

Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery: A Call to Action

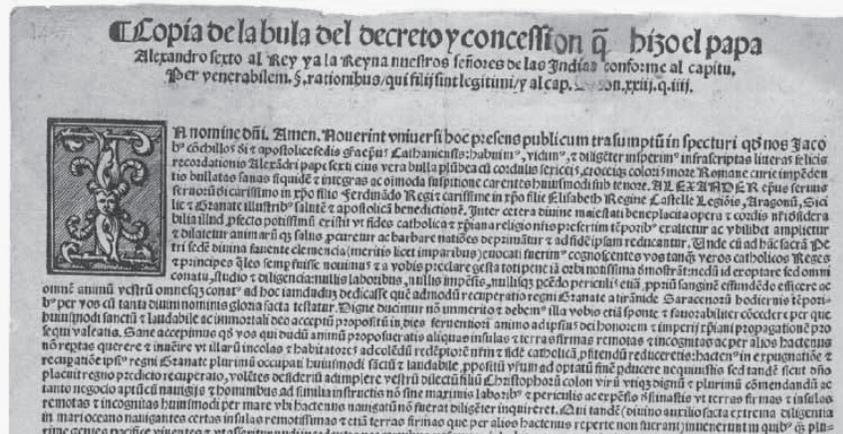


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Everything has a beginning, a genesis, its “birth” so to speak. And so it is for the Doctrine of Discovery. It almost sounds like an adventure, this Doctrine of Discovery – a journey to discover, seek, and learn new and wonderful things. Yet the reality is anything but wonderful – it is the opposite of all that is just, ethical, and moral. The genocide committed under the Doctrine of Discovery (also referred to as the Doctrine of Christian Discovery or Doctrine of Dominance) must be brought into the light for all to see. Great Indigenous scholars like Steven

Newcomb, Tamara Starblanket, Vine Deloria Jr, Arthur Manuel, and Sharon Venne have written about the Doctrine of Discovery bringing attention to its brutal global impact. I invite each reader to research the information provided in this article as a part of one’s duty to live morally, and to help all our children walk toward a future of peace.

Let’s be clear: Indigenous peoples have always been here in these lands now known as “Canada.” We lived as vibrant, independent, and free peoples enjoying structured leadership, centuries-honed legal systems, and intimate relationships



Papal Bull, Inter Caetera, issued in 1493.
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with all the diverse landscapes and waterscapes that make up Turtle Island. Our Indigenous history did not begin with the arrival of Europeans. What happened when Europeans arrived is a critical turning point that all Christians need to understand so that they may be given the opportunity to take action. *Please consider this article a “call to action.”*

The Doctrine of Discovery is a complex legal tradition that arose in western Europe during the medieval period. And the Church played a central role. A series of papal bulls both reflected the thinking of dominant European powers and reinforced the trajectory of justifying conquest by Christendom powers. Among them was the 1455 Papal Bull, *Romanus Pontifex*, which sanctified the seizure of newly “discovered” lands and encouraged the enslavement of native peoples. Then, in 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued *Inter Caetera*, which gave the Americas to Spain and Portugal. It is through this that the infamous explorer (or land speculator) Christopher Columbus was given

his royal prerogatives. Columbus’ prerogatives were to subdue, convert, or kill the barbarians and assert the Monarchy’s title to the land; in other words, to colonize the lands and its peoples. With his royal rights in hand, Columbus arrived to the far south of Turtle Island.

His first act was one rich with Christian symbolism. He planted a sword into the soil and invoked a Christian chant that baptized the lands. This chant was a symbolic act of asserting sovereignty and dominance over Indigenous peoples, lands, and all that came with it. This seemingly simple act – a symbolic Christian ritual – set in motion a series of horrific events still felt today in many Canadian court cases, laws and policies.

