

# Beyond Disavowing the Doctrine of Discovery

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## Steps for Christians to Dismantle It

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by Arden Mahlberg of Christian colonizer ancestry



### I. Doctrine of Discovery: Steps to Dismantle Beyond Repudiation & Disavowal



Many Christians are ready to address what remains of the Doctrine of Discovery that continues to cause harm. Beyond simply disavowing or repudiating it, they want to help Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, recognizing the ongoing harm that it does.

Several congregations and

denominational bodies have taken steps to repudiate or [disavow the Doctrine of Discovery](#). Through this doctrine, Christianity, in the 15<sup>th</sup>

century, enlisted the cooperation of European nations to further its goal of converting the entire world to Christianity. This was done when European nations had become capable of global travel by sea. The motivation of the nations was to acquire more wealth and claim more land. Popes decreed it was right for them to do with the condition that they attempt to convert whoever was on that land who was not Christian, which was pretty much all of the world outside Europe.

Previously, Pope Boniface VIII, in his bull, *Unam Sanctam*, (*One God, One Faith, One Spiritual Authority*) had declared the authority of the church over political authorities. In the 1530's, Pope Paul III learned that some of the conquerors were no longer holding up their end of the agreement, arguing that the people across the sea were devoid of the humanity necessary to be Christian. Pope Paul III would have none of it and reasserted the need for the "Indians" to be Christianized, citing the Great Commission, which we will address shortly.

The Papal Bulls referred to as the Doctrine of Discovery made a moral enterprise of taking the land and its resources from non-Christians. As we will see, it authorized such brutality that it is easy for caring Christians now to disavow the doctrine. Some Christian bodies have gone beyond that disavowal to also address the ongoing benefits Christians derive from what was done to Native peoples. Some are keeping the situation in their awareness by identifying whose ancestral land was taken and made ultimately available to the congregation. Individuals are doing the same with the location of their homes, businesses, and farm properties. Educational institutions are writing land acknowledgement statements to post prominently on their campuses and read when they have formal meeting so the reality of their relationship to the land is kept forefront. As a result of this process, some individuals and organizations are deciding to return land to those it was taken from or give financial compensation.

Unfortunately, Christianity has yet to identify, acknowledge and disarm the elements within its scripture, its narrative and its theology that

led to the Doctrine of Discovery. Those elements were activated by the popes and led to the widespread participation by ordinary Christians in the harm that it justifies, even today. That is the purpose of the current effort, to identify key elements within Christianity out of which the Doctrine of Discovery was hatched, acknowledge them, and consider steps Christians and their churches can take to defuse those harmful features. Until that is done, non-Christians around the world continue to remain at risk.

## II. Do We Have a Right to the Spoils of Conquest?



Nearly every county in the U.S., it seems, has a pioneer village museum memorializing the early face of Euro-Christian occupation of the land. We honor the personal and collective qualities that it took for these people to shape their new lives. Now, for those of us who are their descendants, it is painful to consider that our ancestors, whom we may well admire for good reason, participated in something inherently immoral, that the land and the wealth they acquired was ill-gotten.

It is challenging to face what that realization means for our own subsequent land ownership and wealth. Without that, we live as though we believe that to the victor belongs the spoils, and to us, their descendants, as well. To possess it is morally somewhat akin to possession of stolen property. Again, there are some Christians and Christian churches that have come to recognize that their land was ill-

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gotten. So they have made decisions to **return land** or the wealth derived from it, as steps to take to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery.

The formal disavowal of the Doctrine of Discovery has not addressed the belief it contains that to the victor belongs the spoils, and to their descendants as well. Many churches and Christians who disavow the Doctrine of Discovery live as though they believe that to the victor belongs the spoils. They have yet to



address their assumed right to the land and natural resources they legally own that were taken from the First Nations. A key step is to identify whose homeland it was. Very few churches formally acknowledge which First Nations were displaced from the land the church and its members occupy.



