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# Unsettling Truths

THE ONGOING,  
DEHUMANIZING  
LEGACY OF THE  
DOCTRINE OF  
DISCOVERY



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Doctrine of Discovery and Why It Matters



“YOU CANNOT DISCOVER lands already inhabited.”

I (Mark) said this almost under my breath, as I walked past a line of men dressed as Spanish sailors from the 1490s. I was in front of Union Station in Washington, DC, near the massive statue of Christopher Columbus overlooking the United States Capitol. Every Columbus Day, there is an official ceremony in this plaza honoring Columbus as the discoverer of America. I had stumbled upon this ceremony by accident the year prior. There were a few non-natives holding signs and protesting the ceremony but nothing very disruptive. I came back the following year primarily out of curiosity. I was not intending to protest, nor did I want to make a scene.

As I walked up behind the statue and approached the group of men dressed as Spanish sailors, the words just came out of my mouth: “You cannot discover lands already inhabited.” As I walked farther down the line, I said it again, this time a little louder. “You cannot discover lands already inhabited.” As I continued walking, I came to the front

of the line, where a group of men dressed in suits were standing. I repeated myself, making sure they could hear me. “You cannot discover lands already inhabited.” “Suck it up” was the reply I heard as I kept walking.

By this time, I had walked around the statue and reached the front, where a small stage had been erected and chairs set up for people to watch the ceremony. It hadn’t started yet, but more than half the audience was seated, waiting for it to begin. So I stopped near the center, turned toward the gathering crowd, and in a calm but loud voice I said to the people: “You cannot discover lands already inhabited. That process is known as stealing, conquering, or colonizing. The fact that America calls what Columbus did ‘discovery’ reveals the implicit racial bias of the country—that Native Americans are not fully human.”

Quickly one of the white men dressed in a suit walked over and interrupted me. “You are not welcome here,” he said as he grabbed my arm and began walking me away. I attempted to explain the inappropriateness of both celebrating this holiday as well as hosting this ceremony. But instead of engaging in conversation, he threatened me with arrest and escorted me from the area. As I walked away from the gathering, I was amused at his words and at the irony of their context: a white man, participating in a public ceremony honoring Christopher Columbus as the discoverer of America, telling a Native man he was not welcome in that space.

### WHAT IS THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY?

How did a flawed assumption about the place of the indigenous population in US society become normative? How are assumptions so deeply ingrained in the American psyche and imagination that dysfunctional and oppressive actions emerge? How did a dysfunctional idea and worldview form that allows for the displacement of Native

bodies? One of the explanations for the formation of this dysfunctional worldview is the Doctrine of Discovery.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a set of legal principles that governed the European colonizing powers, particularly regarding the administration of indigenous land. It is the “primary legal precedent that still controls native affairs and rights . . . an international law formulated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”<sup>1</sup> From a theological perspective, the legal and political role of the Doctrine of Discovery is rooted in a dysfunctional theological imagination that shaped the European colonial settler worldview.

The doctrine emerged from a series of fifteenth-century papal bulls, which are official decrees by the pope that carry the full weight of his ecclesial office. On June 18, 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull *Dum Diversas*, which initiated the first set of documents that would compose the Doctrine of Discovery. The official decree of the pope granted permission to King Alfonso V of Portugal “to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery (emphasis ours), and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.”<sup>2</sup>

*Dum Diversas* would identify Saracens (a common term for Muslims at the time) and pagans (essentially identifying any non-Christian or “others”) as those who could be targeted for “perpetual slavery.” The papal bull intentionally used language that identified those outside the European Christian world and enforced the Western theological imagination of non-Europeans as “other.” The Portuguese took these ecclesial statements to heart and perpetrated

the slave trade from the African continent to the European and the American continents. As a Christian ruler, the king of Portugal would have power endowed from the church to take possession of “the other” as slave labor from the continent of Africa. The pagan African body was just another commodity to be taken for the pleasure and profit of the European Christian body, the one made most fully in the image of God.

In January of 1454, Pope Nicholas V authored the bull *Romanus Pontifex*, also directed towards the kingdom of Portugal. Written as a logical sequel to *Dum Diversas*, *Romanus Pontifex* allowed the European Catholic nations to expand their dominion over “discovered” land. Possession of non-Christian lands would be justified along with the enslavement of native, non-Christian “pagans” in Africa and the “New” World. The church believed that Alfonso “justly and lawfully has acquired and possessed, and doth possess, these islands, lands, harbors, and seas, and they do of right belong and pertain to the said King Alfonso and his successors.”<sup>3</sup> The abusive system of transcontinental slavery initiated by Portugal would be seen as just and lawful.

The church claimed that what benefited the European colonial powers would benefit the church. The warped Western social imagination that saw slavery as a just and legal institution would be rooted in the dysfunctional assertions of this papal bull. The Doctrine of Discovery deemed as just and lawful what benefited the European powers, affirming the privilege of the “pure” European Christian to determine what is right and just. Because the pure European body held an inherent spiritual worth, the actions of European Christians would be deemed just. King Alfonso as the true image bearer of God held the right to discover the land and to pass along the rights to the land to his children and to his people. Alfonso would operate as an agent of God, while the conquered and enslaved people would have no agency before God. The Doctrine of Discovery created the

possibility of significant harm upon those outside the privileged position of the pure European body.

*Romanus Pontifex* revealed Pope Nicholas V's desire to seek "the salvation of all . . . [that] he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls."<sup>4</sup> The papal bull would cite spiritual and theological motivation for the acts of atrocity that followed the Doctrine of Discovery. The pope believed that "if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who . . . restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations."<sup>5</sup> There would be an unashamed elevation of the European rulers with a subsequent diminishing and demonizing of non-Europeans who would be rightly vanquished. The slave trade would become the fulfillment and material expression of the dysfunctional theology offered by the church.

