saracens,” “pagans,” and “enemies of Christ.” The Vatican distributed these directives to Christian kingdoms like Portugal and Spain to explore and to seize all lands, bodies, and worldly goods of Indigenous peoples around the world with the purpose of establishing Christendom—thus, continuing the Crusades to reconquer the Holy Land.

Cultures and lands were devastated by Christian raiders looking for gold and silver to fund these exploits. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the emphasis was on colonialism and the commodification of crops like tobacco, sugar, tea, coffee, and so on. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Doctrine of Christian Discovery was brought into US

---

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Johansen. 1998. *Debating Democracy*; José Barreiro, ed. 1992. *Indian Roots of American Democracy*. The role of the Haudenosaunee in the development of Western Democracy has been formally acknowledged by Congress H.Con.Res.331 — 100th Congress (1987-1988).

property law through the Supreme Court.<sup>6</sup> The Christian doctrine of domination has been consistently behind the devastation of Indigenous peoples and their lands. It undergirds our current existential crisis by disrupting our relationship with the natural world and it has led to our current spiritual malaise.<sup>7</sup>

The Haudenosaunee, along with all other Indigenous peoples, have warned settler-colonial people about their values which are leading to our own destruction. As Onondaga Nation Faithkeeper, Oren Lyons says, the Earth is not dying. It will be fine without human beings and will recover very quickly without us. We are actually working on our own destruction by making Mother Earth uninhabitable.

In consultation with the Onondaga Nation leadership the Skä·noñh - Great Law of Peace Center was created to impart the values of the Great Binding Peace. It is important that our visitors learn this essential protocol of peace, but we feel it equally important to address the problems that came with the early colonial invasion into these lands, with the intention to destroy this way to peace. This message is not a new one. It has been repeatedly discussed with the Founding Fathers and their successors. Now it is time for human beings to rededicate ourselves to hearing the message of the Peacemaker and embrace the fact that peace cannot be attained without being in proper relationship with all living beings (human and otherwise) in this regenerative world. Our survival depends on it.

In 1991, “Value Change for Survival” was the phrase that summarized the work of the United Nations’ Global Forum of Spiritual Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival. The Indigenous Peoples were represented by Oren Lyons and his message amplified the Great Binding Peace. Healing the rift between human beings and the natural world will only occur with a religious recalibration that will orient us towards the myriad life upon which humankind depends. We suggest the model of the Great Binding Peace would be a good place to start.

---

<sup>6</sup> US Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* 21 U.S. 543 (1823).

<sup>7</sup> See Bigtree, S. and Arnold, P., “Forming a ‘More Perfect Union’ through Indigenous Values.” *Orion Magazine*, August 12, 2020, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/forming-a-more-perfect-union-through-indigenous-values/>.