

The Doctrine of Discovery and Beloved Community

A report from Theology Committee of the House of Bishops for its March 2022 gathering

The roots of reparation lie deep and often hidden in the human soil. The call to repair, restore, and renew does not issue from injustices of our day only; it has cast a long shadow. We speak in temporal terms: of the long history of despoliation, enslavement, folly, indifference, and cruelty. But we might also speak in other terms: of space, of human and cultural geography.¹ The call to reparation lies entangled in this pattern of recognizing land as a commodity: the dividing, conquering, amassing, and controlling of land. Etched into the lives and history of many peoples, the name given this terrible pattern is the Doctrine of Discovery. Though this doctrine is often considered to be a decidedly secular conception of land, in truth its origins lie tangled in the history, theology, and practice of the Church. It is the legacy of the Church Universal, for all Christian communities have subjected others or been subjected to its terms. The Western Church, however, has particular responsibility for the Doctrine of Discovery, for it formulated key ingredients of this doctrine, provided theological legitimacy, and rooted it in the scriptural interpretation of the day. Chaplains, missionaries, catechists, and theologians embraced this doctrine as an interconnected whole.²

The Church throughout the world in all its offices—head and members—is caught up in the Doctrine of Discovery, at times as those who benefit, at times as those who suffer under its lash. This imperialistic, godless doctrine is a foundational legacy that comprises at once an epistemology, a metaphysic, and a deep material dynamism. It is a form of knowledge, a depiction of reality itself, and an account of society and its inner workings. It is a worldview.³ This worldview gave impetus to

¹ Often the history of enslavement and caste have been considered distinct movements—sinful ones—from the social organization of land. But recent theorists of race have underscored how land—and the structure of natural and cultural spaces—express and generate gender and racial hierarchies. The constriction of Jews in some European realms to certain quadrants of a city (in medieval Italian, a 'ghetto'), or of women to certain structures in a village (the interior of houses or away from public squares), or the modern practice of discriminatory housing ('red lines' drawn by bankers around neighborhoods that must remain white spaces) show the spatialization of human difference. For analysis of this kind, see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2010); Jay Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Ghazi-Walid Falah and Carol Nagel, eds., *Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion, and Space* (Guilford Press, 2005); Robert Warrior [Osage], "Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians," and William Baldrige [Cherokee], "Reclaiming our Histories," in *Native and Christian*, ed. James Treat (Routledge, 1996); or in an architectural vein, see Carl Schorske, *Fin de Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1979).

² For documents related to the history of the Doctrine of Discovery, see the following internet collections:

<https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/papal-bulls/>

<https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/episcopal-church-repudiates-the-doctrine-of-discovery/>

https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/va01.asp

³ 'Worldview' translates a German original, 'Weltanschauung.' Its origins lie in German Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy of writers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, and Wilhelm Dilthey.

European colonial expansion and the cultural mission of the Church. For centuries, European cultures—but not only they—lived within this world, forging and maintaining and refining it, so that it became gossamer to those who ruled and iron-clad to those so ruled. It is a particular form of caste,⁴ in which purity and defilement constitute a *res extensa*,⁵ an object located and extended into space.

For the Western world, the Doctrine of Discovery took root in what historians have called the Age of Discovery, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of European expansion. Foundational to this account of colonial expansion is the notion that other territories and peoples are empty commodities to be exploited. Space lies open for mariners, explorers, traders, and their chaplains to uncover, hold, and claim as their own. Monarchs and prelates gave both legal and holy permission to this endeavor. Certainly, these explorers knew that they encountered other peoples in their voyages! Manuscripts are filled with sketches of these peoples, their dwellings, their habits, and their dress. And the records show the debate among Europeans about the creaturely status of these beings: Are they human? Should they be catechized and baptized? Are they dangerous to European aims?

But axiomatic to the Doctrine of Discovery is the conviction, both intellectual and spiritual, that these human beings do not count. They are, in Ralph Ellison's haunting words, the 'Invisible Man.'⁶ It is not necessary to negotiate with them, or to make pleas for entry, or to recognize or defer to the culture, habit, and social organization of these peoples. The land is empty, laid bare for the discoverers, and the human beings found there are commodified as labor. Working in mines; harvesting timber; smelting precious metals for export; harvesting and growing sugar cane, cotton,

Nationalism and concepts of a national identity of a people (a 'Volk'), their soil, ethnic and racial classifications, and their spiritual practice are all ingredients in this German term. For analysis see Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1968); Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1982).

