

# DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY: MANIFESTING OUR DESTINY

Hastings on Hudson  
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Last week's sermon was about the current state of immigration. I asked if our understanding of inherent worth and dignity was limited by nationality or citizenship. I outlined the path of history that brought us from boundary negotiations to the drawing of imaginary lines and the building of walls and the us-them-whose-side-of-the-wall mentality that has resulted and the subsequent rise of hate groups and outrageous laws like SBI070 as the natural consequence of what we've created. I told the story of our fellow Unitarian Universalists participating in an act of non-violence and the support they got from both UU congregations and human rights groups as they worked to call attention to the inhumane treatment of people who have violated civil, not criminal, law.

But, the story didn't start with SBI070 or the war on drugs or building walls or the drawing of imaginary lines. It started with a theology that recognizes only its own truth, embodied by people who used only one lens to view the world. It goes far back into human history; these things don't happy out of nowhere. They build making one logical conclusion after another, which might make sense if the original thoughts were grounded in a complex understanding of truth, but instead are limited by their lack of intellectual or moral imagination.

I won't unearth all of those presuppositions this morning. But, I am going to bring us back to the beginning of Christian European presence in what are now called the Americas.

1492. I bet we all know a line or two of the child's poem. 14 hundred and 92 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. 1492 also saw a Crusade in Granada. The Crusades had become an accepted reality. They had been going on for centuries. Some historians will declare their end in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, but many will recognize that they continued well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century and some suggest that they haven't ended at all. When Columbus sailed, the spreading of Christianity at the end of a sword was considered an acceptable, if unfortunate, part of life throughout the Middle Ages.

In the year 1492, rumblings of Reformation could also be heard. No one could have predicted the wildfire Luther was to set off 25 years later, but fire doesn't spread that quickly unless a lot of land is dry.

Recognizing those things, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Holy Roman Empire was seeking to expand its jurisdiction, and a series of Papal Bulls called the Doctrine of Christian Discovery went into effect. The first was from Pope Nicholas V. It says:

We grant to you (King of Portugal) full and free power, through the Apostolic authority by this edict, to invade, conquer, fight, subjugate the [Muslims] and pagans, and other infidels and enemies of Christ, and wherever established their Kingdoms... Royal Palaces, Principalities and other dominions, lands, places, estates, camps and any other possessions, mobile and immobile goods found in all these places and held in whatever name, ...and to lead their persons in perpetual servitude.

This edict gave sanction for Portugal to invade Africa, take its resources, and begin what was to be called the African Slave Trade.

There were two more after that, one confirming Portugal's rights over other Christian nations and one in 1493 giving the rights for all Christian explorers to lay claim to land and everything on it if the land had been previously unknown to Christians. It added a clause requiring the proselytizing of the inhabitants to Christianity.

It is this Doctrine of Christian Discovery based on these three papal bulls that became the basis for the United States' claim to this land. The assumption here was that once the Europeans were no longer the rulers, the authority to subjugate new lands in the Americas fell on the emerging nations.

The US Supreme court in 1823, in *Johnson v McIntosh* used the doctrine to state that Johnson had no

claim to the land he purchased directly from native peoples because the land rightfully belonged to the US government by virtue of the Doctrine of Discovery. In other words, he couldn't have bought it from them because they weren't allowed to own it. This ruling meant that the indigenous people only had the right of occupancy so long as the US government allowed it and could at any time revoke that right. This was upheld in the US Supreme Court ruling of 1831; *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*. Justice Marshall wrote that "the relationship of the tribes to the United States resembles that of a 'ward to its guardian'". This resulted in the trail of tears when 5 nations including the Cherokee and Choctaw were moved to "Indian Territory" known today as Oklahoma.

This doctrine became the footprint of Manifest Destiny, the belief that the United States should expand from coast to coast, the belief that our expansion was destined by God. We see an uncritical acceptance of the virtue of American institutions and culture, our mission to spread these institutions by way of redeeming and remaking the world in our image and our destiny as declared by God to do so.