Some of the texts Christianity adopted as its own (Old Testament or Hebrew Bible) celebrate conquest and express the belief that the victor is entitled to the spoils. That is the point of the conquest, not self-defense. Some texts even express that Yahweh ordered His followers to occupy land inhabited by others and that the spoils were Yahweh's gift to them and their descendants. (See the books of Proverbs, Joshua & Judges, for example). Christians celebrate in song Israel's invasion of the land of Canaan, starting with the sacking of Jericho and the taking of their land. It is a celebration of power and entitlement to what has been taken from others.

On the other hand, when followers of Yahweh were defeated and their resources taken from them, the texts claim that this was the will of Yahweh because the people had displeased Him. The belief that God's favor explains who wins and who loses reinforced Christian expansion and acquisition. It justified the taking of resources First Nations lost to the

Christians because they were believed to be out of favor with the Christian god. If we don't still believe this today, we need to say so and address the Biblical texts that perpetuate the belief in divinely sanctioned entitlement to what others have. This is a step in dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery.

Without that, the harm from this belief continues to be perpetuated. Christians took the spoils of conquest to include a right to the artifacts of Indian culture. Museums of the colonizers still possess and lay claim to those artifacts, which have included human remains. They also laid claim to Indians' subjective reality as well. They assumed the right to strip them of their national and individual identities, which is one way to defeat and control people. Christians renamed the tribal nations rather than use their names for themselves, which might be difficult for the Christians to pronounce. Individuals were forced to take Christian/European names. They changed the names of sacred sites, often pejoratively, for example, from Spirit Lake to Devil's Lake. We continue to use these names today. Thus, there is no sense of moral violation when Christians bring harm to those sacred places to extract mineral wealth from them. Christians don't see this as comparable to robbing a Christian church for the gold on its altar. Even further insult is to take a sacred mountain and carve into it the heroes of the conquest, as in the Black Hills.

To the victor belongs the spoils is a violation of Jesus' principle that when universal love is operating, the first put themselves last, so the last become first. This would mean now, with the conquest that has been done, that we put the needs and interests of the displaced people and First Nations ahead of our own.

Are those of us who are Christians now ready to formally reject the principle that to the victor belongs the spoils? Are we ready to contend with the complex implications that admission brings for property and other wealthy of our ourselves, our families, and our churches? It is an essential step to dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery.

### III. The Declaration of Christian Supremacy & the Duty of Domination



When Spanish conquerors encountered the native peoples of Turtle Island, they addressed them by reading a declaration of dominance. That

declaration, [Requiereamiento](#), (*Requirement: To be Read by Spanish Conquerors to Defeated Indians*) was written in 1510 by the Council of Castille. It stated that what the conquerors were doing was ordained by God, and that the Church was “the Ruler and Superior of the Whole World.” The Native peoples were informed that they were invited to voluntarily convert to Christianity. When they did, they would lose their autonomy and become “the subjects and vassals” of the Spanish crown. Belying the fact that this was not at all voluntary, if they did not convert,

“with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us.”

Christianity laid claim to all the peoples of the earth. There was a mandate to convert everyone. And those who did not convert were subject to harsh

punishment. Conversion to Christianity was required. While, in this case, punishment for failure to do so was immediate, others claimed the punishment would be exacted by the Christian god after death. Any wonder that some would now claim that “Christianity represents the worst of the history of colonialism among Indian peoples in North America.” (p. 72, [A Native American Theology](#)) This was carried out by faithful Christians as a moral obligation. As Simone Weil observed, “[Evil when we are in its power is not felt as evil but as a necessity, or even a duty.](#)”

Because there has been moral progress, we are now shocked by the brutality of the *Requerimiento*, while average Christians in the past were not. That brutality has deep roots within Christianity that follows from a sense of divinely ordained supremacy. Brutality was not just an aberration in the process of the global application of the Great Commission. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V, in [Dum Divertus](#), declared those who are not Christian to be “enemies of Christ,” The Pope asserted that he spoke with the authority of Christ. And Christ claimed that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. This is nothing less than Christianity’s claim to supremacy. Hill Fletcher sees the claim of Christian supremacy as leading eventually to White supremacy. ([The Sin of White Supremacy](#)). From supremacy, the right to domination and brutality easily flow. So, there are very important reasons for Christians to come to terms with Christianity’s claim to supremacy. Christ claimed it and he passed that authority to his church through the Apostle Peter.

