

Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery

A review of Mark Charles and Soon-Chan Rah's book

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The Doctrine of Discovery, created in a series of Papal Bulls in the Fifteenth Century, has served as the basis of most of European colonialism’s destructive rampage across most regions of the world. It was most successfully applied in the Western Hemisphere where Spanish, Portuguese, and British colonies decimated much of the indigenous population and proceeded to ‘own’ the land by way of the Crown. In the truly British colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, the indigenous populations have suffered from ongoing ethnic cleansing and genocide.

What is most surprising is that these Papal Bulls, written by Roman Catholic popes over 500 years ago, still serve as legal documents used to argue against indigenous possession of land and any rights to it. Canada’s legal system does not use the Bulls directly, but refers to their use in the U.S. The Sparrow case in British Columbia in 1990 used the 1823 Johnson v M’Intosh decision of the U.S. Supreme Court:

“The M’Intosh verdict held that a discovering sovereign has the exclusive right to extinguish Indians’ interest in their lands, either by purchase or by just war.”

The result in the Sparrow case “confirms that these rights [Aboriginal rights] are not absolute, and can be infringed upon providing the government can legally justify it.” [1]

Christian Justification for slavery, racism, and white supremacy (pardon the tautology)

Think about it. Some racist white Christian man five hundred years ago made a supremely racist pronouncement accepting genocide, ethnic cleansing, and slavery that is still used by both the Canadian and U.S. governments in legal decisions against indigenous people.

Beyond that, it promoted slavery, and combined with the ethnic cleansing and genocide of indigenous people, set Canada and the U.S. on their current course of attempting to uphold western hegemony over – essentially – the rest of the world. It is a broad brush to sweep with based on a piece of paper that should have been denied legality, if not generations ago, at least now that common international humanitarian law and war law would not accept

such a doctrine.

In ***Unsettling Truths - The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery***, the authors, Mark Charles, and Soon-Chan Rah, both Christian pastors, explore the history and ramifications of the pronouncement of these Papal Bulls. Interestingly enough the book does not provide the texts of the Bulls even though they are quite short and easy to understand. They do however provide a precis:

“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..””

Other than the fact that it is accepted as international law, it is entirely bogus, a sham, a pretence - it is a racist religious doctrine which should not have any legal authority.

That it does have ongoing legal authority only serves to define Canadian and U.S. societies as legally racist, supportive of wars of genocide and ethnic cleansing in order to obtain the wealth of the world. This idea will return in a moment, but first, the book.

“Unsettling Truths” is a series of short essays set out in historical order describing how it has been abused for centuries and served as a major component of the establishment of the British Colonies in North America and their subsequent changes into independent states. The authors excoriate the Puritan settlers as the prime promoters of this racist ideology, and apply the same severe criticism to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, following on with a deconstruction of Abraham Lincoln’s.

Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln receives two chapters in judgement. The second covers his application of sovereign rights as determined by the Doctrine of Discovery towards removing the indigenous populations, permanently, one way or another. The first discusses his arguments during his tenure in office and shows that he was not against slavery per se, but was concerned about holding the union together under the control of the economic power of the northern states.

Well beyond that, and having a considerable impact on U.S. society today, is the Thirteenth Amendment, of 1865, used

“to keep white supremacy alive beyond the grotesque institution of slavery, by creating a second-tier level of citizenship, specifically for people of color:
“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime wherof the party shall have been duly convicted....”

Fast forward to today’s incarceration rate, both in absolute numbers - the largest in the world - and in percentages - still the largest in the world but also dominated by people of colour. Discriminatory laws and institutionalized racism have kept slavery alive.

The U.S. is not a Christian nation.

As well as deconstructing the secular, the authors also present arguments about the lack of Christianity in the U.S. Under the descriptions and definitions of the authors, they present the U.S. as an attempt at “Christendom” arguing that it “cannot exist with the teachings of Jesus.” They see Christendom – the American nation, the physical entity encompassing Christianity in the U.S. – has “prostituted itself to empire....the need to address corporate sins like stolen lands, broken treaties, genocide, slavery, sexism, systematic injustice, white supremacy, and Christendom itself is ignored or outright rejected” by U.S. churches. Confronted with the Doctrine of Discovery, “the church has no meaningful theological response....the dysfunctional narrative of American exceptionalism has no basis in Scripture.”

The author’s final argument summarizes succinctly that “the Church in America has nothing to offer.”

Ramifications

Whether the theological arguments of the authors are accepted by the reader or not, the legal arguments and the current state of global affairs needs to be examined using the ideas promulgated under the Doctrine of Discovery. To reiterate: That the Doctrine of Discovery does have ongoing legal authority only serves to define Canadian and U.S. societies as legally racist, supportive of wars of genocide and ethnic cleansing in order to obtain the wealth of the world.

That an ancient church document has legal power today – in particular in light of modern international humanitarian and war law, and the western theoretical separation of church and state – should not be at all acceptable. It survives in law only because of racism and white supremacy, a convenient circular support system.

The United States attempts at global hegemony are derivatives of this doctrine, with the major emphasis – as demonstrated by the Indian Wars, and all their imperial wars since then – on using force. Many arguments have been made for “just wars” under the guise of Christianity (and other religions) but no war can be “just” in the true sense of justice being served – all people lose in wars except for the corporate war profiteers of the winning side, and if Germany is the example, the same group on the losing side.

Examples of U.S. white supremacy are spread throughout modern current events and locations, and while the ideals of white supremacy are downplayed, they still provide the undercurrents supporting wars based on “the right to protect”, “freedom and democracy,” and currently with the media hype against Russia and China, it is “democracy versus autocracy.” The authors include Israel/Palestine within this mix:

“...when Netanyahu publicly ordained both the United States of America and the modern nation state of Israel as having “promised lands” he revealed the very dysfunctional and codependent relationship that exists between the two countries. The U.S. needs Israel’s Old Testament legacy of promised lands to justify [its] history....The modern state of Israel needs the continuing flourishing of the United States as a shining light upon hill to justify their current unjust actions against the Palestinians and Bedouin people.”

The idea of a “flourishing” U.S. may be a noble idea, but the reality, especially as exposed by the four years under Trump and the continuing open and obvious racism within the U.S.

denies any flourishing. The only segments of the U.S. that are flourishing are the corporate military industries, the financialized one percenters, and many of the politicians involved with both. Unfortunately, until the U.S. can accept and identify its underlying racist, sexist, supremacist, white patriarchal structures, it will continue to decline in the pursuit of hegemony in the face of a global community slowly attempting to extricate itself from U.S. dominance financially and militarily.

Finally

But to return to the author's main argument, the church in the U.S. continues to support the politicians, the aggressive foreign policy, the abnormal ties to Israel, and appears incapable of doing anything about it. *Unsettling Truths - The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*, by Mark Charles, and Soon-Chan Rah is an interesting and instructive read on how the church and its beliefs within the overall parameters of 'western' or European racism created a country that will have great difficulty accepting the idea and then dealing with the practicality of its historical trauma.

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Jim Miles is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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