⁴ The salience of caste as a form of social and spatial hierarchy has been the subject of intensive study focused originally on the colonial and post-colonial British presence in India. It has been treated as the foundation of European fascination and dread of its colonial subjects. Edward Said's work, *Orientalism* (Vintage Press, 1979), is a classic example. George Orwell's complex relation to his time in colonial India (translated in the novel to 'Burma') is still powerful: George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (Harcourt Publishing, 1934). Caste has also been given a structuralist interpretation: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge, 2002); or Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Beacon Press, 2016). Recently it has been compared to racial hierarchy in the United States: Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste* (Random House, 2020); or to sin and xenophobia: Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Paradigms, Practice and Possibilities* (Routledge, 2016).

⁵ The Latin term used by René Descartes to redefine the central category of Attic metaphysics: 'substance.' In viewing objects as 'extended matter,' Descartes made all material or physical realities homogenous. Everything outside the mind (the 'Cogito') is simply extension: it takes up space. See René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy" in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. and eds. Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁶ Ralph Emerson, *Invisible Man* (Modern Library, 1994).

and coffee for European use—these invisible people became ingredients in the world system of the conquest of land. The hierarchies and controlled geography of the Doctrine of Discovery can be found in the exploitation, expulsion, and cultural despoliation of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. This is history. From the days of the Babylonians and the Assyrians, empires have done this; it is no novel human sin. Christians need to learn and wrestle with this truth.

The early modern European Age of Discovery laid claim to the entire globe in novel forms. This godless “economy of space” developed notions of race that haunt and control us to this day. It was identified and heralded as a Christian endeavor. It also perfected a form of social organization that Antonio Gramsci called the ‘subaltern.’ Borrowing from colonial military ranking, Gramsci saw in imperial geography the creation of a class of indigenous subjects who were at once controlled, invisible, and inferior, yet used as puppets for colonial agendas. The education, training, and professional expertise of subjected and subdivided peoples became integrated into the secular space of discovery and empire.⁷

The central lie perpetuated by the Doctrine of Discovery is that some humans are inferior to others. Such a worldview has influenced policies, jurisprudence, strategies, and more in the service of colonial expansion. The theological task in 2021 is to correct this insidious and godless worldview that has been draped in religious garb. We must genuinely learn to view each other as equals and fellow travelers on this planet, even across our differences. Without such a deep spiritual repair in our worldview, tweaks in behavior, policy, and other expressions of regret will not help us build a sustainable beloved community.

The Christian doctrine of reparation stands in stark contrast to the previous policies and behaviors of both church and state. It offers a vision of the holy and gracious God, a sacred geography, a judging and renewing of all land as holy land, as God’s very own. In the sacred geography, human beings stand before God as image-bearers. They belong to one another as members of one Body—that is, Christ’s—and they are related to and dependent on this holy land. The land they dwell on has been created *ex nihilo* by the commanding Word and belongs by every right to its Creator. This holy God indwells in the world as in the Temple, filling it with divine Glory, and setting forth teaching that formed the People of Israel in dealing justly, in incorporating

⁷ For this complex concept in Gramsci see: Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, trans. Joseph Buttigieg, 3 vols. (Columbia University Press, 2011); Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Polity, 2007). Parallel themes are developed in a psychoanalytic key by Frantz Fanon. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2005); *Black Skin, White Masks*, rev. ed., trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008).

the resident alien, in restoring what has been stolen, in renewing what is defiled, in honoring the dead, and in protecting the living, most especially the widow, the orphan, and the poor. This same holy God indwells the cosmos in the Eternal Son, incarnate in human flesh, walking on God's earth as defender, as teacher, as healer, and supremely as Goel, the redeemer of Israel. Those who are drawn into this righteous realm inhabit a sacred geography that inverts, defends, and renews the fallen geography. The eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. A new knowledge and a new reality are spread out among those called by the Son of Man.

Disciples of Jesus Christ are called by the Risen Lord to take their share in building up this realm, in restoring and repairing and feeding and sheltering, in listening to and joining with those people oppressed and broken hearted. For the followers of Jesus, this is a new doctrine to embrace: an insight written on the heart, on the structures of a fallen world that they have inhabited, built up, and gained from, and now are given the strength to dismantle. In the United States, reparation will address the theft of land, labor, and dignity, most especially for those once enslaved and even now segregated. Mere material repair will not meet the call of our Redeemer. Rather, Christians are to live as those knit together in a "single fabric of destiny," as Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed it, as kin of one another, inhabiting this good earth as those who cannot do without one another, seeking the welfare of other above self. This is the gracious call and command of our Savior Jesus Christ. The call is urgent; the time is now.