

Rethinking Columbus Day - A^α

What would Exodus 32:1-14, a narrative about how our ancestors-in-faith turned to false gods of their own making, during a time of anxiety in the wilderness, have anything to do with the upcoming observation of Columbus Day? Here, the Doctrine of Discovery, which the General Synod repudiates in 2013, may provide one sobering lens for theological connections.

As the Western hemisphere approached the 500th anniversary of Columbus' 1492 landing, the National Council of the Churches of Christ (NCC) in the United States adopted a resolution stating that celebration would be inappropriate. Instead, it called the churches to a committed plan of action to discontinue the perpetuation of paternalism and racism into our cultures and times.¹

“[W]hat some historians have termed a *discovery* in reality was an invasion and colonization with legalized occupation, genocide, economic exploitation and a deep level of institutional racism and moral decadence,” said the resolution. “What represented newness of freedom, hope and opportunity for some was the occasion for oppression, degradation and genocide for others.”

“[T]he Church, with few exceptions, accompanied and legitimized this conquest and exploitation. *Theological* justifications for destroying [Indigenous] religious beliefs while forcing conversion to European forms of Christianity demanded a submission from the newly converted that facilitated their total conquest and exploitation.”

It has often been asked about the Protestant settlers of this continent, who are also our ancestors-in-faith – how could the Christians who fled from their religious oppressors in the old world, and their descendants who have the freedom to worship in this continent, have allowed the decimation of American Indians? Today, some think that past generations adopted the religious, cultural and racial sense of superiority of their times, but it has nothing to do with our generation in the 21st century.

In *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* (eds. Bill Bigelow & Bob Peterson; Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 1998), there is an effective demonstration to help elementary school children to understand the problem of Columbus' “discovery.” A teacher picks up a student's purse that is lying on the classroom floor, announces that because he “discovers” it, the purse belongs to him; and he further proved it by showing all the things he has inside the purse. The children respond, “Wait a minute!”

The word “discovery” used in describing Columbus' landing masks the theft of Indigenous lands. But why is that theft not be recognized, when it is so obvious even to elementary school children? The answer is the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal principle with theological justification for European and American settlers to perpetrate oppression upon Indigenous peoples and lands for five centuries. Today in the 21st century, the Doctrine of Discovery remains in international law and is being cited in U.S. federal laws and policies impacting American Indian communities.

In *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska, 2008), Robert Miller pointed out ten elements of discovery, and its adoption and use in North America by European colonists and by the U.S. to create Manifest Destiny. Some of those elements of religious, cultural and racialized ideas of Euro-American superiority feed into a theological justification of conquest.

^α A reflection on Exodus 32:1-14 for the Sunday before Columbus Day (Revised Common Lectionary, Year A) written originally for Sermon Seeds, October 12, 2014, by Elizabeth Leung, Minister for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ.

- Christianity is a significant religious aspect of the Doctrine of Discovery. Non-Christian [Indigenous] peoples were not considered to have the same rights to land, sovereignty, and self-determination as Christians. The Christian European nation which discovered them held the power of preemption over their lands, and the rights of Indigenous peoples to their lands are limited to occupancy and usage, but not full property rights and ownership.
- Culture is defined according to European and American standards. Miller contends that Manifest Destiny grows out of the Doctrine of Discovery. Euro-Americans thought that God had directed them to bring civilized ways and education and religion to Indigenous peoples and often to exercise paternalism and guardianship powers over them. (Do you see any of this in our education systems, child welfare policies, and other cultural standards of excellence today?)
- Land, the object of the doctrine, was also defined according to Euro-American legal standards. Lands that were actually owned, occupied, and actively utilized by Indigenous peoples were often considered to be “empty lands,” *terra nullus*. Colonizers could claim that if they were not being “properly used” according to European and American laws. (How would this illuminate the history of Indian removal and the meaning of land today?)
- Conquest as an element of discovery was specifically defined by the Supreme Court in the 1823 case *Johnson v. M’Intosh*. Originated in Europe, conquest referred to the principle that the property rights of conquered people were not taken away following military conquest. However, the U.S. Supreme court modified that principle and determined that it did not apply to Indigenous lands “because of the different cultures, religions and savagery” of its peoples!

Norm “Jack” Jackson, a theologian from the Eagle Butte Learning Center in South Dakota, observed that the Euro-American belief of one true faith was supported by their powerful and superior weapon system in their conquests throughout the world, which in turn confirmed their belief in their superiority. And when such faith “slips into ideological institutions where walls are metaphorically built ... [their belief] became a fort from which they attack others ... even encouraged them to decimate Indigenous populations as an act of faith.”

Religion, culture, land and conquest are the elements that made up the theological justification for discovery, exploitation and genocide. Similar elements are found in the story of ancient Israel from Abraham to Joshua, who led the invasion of Canaan to claim the Promised Land.ⁱⁱ Just as the Church struggled with biblical texts that support slavery, it is necessary for us to struggle with similar texts and elements that support conquest and invasion.

Rosemary McCombs Maxey, another theologian from the Eagle Butte Learning Center, encourages us to explore and engage what it means to “repudiate” the Doctrine of Discovery. She suggests that we can begin by: (1) rethinking our theology, our bible study, our faith symbols; (2) rethinking our relationship with each other where we live as well as globally; and (3) rethinking how we can be church together.

ⁱ See <http://www.transformcolumbusday.org/faithful.html>

ⁱⁱ For a detailed analysis according to settler colonial studies, see Pekka Pitkänen, “Pentateuch-Joshua: A Settler Colonial Document of a Supplanting Society” in *Settler Colonial Studies* (2013); see also *idem*, “Ancient Israel and settler colonialism,” *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2014, vol. 4, no. 1, 64-81.