The papal bull asserted the "noble personage" of Henry, uncle to King Alfonso of Portugal. Prince Henry would be one of the progenitors and propagators of the African slave trade. The pope would again assert the specious spiritual rationale that Henry would "bring into the bosom of his faith the perfidious enemies of him and of the life-giving Cross by which we have been redeemed, namely the Saracens and all other infidels." Henry's work of furthering the slave trade would therefore be seen in the most positive light, his pursuit of the slave trade being described as "growing daily more and more zealous in prosecuting this his so laudable and pious purpose."<sup>6</sup>

Hex Logics!

One of the immediate consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery, therefore, was the furtherance and establishment of the African slave trade by Prince Henry, the very person verified by the pope as an agent of God. The first captives from Africa were taken into slavery

assuredly worthy and of the highest recommendations and fitted for so great an undertaking, . . . the said Christopher has already caused to be put together and built a fortress fairly equipped, wherein he has stationed as garrison certain Christians, companions of his, who are to make search for other remote and unknown islands and mainlands . . . to bring under your sway the said mainlands and islands with their residents and inhabitants and to bring them to the Catholic faith . . . to lead the peoples dwelling in those islands and countries to embrace the Christian religion; nor at any time let dangers or hardships deter you therefrom.<sup>13</sup>

By this reasoning, Columbus could be considered the “discoverer” of the Americas, despite the continents already being filled with people and civilizations. As a European Christian fully endowed with God’s presence, he would hold a superior position over and against the Native inhabitants of the land. A 2013 study by the Christian Reformed Church asserted that “framing Aboriginal peoples as enemies of God positioned Europeans as the harbingers of civilization and Christianity to the so-called pagans of the Americas. The doctrine of discovery became the justification for colonial actions.”<sup>14</sup>

The authority to “discover” and to “conquer” drew from an assumed spiritual authority. The bull asserted that those who would oppose the authority and rule of the European powers would be opposing the will of God: “Let no one, therefore, infringe, or with rash boldness contravene, this our recommendation, exhortation, requisition, gift, grant, assignment, constitution, deputation, decree, mandate, prohibition, and will. Should anyone presume to attempt this, be it known to him that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God.”<sup>15</sup> The assertion of European supremacy by these papal bulls had taken such a hold that anyone opposing this doctrine would be considered opposing the will of God.

In September of 1500, Columbus had been brought back from Santo Domingo in chains. The royal court was at Seville and he stayed for a number of months at the Carthusian monastery of Las

Cuevas across the Guadalquivir River from the city.<sup>16</sup> At the monastery Columbus compiled his notes, which he described as “a notebook of authorities, statements, opinions and prophecies on the subject of the recovery of God’s Holy City and mountain of Zion, and on the discovery and evangelization of the islands of the Indies and of all other peoples and nations.”<sup>17</sup> Christopher Columbus’s self-perception reveals a connection to the heresies of both Christendom and the Doctrine of Discovery. Columbus’s atrocities would find justification in the belief that all of these actions would result in evangelization. The spread of the European version of the Christian message would justify violence in all forms found in Western imperialism.

The Doctrine of Discovery, first directed towards Portugal then directed towards Spain, affirmed the imperial ambitions of these two European powers. It gave theological permission for the European body and mind to view themselves as superior to the non-European bodies and minds. The doctrine created an insider perception for the European while generating an outsider, other identity for non-Europeans; it created an identity for African bodies as inferior and only worthy of subjugation; it also relegated the identity of the original inhabitants of the land “discovered” to become outsiders, now unwelcome in their own land.

Those who stole the land now claimed power over those who originally held the land. In order to strengthen the claim to usurped land, the more pure, European-American Christian settler colonialists needed to elevate themselves over and against the indigenous inhabitants. The dominant powers created dysfunctional narratives derived from a diseased social and theological imagination that elevated the sense of worth of the dominant group. This lie of supremacy empowered the dominant group to define the other as inferior and claim authority over them.

### THE IMPACT OF THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY ON THE INDIGENOUS NATIONS OF TURTLE ISLAND<sup>18</sup>

The collective expression of the papal bulls that would result in the Doctrine of Discovery fueled the conquest of non-European lands by Europeans. As Stephen Newcomb notes, “what is generally referred as the doctrine of discovery might be more accurately called the doctrine of Christian European arrival, or, better still, the doctrine of Christian European invasion.”<sup>19</sup> The Doctrine of Discovery served a dual function: a theological “doctrine” that served as an affirmation from the church for European atrocity and a political, even military doctrine (akin to the Monroe Doctrine or even the Bush Doctrine) that provided political boundaries and mediation between colonial settler powers.

The doctrine as expressed to Portugal furthered the African slave trade and as expressed to Spain affirmed the “discovery” of the Americas. This military and political doctrine that defined the parameters of European imperial greatness arose from an ecclesial treatise rooted in a dysfunctional theology. At the foundation of this doctrine was a narrative of European Christian purity and supremacy that negated the value and worth of the other and permitted European Christians to assume their own supremacy and privilege on specious theological grounds.

An individual questioning the appropriate presence of a Native American at a Columbus Day celebration reveals a dysfunctional narrative embedded within Western society. The concept of the other stands in direct opposition to the teachings of the New Testament. Theology that arises from Scripture and from the teachings of Jesus does not allow for the identification and exclusion of the other. A Christian Reformed Church task force concluded that “the doctrine encoded racial ideas that created a hierarchy within humanities that invariably placed European Christian nations in

the position of power.”<sup>20</sup> The assumption of white supremacy took root in the imagination of the Western mind. This imagination and narrative have become embedded realities in the American Christian worldview.