

Untangling Ourselves from the Doctrine of Discovery

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Sailing into the Sunset¹

Scholarship and Indigenous activism focused on the Doctrines of Discovery (DoD) have shed important light on its role in the colonial experience of North America throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. However, in the 21st century, scholars and Indigenous advocates need to re-examine how the historiography of the DoD may be creating a cultural narrative that can disempower Indigenous Peoples by perpetuating a highly legalistic and historically deterministic narrative that is becoming less relevant to the daily realities and manifold challenges that Indigenous Peoples face.

This paper will examine how the DoD has been superseded by other legal fictions which are not being adequately addressed. As cofounder of an international environmental organization who has worked on climate change and the “green energy transition” I argue that entirely new legal and moral fictions are now replacing residual traces of the DoD as a colonial tool for the displacement of Indigenous Peoples from our lands and the further erosion of Indigenous sovereignty and treaty obligations.

As a Medieval and Renaissance historian, I examine and question the wisdom and accuracy of attempts to label the DoD as profoundly or quintessentially Christian. The dehumanization of others evident in various doctrines of discovery is a reflection of a Medieval Eurocentric world view and its racism, not theological principles. The brutality and genocide attributed uniquely to Christianity is, sadly, a more universal attribute of imperialist and colonial powers dating back to Greek and Roman times and is evident in non-western non-Christian societies today. Demonizing Christianity is an affront to the millions of Indigenous Peoples in the western hemisphere who have found a way to combine their traditional beliefs with Judeo-Christian teachings and practices. Mainstream churches have become allies with whom we need to build bridges.

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In recent decades sound and rigorous scholarly research on DoD jurisprudence has suffered from over-reach by those who would attribute every affliction in the lives of Indigenous Peoples to the existence of the DoD. Residential schools, alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence are all being laid at the doorstep of the DoD. These complex issues and legacies require nuanced multifaceted understanding, not monocausal explanations that distract us from asking hard questions and crafting practical solutions.

Finally, building on concerns about historical causality, I argue that we need to dial back the over-use of the DoD as *the* explanation of colonial history before we can engage in individual and community self-healing. I examine how others who have experienced extreme forms of subjugation and genocide have been able to liberate themselves from self-fulfilling narratives of victimhood and dis-empowerment, how they have benefitted psychologically and spiritually, and what specific actions Indigenous Peoples may take to begin disentangling ourselves from the legacy of the DoD.

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