After Christ claimed his authority over both heaven and earth, he gave his followers a directive to make all the nations of the earth follow his commands. It is this directive, known as the Great Commission, that has compelled Christians to convert



everyone while ignoring or justifying the harm they are doing. The four sentences that constitute this directive occur only in the book of Matthew. While scholars have debated who Jesus meant this order to apply to, and even if the account in Matthew ever happened, it has shaped Christians relations with non-Christians ever

since.

In the Great Commission, Jesus’s assertion of power and authority, in effect, “the ruler and superior of the whole world,” as the *Requerimiento*, put it, is a stunning reversal from the position Jesus took right after he was baptized. He was filled with spiritual power, and with power comes temptation. One of the temptations Jesus encountered rather explicitly was that he could easily have power over all the nations of the earth and have them bow down to him. That power and its allure were attributed to the devil. At that time, Jesus resisted. When Jesus was arrested and interrogated by Pilate, he explicitly did not claim authority on earth. It was only after his death and resurrection that he declared, “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me,” and instructed that all people on earth become his followers and obey his commands.

As Mark Charles and Soong-Chang Rah point out, acting from the Great Commission can lead to the same harm as the Doctrine of Discovery. (*Unsettling Truths*, p.118) So, it is dubious to disavow the latter while embracing the former. As we shall see, the Great Commission was the religious motivation for the Doctrine of Discovery. The Great Commission itself has been an instrument of harm to nations all over the world. An example recent to this writing is John Chao, a US trained missionary who illegally invaded an isolated indigenous community protected by the government of India. His effort ended with a bamboo arrow in his chest. He called the island “*Satan’s last stronghold*.” While his missionary office



called him a Christian martyr, he was not killed for being a Christian, he was killed for being an invader. To the degree Christianity gave him the orders to do it, Christianity is culpable and should be held accountable.

While the Great Commission did drive Christianity to become the largest religion in the world, it was at great cost to non-Christians. Jesus said we will know people by their fruits, not their appearance, or, we would now add, by their intentions. This measure applies to anything – ideas, beliefs, and practices. We know their nature by their fruits. So, if Jesus had known that following his commission, this going forth into the world to convert everyone, would expose hundreds of thousands of people to diseases they had no immunity to, would he have ordered it? Jesus was committed to nonviolence and to the cause of the marginalized. Had he known the unintended consequences of massive death on Turtle Island, for example, would he have said “Go forth and make them obey me”?

Now, chaplains understand that when people are under great stress, it is unwise and unkind to challenge their beliefs. It is those beliefs and religious practices that help a person cope with what is happening. But when the indigenous peoples were under the great existential stress of invasion, displacement and colonization, Christians tried also to take their religion from them, even making it illegal and punishing them for practicing their traditional rituals. When people were under the existential stress of colonization and needed their religion the most, Christians systematically took it from them. Christians forced them to adopt a religion completely alien to their world view. This added to their stress and pitted them against their own families and communities. We now understand this to be abusive. We now understand this to morally be malpractice.

As Christians, we can wish to share the good news with others without adopting the Great Commission as it was formulated: “Go.... Make.... Obey....” The order is clear: make it happen! And so it was done. But Jesus also taught the alternative, the alternative of attracting others by letting one’s light shine and be seen by them. The light itself becomes the attraction and the invitation. Then one may wish to convert, and no

one has taken anything away from them or violated their will. This was the approach used by Christians in the original colony of Pennsylvania, which granted religious liberty to all, including the Lenape in that area. For some of us, the spiritual frontier beyond disavowing the Doctrine of Discovery includes the discovery some missionizing Christians came to recognize early on, that the native peoples may not have been in need of salvation at all. We can't dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery without addressing the Great Commission that motivated it.

