
REVIEW ESSAY

The Doctrine of Discovery as a Doctrine of Domination

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Sheldon Wolfchild (dir.), *The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code* (38Plus2 Productions, 2014), DVD, \$50US.

Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Books, 2008), 216 pp., \$19.95US (pbk). ISBN: 978-1-55591-642-8.

In 1436 Pope Eugenius IV issued a **papal bull** titled *Romanus Pontifex* that concerned 'the concession of the right of domination over the Guanches people' and the Canary Islands, allowing the kingdom of Castile, a medieval Iberian Peninsula state in what is now Portugal, to claim them (Newcomb in Rotondaro 2015). Sixteen years later, in another bull, *Dum Diversas*, Pope Nicholas V ordered the Portuguese crown 'to invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens, pagans, and other enemies of Christ, to put them into perpetual slavery, and to take away all their possessions and property', and in 1454, yet another bull titled *Romanus Pontifex* extended the rationale of the previous bulls by approving the appropriation of all African non-Christian lands (Newcomb in Rotondaro 2015). These documents ultimately articulated Christian entitlement to 'discovered' lands by 'declaring war against all non-Christians throughout the world,...specifically sanctioning and promoting the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian

nations’—a collective proclamation that would later become known as the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ (Newcomb 1992: 18).

In both the documentary, *The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code*, and the book it is based upon, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery*, film co-producer and book author Steven Newcomb makes abundantly clear that the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ was a thinly disguised theological document that justified the oppression by Christians of all indigenous peoples, who were considered ‘heathens’ and ‘bestias’ (‘beasts’). Moreover, by signing the Doctrine in 1823, the US Supreme Court arguably colluded with the Catholic Church to assert its right to deny all Native Americans¹ ownership of their lands and allow them the ‘mere right of occupancy’. The film thus reiterated theories Newcomb presented in his book. In particular,

Newcomb decodes the Doctrine of Discovery as it was implemented in *Johnson v. McIntosh*. He thus renames this doctrine the Doctrine of Christian Discovery in recognition of the roots of the Old Testament, Christianity, and Christendom on which [Supreme Court] Justice [James] Marshall truly based his ruling (Tsinnajinnie 2009: 568).

The documentary essentially supports the assertions made in Newcomb’s book that despite the ‘presumed separation of church and state’ (p. xxi), US federal law governing Native Americans was based upon ‘theological and legal doctrines formulated during and after the Crusades’ that considered all non-Christians as ‘enemies of the Catholic faith and, as such, less than human’ (Newcomb 1992: 18), thereby denying Indians their ‘original free existence’ and ‘territorial integrity’ (p. xxi).

In decoding the Doctrine of Domination, Newcomb employed cognitive theory to study federal Indian law ‘as an ongoing process of mental or conceptual activity and socialized human behavior’, and he analyzed theological and legal rhetoric for its ‘conceptual metaphors, image-schemas, and other cognitive operations’. For example, Newcomb identified the ‘purposeful (westward) journey conceptualization [i.e., Manifest Destiny] that Americans have/had’ in justifying the appropriation of indigenous land (Tsinnajinnie 2009: 569). Indians are/were accordingly seen as ‘primitives’, while Christian Euro-Americans viewed themselves as culturally superior—a perspective that has been labeled ‘American exceptionalism’ (e.g., Lee 2014a, 2014b,

1. Following Newcomb and many other Native Americans who write about their cultures, I use ‘Native’, ‘Native American’, ‘American Indian’, ‘Indian’, and ‘indigenous’ interchangeably, except where confusion might result.

2014c, 2015a, 2015b; Dancer 2014).² This standpoint allowed America's first European settlers to ignore the 'depth, complexity, and value' of Indian lifeways (Tsinnajinnie 2009: 569). As legal scholar Peter d'Errico wrote in the Foreword of the book, *Pagans in the Promised Land*

is a careful and impassioned exploration of the ways that federal law relating to property, nationhood, and American Indians grew from Christendom... The body of rules created by the US government to define the indigenous peoples of this continent, their land rights, and the land rights of the colonizers...is a continental manifestation of the world-historical mission of Christendom: to bring all Creation into its domain (d'Errico 2008: ix-x).

It became readily apparent from the film's first scenes and voiceovers that we viewers were going to watch and hear about horrific events set on a timeline that began for Newcomb in 1436, when the first Papal Bull or *deprimatur* was released. Newcomb's claims that the Mayflower Puritans considered themselves privileged in their subjugation of the Natives they encountered was affirmed in the National Geographic US television miniseries directed by Paul A. Edwards, *Saints and Strangers*, that premiered a few days before Thanksgiving in 2015. In one of the opening scenes of part 1, the newly landed, hungry settlers came across what was obviously a gravesite and proceeded to steal the corn they found. When one member of the group questioned the propriety of their grave robbing, the Stephen Hopkins character (depicted by the actor Ray Stephenson) justified their actions by replying, 'These people are not Christians'—a message iterated throughout the miniseries and supported by the characters' constant references to the Indians as 'savages'.