Briefly, the 15th-century papal bulls defined all unbaptized persons, including Indigenous peoples (Original peoples), as barbarians, heathens, pagans, infidels, and savages. Only Christians were considered humans. Since they could not kill all the barbarians in order

to acquire the wealth of land and resources, they had to do something with us. Thus began a horrific forced baptism of Indigenous peoples based on the belief that we became somewhat human through conversion... though it did not prevent the ongoing massacre of thousands, if not millions. As Indigenous peoples were baptized, they became baptized barbarians – not civilized humans on equal footing with Euro-Christians. They were forever designated for servitude and slavery. Though baptized, we were nonetheless pagans and savages. Therefore, we could not own property or claim Nationhood as peoples. As a direct result of the Doctrine of Discovery, millions of Indigenous peoples perished through intentional and purposeful genocide to clear the lands and memory of their existence. It was an overwhelming erasure of peoples through colonial laws, policies and outright theft. These systems were the typologies of genocide that still exist today.



Pope Nicholas V issued the infamous papal bull *Romanus Pontifex*. / IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN

O Canada?

So what does this have to do with today's Canada? Everything. Settler Christians and all non-Indigenous peoples who benefit from the riches and wealth of these lands have such well-being at the cost of Indigenous peoples' continued poverty and racism against them.

The very idea that one group of people could assert domination of another – through slavery, death, and servitude – by virtue of being religiously superior is utterly absurd. Yet that's what we are dealing with today. For example, all court cases that challenge the Crown's title to lands come from the Doctrine. Whenever Indigenous peoples have taken their issues to Canadian courts questioning and challenging the Crown's assertion of title to Indigenous lands, we are told that the “underlying title” of the Crown is the basis of their ownership to all lands and resources. What is the “underlying title” of the Crown? Simply put, it's the application of the Doctrine of Discovery.

We need to disrupt and deconstruct this myth and lie. The mentality that Indigenous peoples are barbarians incapable of making decisions (without the paternalistic help of the government of Canada) is imbedded in every law, policy, and legislation in the federal system. The ongoing existence of the Indian Act is proof: it is the most racist piece of legislation still utilized to monitor and police Indigenous peoples and their lands. Even as we took Treaty with the British Crown in 1871 – and were promised a relationship of peace, mutuality, and respect – the Indian Act was being created in total violation of that Treaty.

The Doctrine of Discovery is an act of theft with no basis in law. It is fiction constructed out of the imaginations of Church and State. This act of theft has left Indigenous peoples with very little means to defend against an impending environmental catastrophe created by the destructive activities of colonial corporations acting under the presumed sovereignty of Canada, which gives them permission to extract resources. The horrific impacts of the Alberta tar sands, mass flooding of our traditional territories by the dams of British Columbia, Manitoba, and Quebec, the potash mines in Saskatchewan, the precious metal mines of Ontario, the clear-cutting of old-growth forests all across these lands... these are just a few of the actions of Canada's presumed sovereignty through the Doctrine of Discovery.

The colonization and genocide of Indigenous peoples continues. There is no freedom or self-determination for my peoples, the nēhiyawak of Treaty 6. So long as the Doctrine of Discovery is used as the basis of ownership over Indigenous lands and resources, there is no real humanity and no hopeful future for anyone.

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* does push against the Doctrine of Discovery, but not totally. Articles 8, 10, 26, and 28, for instance, assert that Indigenous peoples have the right not to be dispossessed of their traditional lands, the right not to be relocated, the right to receive redress for lands that have been taken, and the right to control their lands. All those rights speak against the “right of discovery.” Yet Article 46 seems to undermine such rights when it asserts that “Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying... any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States.” How can one work against the Doctrine of Discovery if the colonial state's territorial integrity cannot be challenged? To undo the Doctrine, something of what has been taken must be returned.

This is where we, the Indigenous peoples, need you. There are things you can do; the power resides in each of us to seek recourse when we see injustice. The Doctrine of Discovery effects all of us. If you are against the domination and discrimination of any peoples, then seek to question the information provided here and, together, let us do something so that a wrong can be corrected. Do some homework. Ponder the statements recently issued by some churches to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. Learn from them. Discern what is missing. And, most importantly, connect with the host peoples of your territory to learn their stories, their experiences, and the impact of the Doctrine on their lives and lands. That's a solid beginning.

This article is a call for justice, liberation, and freedom; let's demand that the Doctrine of Discovery – created by Christendom, and sustained by such imaginations – be dismantled and abolished. Our collective effort to protect and defend the earth needs all of our voices to stop the contamination of land and water for our collective future to endure.



For specific resources on the Doctrine of Discovery, including various church statements, visit www.commonword.ca/go/533