

The Practice of Welcome

The Doctrine of Discovery issued by the pope of the Catholic Church in the 15th century gave Christian explorers the right to claim lands they "discovered" and lay hold of them for their Christian Monarchs. Any land that was not inhabited by Christians was available to be taken hold of, and exploited. The "pagan" inhabitants were to be enslaved or killed.

The Discovery Doctrine is now a concept of public international law expounded by the United States Supreme Court in a series of decisions made in 1823. Chief Justice John Marshall justified the way in which colonial powers laid claim to lands belonging to sovereign indigenous nations during the Age of Discovery.

The doctrine has been primarily used to support decisions invalidating or ignoring aboriginal possession of land in favor of colonial or post-colonial governments.

The 1823 case was the result of lawsuits where land speculators worked together to make claims to achieve a desired result. The supposedly inferior character of native cultures was a reason for the doctrine having been used.

This Doctrine governs United States Indian Law today and has been cited as recently as 2005 in the decision: *City Of Sherrill V. Oneida Indian Nation Of N.Y.*

The following comes from two Papal Bulls or charters given by the pope. The First is *Dum Diversas*, (meaning "until different") issued by Pope Nicholas V in June 1452. It provided the theological, moral and legal authority to the King of Portugal to claim lands outside of Portugal.

"We grant you by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens [meaning Muslims] and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, counties, principalities, and other property . . . and to reduce their persons into perpetual slavery."

The second reading comes from the *Romanus Pontifex* (transl: "From the Roman Bishop") also written by Pope Nicholas V in January 1455 to King Afonso V of Portugal. It confirmed to the Crown of Portugal dominion over all lands discovered, and repeated the earlier bull's permission to enslave non-Christians or people of other faiths. It said in part that Catholic rulers are like athletes in their tireless efforts to "restrain the savage excesses" of infidels, and "vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations," through "salutary and laudable work". The bull gives legal right to King Alfonso "to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue" all non-Christians encountered, "and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his use and profit."

The King “justly and lawfully has acquired and possessed, and doth possess, these islands, lands, harbors, and seas, and they do of right belong and pertain to the said King Alfonso and his successors.”

Thanksgiving celebrates the generosity of the Native Americans to the pilgrims who arrived in 1620 in Virginia, 128 years after Columbus.

The pilgrims were escaping religious and political persecution, and they arrived on these shores to a native people who welcomed them in 1620, taught them how to grow corn, saved them from starvation. The pilgrims came with certain ideas about who did and did not deserve the love of god and humanity.

They were armed with the political and ideological training of the Doctrine of Discovery supported by Christianity, a doctrine that did not create but rather expressed the sentiments of the day, and as we heard, still is used to ensure those sentiments maintain the mechanisms of conquest, power and profit.

Closer to home, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was settled in 1630. John Winthrop, who became our first governor was a wealthy English Puritan lawyer and one of the leading figures in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop led the first large wave of migrants from England in 1630, and served as governor for 12 of the colony's first 20 years of existence. His writings and vision of the colony as a Puritan "city upon a hill" dominated New England colonial development, influencing the government and religion of neighboring colonies.

Governor Winthrop wrote that God had delivered smallpox to the Indians, decimating them across a swath of 300 miles so that a new colony could be established in their place, and the fifty or so survivors were declared dependent subjects.

Native American people were not named human beings until the case of Standing Bear vs. Crook (April 1879) when Judge Elmer S. Dundy ruled that an “Indian is a person.”

At the 2012 General Assembly in Phoenix, AZ, delegates of the Unitarian Universalist Association passed a resolution repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and calling on Unitarian Universalists to study the Doctrine and eliminate its presence from the current-day policies, programs, theologies, and structures of Unitarian Universalism.

It reads: "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."

When I listen to the tenets of this doctrine, my blood boils. Is your blood boiling too? It is so obvious that this is wrong, arrogant, abusive, the justification of white supremacy and imperialism.

