

# The Doctrine of Discovery: Factsheet

## 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 The patterns of oppression that continue to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their land today are found in numerous historical documents such as Papal Bulls, Royal Charters and U.S. Supreme Court rulings as recent as 2005.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

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 a land as described in the Exodus story. Manifest Destiny in the U.S. grew out of the latter.



### Justification of Violence

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



### *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.

## 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.

## What have been the results of the Doctrine of Discovery?

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:



# Bibliography & 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)
- “Five Hundred Years of Injustice: The Legacy of Fifteenth Century Religious Prejudice,” by Steve Newcomb, Indigenous Law Institute: [http://ili.nativeweb.org/sdrm\\_art.html](http://ili.nativeweb.org/sdrm_art.html)
- UN Preliminary Study on the Doctrine of Discovery: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E.C.19.2010.13%20EN.pdf>

## Video clips:

- Chief Oren Lyons (15 min.): [goo.gl/a64Nwy](http://goo.gl/a64Nwy)
- Steve Newcomb at Parliament of the World’s Religions ‘09 conference on the Christian Doctrine of Discovery Panel. (7 min.): [goo.gl/Ax2RjH](http://goo.gl/Ax2RjH)

## Books:

- Vine Deloria, Jr. “Conquest Masquerading as Law,” in Unlearning the Language of Conquest (Texas University Press, 2006).
- Robert J. Miller, Esq., Native America, Discovered and Conquered, Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark and Manifest Destiny (Bison Books, 2008).
- Steven T. Newcomb, Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery (Fulcrum, 2008).
- Blake Watson, Buying America from the Indians: Johnson v. McIntosh and the History of Native Land Rights (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).