#### IV. The Tradition of Cruelty Toward Other Religions



The cruelty we see in the how Christians related to non-Christians during colonization was not without precedent. It was, however, boldly explicit in officially calling for brutality. In [Dum Divertus](#), 1452, Pope Nicholas V forgave in advance the crimes that would be committed toward indigenous peoples in order that they be

“subjugated to the Christian religion.” This permitted Christians “full and free power” to do whatever they pleased in this cause, including placing non-Christians in ‘perpetual servitude.’”

Christian brutality was not limited to the colonization process. Christianity engaged in brutal suppression of the rural religious practices in Europe, regarding them also as being demonic. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants engaged in it. Also, in the 1500's, reformer Martin Luther called for Christians to burn the homes, schools and synagogues of Jews and destroy their prayer books. Why? Because they refused to convert to Christianity. The scriptural roots that fed Luther's faith also led him to brutality toward non-Christians who refused to convert. Moses had ordered the slaughter of everyone in his camp who did not declare

allegiance to the god of Israel ([Exodus 32:26-28](#)).

Moses told his loyalists it was God's will that they slaughter their brothers, friends and neighbors who did not declare their loyalty to his god. The result was a complete purge of their camp. The body count was 3,000. Most Christians are not taught to see this for the religious hate crime that we now recognize it to be. This was after Moses famously destroyed a sacred object depicting a rival god, Baal, his followers had fashioned in his extended absence from melting down their gold jewelry. Now, Moses would rightly be arrested for such a hate crime. There has been progress in what we understand to be immoral.

The prophet Elijah had also ordered the slaughter of the priests of the same god, Baal, as a kind of purge. This was even after Baal had lost the contest for which god could start a fire on their altar. Defeat of his rival was not enough for Elijah. He had to order the slaughter of the religious leaders of Baal. He feared that people were so weak in their faith that they could not be trusted with the religious choice we now take as a basic human right. [Deuteronomy 17:2-5](#) calls for people who worship or follow other gods to be stoned to death.

The U.S Army's brutal massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 was a massacre of First Nation people performing a religious practice, the Ghost Dance. White settlers were terrified by this new religion. In an example of Christian and White fragility, rather than dealing with their fear, they destroyed what frightened them. Christianity has made thousands of martyrs of non-Christians all over the world. Now that freedom of religion is being more broadly applied, these historical examples are exposed for the religious intolerance they always were.

While Jesus and his early followers were overtly nonviolent, they did engage in striking ill-will toward people who did not convert to their faith. Jesus instructed his emissaries to bring a blessing of peace to those they stayed with, but if they found that the people were not open to his teaching, they should withdraw the blessing. ([Matt 10: 11-15](#)). We would now recognize this to be an act of spiritual hostility, not quite a curse,

perhaps, but close to it in intent. Jesus also declared that on the day of final judgment, those people who were not interested in his teaching would be horribly punished.

Since Christians believe that it is Jesus Christ himself who will make those final judgments, in effect, Jesus was saying he would exact severe retribution to those who did not accept his teaching. This is striking. And Jesus did say that those who are not for him are against him. ([Matt 12:30](#)) This is consistent with the popes later declaring that non-Christians were enemies of Christ. The tradition Jesus drew from was, as we have seen, that those identified as enemies of one's god are to be slain. But Jesus also told his followers to love their enemies. As [Karen Armstrong informs us](#), the term we translate as love was a term used in standard peace treaties at the time. To love one's enemy was to pledge to do no harm to them and to protect them from harm by others. While Jesus had famously declared that the poor are blessed, now it seems they are not blessed if they do not believe in him. His blessing appears to be conditional. On the face of it, this seems inconsistent with his teaching to love one's enemies. Unfortunately, this principle of love of enemy has not guided Christian's relationships with religions they regard as enemies of Christ.