In the documentary, Newcomb was careful to provide translations of the non-English words used, and he often emphasized how English translations made obvious the deepest meanings of the Latin words. For example, he translated '*deprimatur*' as 'to subjugate' and noted the variety of meanings for the root *Domo*: 'to subdue, subjugate, tame, till, cultivate', which places words such as 'dominion' in a whole new light. Understood this way, it is difficult to accept Christian apologist insistence that 'dominion' means 'stewardship'. For the colonized indigenes, it clearly did not; for many Indians it meant loss of culture, oppression, and death.

Newcomb also deconstructed 'colonize' and associated its root—'colon'—with 'digest', which he claimed is figuratively what the colonizers did to the Natives (pp. 14-15). In this way, Newcomb applied

2. For more on the attribution of 'primitive' to Indians, see Greenberg 2013.

cognitive theory to Christian theological rhetoric to demonstrate that ‘US government officials such as Indian Commissioner [Hiram] Price’ took to be ‘*literally* true’ epithets about Indians that Christian European settlers understood as ‘merely *metaphorically* true’ (p. 13).

Additionally troubling was the revelation in the film that the basic tenets of the Doctrine of Discovery continue to be applied by the US courts. Newcomb cited a contemporary (27 August 2014) application of the Doctrine that allowed timber to be removed from Tongass National Forest—the largest national forest in the United States—because its supposed ‘discovery by a Christian nation gave them title to the lands’. Newcomb went on to provide a litany of events that proved the ‘key’ point he was trying to make in the film: ‘that it is not about discovery, it’s about *domination*’ (Braine 2015, emphasis added).

As ‘an alternative to the dehumanizing domination system of Christendom’,³ Oglala Lakota Birgil Kills Straight, co-founder with Newcomb on the Indigenous Law Institute in 1992, offered his nation’s ‘traditional indigenous teachings’ in the film and book (p. 136). Also interviewed in the film was theologian Luis Rivera-Pagán, who articulated the ravaging consequences of colonization: ‘the absolute devaluation of one’s being’. Ultimately, the film implored the Holy See at the Vatican to ‘revoke’ the papal bulls that set into motion the Doctrine of Christian Domination—a request that has been made in the past and rejected.⁴

One of many intriguing aspects of the film for me was Newcomb’s ability to narrate in a calm, almost impassive voice what must have been truly devastating events perpetrated against Indians. Rather than impassioned *rhetoric*, the visual effects and voiceovers detailed *visually* ‘the religious reasoning behind Christianity’s takeover and subjugation of the original inhabitants of Turtle Island, how that led to political justifications that were at their base economic, and how those themes continue to be played out today’ (Braine 2015). In this way, the documentary combined the arts of oral storytelling and cinematography so masterfully that the images themselves did not need to be excessively graphic, and for the most part they were not.

3. Online: <http://www.38plus2productions.com/>.

4. On the other hand, the Episcopal Church in 2009 repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, and in 2012, ‘The Unitarian Universalist Association followed suit’ (Rotondaro 2015). The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the World Council of Churches, New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, and the United Methodist church are among those that have also disavowed it (Rotondaro 2015). See also Toensing 2006 and ICTMN Staff 2009, which documents the request by a group of nuns to revoke the 15 bulls that comprise the Doctrine of Discovery.

Rather than image *movement*, Newcomb relied on voiceovers, interviews, historic documents, drawings, paintings, and still photographs to illustrate the atrocities of colonization. For example, a Dutch witness to a massacre of Lenape people at the south end of Manhattan Island on 25 February 1643 wrote,

Infants were torn from their mother's breast and hacked to death in the presence of their parents, and the pieces thrown into the fire and in the water... Other sucklings, being bound to small boards, were cut, stuck and pierced, and miserably massacred in a manner to move a heart of stone. Some were thrown into the river, and when the fathers and mothers endeavored to save them the soldiers would not let them come on land but made both parents and children drown.