I might even suggest that we saw evidence of this manifest destiny when Newt Gingrich, then a candidate for the presidency, declared his vision for a colony on the moon that would then become one of our United States. His idea, not universally scoffed, was that we plant our flag and claim it by colonization, declaring it our own. Of course, if there really is a man in the moon, he must be enslaved by our invading forces.

As most of you know, Unitarian Universalists govern ourselves congregation by congregation but we have joined together in an association of congregations for the purposes of addressing issues that one congregation cannot impact alone. We do this during our annual General Assembly whereby every congregation, including ours, sends representatives to discuss and vote on the business of our association. After SBI070 – the restrictive law legalizing racial profiling in the state of Arizona- was passed, our delegates wondered whether we should move forward with our plans to hold our 2012 GA in Phoenix as planned. Each GA is planned about 5 years in advance and thousands of people mark their calendars. The delegates wrestled with the question of whether our attendance might be perceived to legitimate a law that so clearly opposes our shared Principles. Should we keep our reservations and find a way to stand in solidarity with the marginalized people of Arizona or should we let go of our million dollar deposit and decide not to bring any more of our money to a state that stands in direct opposition to our values.

Our GA Planning Committee and UUA Board turned to our congregations in Phoenix for advice and were then directed to local human rights groups. Those groups, Puente among them, asked that we come, en masse, with a hunger for justice. And we were asked to repudiate the founding doctrine that brought us to this particular crisis. Those grassroots organizations and several tribes of indigenous peoples asked that, as part of our business, we renounce the Doctrine of Christian Discovery.

Admittedly, many UUs, after hearing that this repudiation would be one of the only pieces of business we'd be taking up in Phoenix, were critical of the decision to use our time this way. The Doctrine of Discovery? What is it? Its 500 years old? Are you kidding? Thousands of people in one room and that's how they're going to spend their time?

But then we all started to learn. We learned that laws like SB 1070 aren't written in a vacuum. We learned that we are the beneficiaries of centuries of philosophy and theology that privileged one group over another. We learned that we are standing on this very ground in this exact spot because of that Doctrine. That might be because we have European ancestors that declared our dominance or because we have African ancestors who were enslaved as a result of those Papal Bulls or because our ancestors were indigenous to this land. Even if your family is from elsewhere, this pulpit was founded by 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians making us theological descendants and beneficiaries.

That isn't the only reason this Doctrine is relevant. It's also relevant because it's still used. The reason there's been so much energy around the repudiation, not only by UUs but the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ and the Quakers and World Council of Churches and the United Nations is that this Doctrine continues to be cited in American courts. I have found evidence of it as recently as 2001, although some colleagues of mine have declared sitings in 2005. (I'm not doubting them; I just haven't seen that for myself.) In 2001 it was used to deny a claim by a native tribe to land rights. Our Supreme Court relies on precedent which, in this case, was set in 1823 and confirmed in 1831.

The Doctrine of Christian Discovery opened a Pandora's box out of which poured many of our social ills including the ongoing fight of First Nations to their land, a history of forced relocation and genocide and the imposition of European religion and culture. It also brought us the enslavement of Africans and a morass of racism and white privilege that continues to define American life. It has also influenced our confusion about immigration, particularly the migration of indigenous peoples in the Americas, many of whom are on the move because United States policies in Latin America have limited their economic opportunities.

This brings us right up to our present day, doesn't it? This is the reason why it is important to understand our history, even history that is over 500 years old still has an impact on the decisions, on the values, on the culture we express today. And the people who make these decisions in places of authority might not even have a clue as to what they are reinforcing other than that it seems so natural, so logical, so matter of fact that of course this is the way it must be. The reason we do something a certain way isn't often because we consciously chose to do it that way but rather because the historical practice made it part of our cultural DNA.