These passages in the Christian sacred texts that normalize cruelty toward other religions stand today, risking that people now and in the future will consider them to be guidance for their behavior toward other religions. There are potential remedies to consider, beginning with identifying these dangerous texts in the Bible. Then, we can put borders around them and label them something like: "The following text is part of the historical record. It is not meant to influence us today in our attitudes or behavior." To disavow the Doctrine of Discovery and do nothing about those texts leaves them posing an ongoing risk, as they did recently with missionary John Chau. Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery requires changing our structural relationship to these and similar texts.

## V. Is There a Chosen People with a Promised Land?



The Doctrine of Discovery executed, and continues to execute, the narrative of Manifest Destiny. Christians derived this narrative by

acquiring from Judaism the concept of a chosen people with a promised land. (For more on this, see Steven T. Newcomb, [Pagans in the Promised Land](#).) This notion, this narrative, created the sense of entitlement for ordinary Christians to take over land occupied by others. Chosenness was well integrated into Christians' sense of themselves and their relationship to the world. To the arrogance of it all, "Who do you think you are coming over here and forcing your will on us?" the answer was, "Well, we are the chosen people of God. That's who we are. And you are not."

Oddly, being chosen by God doesn't seem to lead to compassion toward others. Take the case of Noah, who was chosen by God to be spared, along with his family, from the flood God used to kill everyone else. After the flood was over and the water receded, Noah got drunk and passed out naked. His son Ham saw him in that state and brought his brothers, who covered Noah's body. When Noah woke up and realized what had happened, instead of apologizing, extending the grace he had received himself, he banished Ham and placed a curse on him and all his descendants.

Chosenness is totally contrary to the Native American worldview, which understands all beings to be in horizontal, reciprocal relationship. (See Kidwell, Noley & Tinker, [A Native American Theology](#)). There is no such thing as chosenness, which is so dear to traditional Christianity. The Great

Spirit, humans, animals, and the elements of nature all have their role in the great circle of existence. The different roles that people have in their communities are horizontally arranged, with horizontal accountability, not hierarchical. Further, the idea of the fall, that humans could fall out of favor with God and need redemption, did not fit with the Great Spirit they knew. Christianity presented a solution, salvation, to a problem that did not exist for First Nation peoples.

In the world view Christians adopted and maintain, God has a hierarchical relationship with everything else that exists, Lord of all. And from creation, humans were God's chosen species, to have dominion over the other species. Of humans, he chose the Jews to be special. And from all human beings, past, present, and future, God chose one person, Jesus, to be the most special. And each case of chosenness carries responsibilities and some entitlement with it relative to others. One person, Jesus Christ, has authority over all human beings' souls, and that person can transfer that authority to a church through a line of direct relationship (apostolic succession). One church can then claim to be the one true church. And Christians can in turn claim authority over other human beings, as well as over other species and nature itself. So, when some Christians observed the relationship to the land and other species that indigenous people had, they found it to be sinful. It seemed like the land was being wasted because it was not all being planted and harvested for human use, as the Christian god intended.

To disavow the Doctrine of Discovery while keeping the narrative based on chosenness and entitlement would leave us with only a kinder and gentler form of entitlement, the kind that continues to harm conquered peoples today in less visible ways. In his study of power, Machiavelli (*The Prince*) observed that kindness can be essential to stabilizing control over others that has been established through brutal means.

Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery the must include addressing the narrative behind it. To keep the lens of chosenness and hierarchy

pretty much guarantees that we Christians will misunderstand our neighbors and their religions. Can Christian theology do without chosenness for the sake of others? Is there something at core of Christianity that is not chosenness or uniqueness? What is the good news of Jesus Christ that does not depend on those concepts and that narrative? Without the narrative of chosenness, the gem of Christianity may shine all the brighter

## VI. Next Steps to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery



There has been considerable progress in moral awareness within Christianity since the Doctrine of Discovery and the initial stages of Manifest Destiny. It is that progress that allows so many Christians to now recognize the immorality of it all. There has also been progress since the time of the events, beliefs, and attitudes in the Christian bible. It is now widely recognized that these Christian texts support injustices of many kinds, from slavery to sexism and intolerance of diversity related to

race, sexual orientation and gender. The bulk of Christianity has not always been ahead of the moral learning curve like we might wish. But the progress in moral awareness that has been made can lead to important next steps regarding the roots of the Doctrine of Discovery and the need for current remedies. That history of moral progress also provides valuable momentum in taking the next steps to dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery.

1. Scour your church's official hymns, documents and prayers for remnants of the belief that God gave this land to the colonizers. For example, the

Episcopal Church, who in 2009 renounced the Doctrine of Discovery, still perpetuates the entitlement narrative in their Book of Common Prayer. Their prayer “For our Country,” begins with “Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage...” See what you find from a thorough review.

2. As individuals and groups, we may be able to commit to addressing the ill-gotten gains of property and related wealth from colonialism that was done on behalf of Christianity and that has benefitted and continues to benefit Christians. This should include taking a position on the principle that to the victor belongs the spoils and to their descendants as well, not just going forward, but with past actions as well. Denominational statements can be very helpful. This may lead more Christians and Christian denominations to change their relationship to their land and their wealth, such as returning land or providing compensation.

3. Consider formal disavowals of the belief contained in the Doctrine of Discovery that non-Christians are “the enemies of Christ.” Do we believe non-Christians deserve to be punished now or in eternity?

4. More can be done to solidify Christian commitment to freedom of religion for all other religions and for those who are not religious. Several denominations have made declarations of that intent already. Some of this is acting to protect non-Christians from hostility, but it can include protection from unwelcome and harmful proselytizing. Theologically, this means addressing the issue of Christian supremacy. When that is done, these statements can potentially celebrate the value of religious diversity along with other forms of diversity that the denomination celebrates.

5. With the way the Great Commission was originally stated, can it be followed without doing harm? It may need to be reimagined to be safe for non-Christians. It could be replaced with encouragement for Christians to let their light shine while respecting freedom of religion and the integrity of will for people who have no interest in Christianity and people who are abandoning the Christian narrative. The principle of doing no harm may need to be made explicit, for the benefit of communities who remain



relatively isolated as well as for all others, including those we personally wish would share our spiritual beliefs.

6. Several Christian denominations have logos that juxtapose the cross with the globe in a way that is easily understood as intent that Christianity dominate the earth. Steps could be taken to consider the unrecognized message in denominational logos and make changes accordingly.

7. Identify sites in your area where non-Christians were martyred for practicing their religion. Learn the stories of their martyrdom. Come to recognize these acts as religious bigotry and hate crimes.

8. Formulate studies and statements that acknowledge the harm that was done with campaigns to Christianize people.

9. Now, when something is dangerous, we clearly label it and give instructions, so harm is not done. A thorough effort can be undertaken to identify texts in the Christian bible that are harmful and contribute to Christian religious intolerance. One idea is to then have Bible publishers mark these passages clearly in the Bible with the advice to not take the passage as guidance for today. This is a responsible step to prevent further harm from these stories.

10. Support efforts to counteract laws and legal precedent based on the Doctrine of Discovery.

11. Support efforts to protect sacred sites and full use of them for those for whom it is sacred.

12. Consider engaging in the conflict involving museums of the conquest society and artifacts in their possession that are not from their culture.

13. Identify places in your area that were renamed by colonizers, especially pejoratively, and promote return to the names they had before the colonizers came.

14. Notice if in your area there are non-Native sports teams or businesses that have appropriated identities of Native peoples. Promote that these organizations cease doing so as part of decolonization.

15. Please add to this list.



The counteracting of injustice always requires courage. Challenging conventional belief takes courage, especially, it seems, religious belief and practice. Jesus had such courage. May we also, and may we support others in being courageous on behalf of justice