Newcomb's assertion of Christian self-proclaimed superiority acquired particular salience during Pope Francis' visit to the United States in September, 2015, when the Pontiff officially canonized California mission founder, Father Junípero Serra. Because Serra has become a controversial figure in California history—he founded nine of the 21 Catholic missions in the state and converted many Indians while concomitantly overseeing their forced slavery and genocide⁵—his canonization was viewed by many Native groups with protest and outrage (Kisken 2015a: 2B; 2015b: 4A; 2015c: 6A; 2015d: 2A; Swegles 2015). The film cited many instances of genocide perpetrated against Indians, including the 'largest mass execution' of Indians (Dakota) in 1862—a 'direct outgrowth of the Doctrine of Discovery'—and the massacre of 425 Indians at Wounded Knee in 1890.⁶ As a remonstrance against the decision to sanctify Serra, his statue in the US Capitol—one of two installed by the State of California—was officially removed

5. See, for example, Hackel 2013: 238; Kisken 2015a: 2B; 2015b: 4A; 2015c: 6A; 2015d: 2A; Bharath 2015; Castillo 2015; *ICTMN* Staff 2015a; Jacobs 2015; Thanawala 2015; Walker 2015.

6. See also the film *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Simoneau 2007) and the eponymously titled book by Dee Brown (1970) from which it was adapted. Perhaps even more disturbing is the apparent ignorance of many white Americans regarding the history of US government lands, much of which was acquired through the forced removal of Natives. To wit; at this writing a standoff led mostly by white ranchers demanding that grazing lands controlled by the federal government be 'returned' to the public was taking place in eastern Oregon on the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. The supreme irony of the ranchers' position—who as American citizens are the owners of this property, collectively, with all other American citizens—has been their total lack of consideration that these lands originally belonged to the Paiutes who were ejected from them in 1879, 'shackled two by two', forced to relocate 300 miles away to the Yakama reservation in Washington State, and never compensated (Keeler cited in Goodman 2016). See also Petty and Valdez 2016.

several months preceding the Pope's arrival after the State Senate's Latino leadership, including President Pro Tem Kevin de León, voted to take it down (Walters 2015).

Serra's canonization therefore seemed particularly disingenuous and hypocritical, especially to North American Native peoples (Thanawala 2015; Bharath 2015), given the Pontiff's apologies in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, for the 'grave sins' (ICTMN 2015b) and "'offenses" committed by the Catholic Church against indigenous peoples during the colonial-era conquest of the Americas' (Winfield and Bajak 2015). According to Angela Mooney D'Arcy, executive director for the Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples in Santa Monica, California, 'Making Serra a saint erases the real stories, the true history of the natives... It's basically saying that the oppression, the killing, the genocide, did not happen' (quoted in Bharath 2015). After the actual beatification ceremony, Serra's gravesite at the Carmel mission was vandalized twice (*LA Times* 2015; Abcarian 2015), and his statue at the Monterey Presidio was decapitated (Palomino 2015). Although Serra's sainthood has its supporters, it is difficult to find any who are not Catholic.

As someone who grew up in California, I can attest to the glorification of Serra and the mission system by the Church and public schools, and I clearly remember the report and exhibit I made of Mission La Purísima in the fourth grade, when missionization minus its concomitant atrocities was taught. Although I wouldn't recommend this film for fourth graders, I do think that the US History curriculum should be amended—if it has not been already⁷—to reflect more accurately the process of colonization and how complicit the United States was in virtually eradicating entire, vibrant cultures. Watching this documentary reinforced my view that the Doctrine of Discovery was in reality a Doctrine of Domination, and I can never again celebrate Columbus Day knowing how the famed explorer set in motion a chain of events that *destroyed*, rather than *discovered*, indigenous peoples and their lands.⁸

7. The US History curriculum has apparently not changed much, if at all, since I was in school 50 years ago, according to a review of the new AP US History Exam by many Native American scholars and others (Lee 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b; Dancer 2014).

8. It should be noted that genocide denial occurs in California higher education as well: a Native student in a California State University, Sacramento, US History class was allegedly 'kicked out' of it by the professor for disputing his alleged comment that 'genocide' is 'too strong' a word for what happened (Schilling 2015). Alternately, a Kiowa lecturer at the University of Oklahoma discusses in her courses how the Indian Removal Act resulted in the 'genocide' of at least 4000 Southeastern US Native peoples during the infamous Trail of Tears (Tsatoke 2015).

Ostensibly, I am not alone in feeling this way; several movements have emerged that decry Columbus. On 12 October 2015, as I was writing this review, groups of Indians demonstrated against the 71-year-old Columbus Day Parade in New York City (ABC News 2015) and against Columbus Day itself in Montana (Walsh 2015). The state of Alaska and several US cities have actually done away with the holiday's title and renamed it 'Indigenous Peoples Day' (Keeler 2015). When the Portland City Council was considering a name change, Klamath/Leech Lake Ojibway actor Dyami Thomas testified: 'Growing up I was never taught the real truth in school. We were taught to praise Columbus for his discovery. It's time for all people to learn the actual truth about what really happened. Something so brutal should never be disguised as heroic' (quoted in Keeler 2015). Indeed.

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