And as blood boils, I know that we all have a piece of this in us, all of us, with many or few resources, from many ethnicities and lands, abilities and genders, we all have a place in us that judges some others as unworthy of our love, our welcome, our friendship or consideration. We have all made and inherited beliefs about what kind of people deserve our respect, trust, care. Though our first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all people, how we view others and keep ourselves from knowing them, allowing them to become part of our lives, does not always reflect this principle.

We still keep some people in and others out. We all define differently the stranger that we will work to know and the one we will keep away. How do your beliefs work to keep some close and others far? Are when we look at these honestly, are these beliefs worthy of us?

When we meet someone right here on this island of different theological beliefs, political stance, ability, culture, language, skin color...do we welcome them, are we curious about what makes up their lives, do we invite them to coffee, open our minds to their stories, their humanity?

The Native American story about the legend of corn is instructive here. Here is a piece of that story that ends with a poem by Unitarian Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called, The Legend of the Corn God.

As was the custom of his people, when Hiawatha was a young man he went alone into the forest to spend seven days without food, and pray. He was concerned that often his people were without food when no fruits or animals of berries or birds or fish could be found.

On the first day, he saw many of his animal friends in the forest: the deer, the rabbit, the pheasant, the flocks of wild geese. And he prayed, O Master of Life, must our lives depend on these things?

On the second day Hiawatha walked near the river where the wild berries grew: blueberries, strawberries, gooseberries. He prayed, O Master of Life, must our lives depend on these things?

On the third day Hiawatha walked beside the quiet waters of the lake and saw many kinds of fish who made it their home. And he prayed, O Master of Life, must our lives depend on these things?

On the fourth day Hiawatha, without food, felt weak and dizzy so he lay half asleep. At the time of sunset, a handsome youth appeared. He had golden hair and introduced himself as Mondamin, the friend of the people, sent by the Master

of Life, in answer to Hiawatha's concern that his people have food they can depend on all year.

He commanded Hiawatha to get up and wrestle with him. As Hiawatha wrestled, he found his weakness left him and he grew stronger and stronger. As darkness fell, Mondamin stopped the struggle but promised to return.

For three days Mondamin returned at sunset and they wrestled until darkness fell. On the last day, Mondamin told Hiawatha that he had to take his life, and that Hiawatha was to bury him in the soft earth and keep watch over his grave. Hiawatha did as he was commanded.

The story goes on to tell how Hiawatha kept his promise to Mondamin and tended his grave. Day by day Hiawatha kept watch over his grave, kept it clean, drove away ravens and brushed away insects.

Now we hear the rest of the story as told by Longfellow in his poem:

Till at length a small green feather
From the earth shot slowly upward,
Then another and another,
And before the Summer ended
Stood the maize in all its beauty,
With its shining robes about it,
And its long, soft, yellow tresses;
And in rapture Hiawatha Cried aloud, " It is Mondamin ! Yes, the friend of man,
Mondamin !"
And then he Showed his people
Where the maize was growing,
Told them of his wondrous vision,
Of his wrestling and his triumph,

Of this new gift to the nations,
Which should be their food forever.
And still later, when the Autumn
Changed the long green leaves to yellow,
And the soft and juicy kernels
Grew like wampum,
Then the ripened ears he gathered,
Stripped the withered husks from off them,
As he once had stripped the wrestler,
And gave the first Feast of Mondamin,
And made known unto the people
This new gift of the Great Spirit.

What do we have to slay in ourselves before we are willing to give what is ours to give? What beliefs do we clutch so tightly that we cannot open our arms or our hearts and give of ourselves? What beliefs need to be sent out on the wind about who we are, who others are, who deserves to be allowed into our lives and who is not worthy of that honor because of who they are or who we are?

I am not suggesting that everyone deserves our trust, entry into our homes and lives. But I am suggesting that everyone deserves our consideration, our understanding, our efforts to see their humanity, their inherent worth and dignity.

What do we have to slay in ourselves before the harvest of our lives can be planted and bloom?

This thanksgiving, this celebration of welcome and trust, as we are grateful for the bounty of our lives, let us also pause and take note of what might need to be let go of in order to fertilize the fullness of our lives.

May the wind that blows and reminds us that we are one, carry us to our understanding.

Amen.