I heard an analogy this week that is sticking with me. A family has ham on Easter. When they cook the ham, they cut it into three smaller pieces before putting it in the oven. They've always done it that way and no one wonders why. But, it turns out, generations back, the progenitor of this tradition didn't have a pan large enough for a whole ham, so she cut it to fit what she had. Generations later, it's part of the cultural DNA of this family. It's what they do.

So here we are half a millennium later, still immersed in cultural norms and mores and in laws that seek to place dominion over another people. Last week I talked about the people of Nogales, a city divided between Sonora, Mexico and Arizona in the US. The people who live in Sonora were part of a nomadic tribe that traveled north into Arizona and back south again, a pattern they followed for 10,000 years. Now the border walls prevent these people from their nomadic customs over land that has been theirs. One of the chants during that day of Non-Compliance in Arizona was "I didn't cross the border, the border crossed me." This is a very real statement. Two countries, Mexico and the United States, developed borders without regard to the indigenous peoples that lived there.

Bruce Knotts, Director of the UU United Nations Office, writes: The Doctrine of Discovery violates human rights on its face. It states that any Christian discovery of non-Christian people, gives the Christian nation the right to claim the land and enslave the people, which many European nations did all over the world. The vestiges of these terrible crimes remain with us today. We have imposed relatively modern borders onto ancient indigenous nations. These newly established colonial borders divide indigenous nations. Families are cut off from each other. Nowhere is this as bad as it is in our American Southwest, where some families and nations of indigenous people are on one or the other side of the American/Mexican border. The American government makes no provision for people of one indigenous nation (which may have existed for over a thousand years as a cohesive people) divided by a border established a hundred years ago. The Doctrine of Discovery, purports to give us the right to do what we never should have had the right to do; which is steal the land of others and to enslave the owners of the land we have stolen.

On occasion, I preach something and someone comes up afterwards to tell me that I'm crazy. I suspect today might be one of those days. Or, maybe I'm hoping someone will because it means you're paying attention. What I'm suggesting here is odd or possibly even outrageous. I'm putting out the possibility that we consider the implications of our actions based on a theology that declared Christianity the only true path to god and minimized the very humanity of people who were not Christian. I'm wondering if we need to rethink altogether the way we've defined our borders. Many people in this room would not define themselves as Christian. We're standing on stolen land, but for many of us, it wasn't even stolen for us!

I happen to be an advocate for squatters rights, so our being here for so long does give us some rights of ownership. But, if we put on our rose-colored ethical glasses, we might see ourselves reimagining our borders. The question really becomes can we continue to tell native peoples where they can and cannot live? Many, some say most, some say almost all, of the people seeking economic or political refuge are Indigenous People. The people coming through the desert, the people crossing those imaginary lines, climbing those border walls, hiding their children in the trunks of strangers, the people who are desperately trying to get into this land are descendants of the people who have been here for millennia.

We are living in a frenzy around undocumented immigrants and the subsequent laws encouraging racial profiling and harassment and resulting in chaos and a culture of fear and broken families and lost children. We have jails designed for strict punishment of people who are not criminals, and a system that denies all human rights as we understand them. We have elevated to power men like Sheriff Joseph Arpaio (R Pie O), the sheriff who has boasted that he runs the toughest jail in the country, the sheriff who over saw the arrest of the human rights workers and UUs seeking to call attention to the violent systems we have created. The sheriff who created Tent City Jail in which temperatures inside have reached 145 degrees, and the border patrols and the hate groups and the detention centers are all natural extensions of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, they are the logical conclusions. SBI070 can be seen as a consolidation of the perception of some Americans that America is a white Christian country on a continent that belongs to them. Leaning on 15<sup>th</sup> century Papal Bulls and 19<sup>th</sup> century interpretations, the law of this land is holding up that perception.

And that's why the United Nations and the indigenous tribes of these continents and many international churches are asking the United States to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and why our delegates voted to support those actions in our own disavowal in June.

As people of faith, as people of moral conscience, we have spoken our truth. "BE IT RESOLVED that we, the delegates of the 2012 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery as a relic of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural, and racial biases having no place in the modern day treatment of indigenous peoples."