The Doctrine of Discovery Factsheet

Q: What is the “Doctrine of Discovery?”
The “Doctrine of [Christian] 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 The patterns of oppression that continue to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their land today are found in numerous historical documents such as Papal Bulls, Royal Charters and U.S. Supreme Court rulings as recent as 2005.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 has legitimated 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 the Christendom Church:

![Theologies of Entitlement](image1)

**Theologies of Entitlement**
Three main Scriptural texts undergird the Doctrine of Discovery: the Great Commission, the divine mandate to rule based on Romans 13, 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](image2)

**Justification of Violence**
The Christendom Church empowered European governments to use coercion and violence, including genocide and enslavement. The theologies of entitlement listed above legitimated their conquest of both people and land.

![Terra Nullius (Empty land)](image3)

**Terra Nullius (Empty land)**
*Terra nullius/nullus* 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:

- **ENSLAVEMENT**... Because the Doctrine did not consider Indigenous Peoples to be humans if they weren’t Christians, conquering nations were allowed to make slaves of the peoples 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 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, there were fewer...
than 250,000. Indigenous communities and ecosystems die to this day because of the ongoing effects of the Doctrine. In the country of Suriname, for example, gold mining companies given access to indigenous land have poisoned the watershed with mercury, threatening the lives of all beings dependent on water for survival, from fish to human communities.

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

The painful truth is that the 500+ years of international policies that unfairly disadvantaged Indigenous Peoples now advantage us (North Americans, Christians, or those of European descent).

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

- Do you know how the land where you live was originally acquired?
- Can you trace the gems or precious metals in the jewelry you wear?
- Where does the water in the bottled drinks you buy come from?
- Do you eat foods or use products made with palm oil?

Bibliography and Suggested Resources:

Websites:
- Interview with Sarah Augustine, from Seattle Mennonite Church: [http://www.breathingforgiveness.net/2013/03/anti-slavery-campaign-interview-series_28.html](http://www.breathingforgiveness.net/2013/03/anti-slavery-campaign-interview-series_28.html)

Video clips:
- Chief Oren Lyons (15 min.): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVZDbqh7WgM](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=9bI9NAlfock](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bI9NAlfock)

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