Module 6 Reflection Paper:

The Doctrine of Discovery

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ST-222—Theological Conversations for Dismantling Racism

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The Doctrine of Discovery is often treated by many as a framework relegated to the annals of history. As Dunbar-Ortiz points out, this doctrine is a collection of fifteenth-century papal documents and nineteenth-century court decisions.[1] Likely, many today, if asked, would say that it is no longer relevant. Sadly, the more I learn, the more I recognize that it is anything but a long-forgotten historical artifact. It continues to be a theological, cultural, and legal framework that has tragically shaped how the United States historically and presently understands land, race, Indigenous peoples, Christianity, and power. The legacy of this doctrine continues to live within mainline and non-denominational Christian Churches as well as within the broader society through the stories we tell, the history that is taught in classrooms, the institutions we maintain as a society, and most importantly, through the assumptions society often fails to question.

At its foundation, the Doctrine of Discovery rests upon the idea that "European nations acquired title to the lands they "discovered," and Indigenous inhabitants lost their natural right to that land after Europeans arrived and claimed it."[2] Within this framework, countries utilized Christian theology to provide "moral and spiritual" justification for their colonization, conquest, and dispossession of land and their Indigenous inhabitants.

Dunbar-Ortiz points out that, as "arcane as it may seem, the doctrine remains the basis for federal laws still in effect that control Indigenous peoples' lives and destinies, even their histories by distorting them."[3] In 2023, the United Church of Christ powerfully acknowledged that the doctrine originated in church documents and was incorporated into American law and political

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[1] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 197.
[2] Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 198.
[3] Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 198.

practice. They cited *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823), for example, where the Supreme Court relied upon this doctrine to establish that Indigenous peoples possessed occupancy rights while the "discovering" government possessed ultimate authority over the land.[4]

In reflecting on the Doctrine of Discovery and the question of racism, it was not only about justifying the land grab that was conducted by imperialist powers. Tragically, it established a hierarchy of people that has been perpetuated to the present. Through this framework, European Christian nations positioned themselves as having authority over Indigenous peoples and their lands. They were granted authority over groups they had never seen, met, interacted with, or even heard about prior to their arrival. The legal and cultural consequences of that hierarchy have enabled the establishment of patterns in which race, religion, land, and political power have all become interconnected.

In reflecting on this reality, it is important to note that the Church today cannot simply point to the government or colonial explorers and claim that they were/are uninvolved. As stated earlier, it developed through a series of papal bulls and European legal/theological developments and has been continually perpetuated by Christian institutions for centuries.

As pointed out by Kwiyani, Christianity was at times used to justify colonial/imperial systems of domination; specifically, missionary activity frequently became intertwined with practices associated with cultural assimilation, the destruction of Indigenous traditions, and the assumption that European Christianity was superior to Indigenous cultures and spiritual traditions.[5]

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[4] United Church of Christ, "Doctrine of Discovery: The Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery," accessed October 1, 2026. United Church of Christ webpage

[5] Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Decolonizing Mission: The African Church Faces Western Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 129.

When we reflect on the larger American society, the Doctrine of Discovery continues to be evident in our narratives. Something as familiar as saying that Christopher Columbus "discovered" America reinforces the assumption that the land was somehow waiting to be found. This runs counter to the reality that Indigenous nations had inhabited and cared for these lands for thousands of years before Columbus was born. The language that we use as a society matters because the stories we tell shape whose humanity, history, and relationship to the land we recognize and whose we don't.

It can be difficult to determine what actions are needed to address and act prophetically to confront persons, systems, institutions, and churches perpetuating racism because this framework is deeply ingrained in the United States' national narrative. Confronting this legacy certainly requires more than changing terminology. It requires truth-telling, repentance, education, relationship, and action.

First and foremost, churches must teach the history of the Doctrine of Discovery honestly rather than treating colonialism as an unfortunate side note in the history of Christianity. They have to acknowledge how the faith tradition has perpetuated this narrative. Congregations must examine their own histories, learn whose traditional lands they occupy, listen to Indigenous voices, support Indigenous sovereignty and cultural preservation, and develop relationships with Native communities rather than simply speaking about them.

Powerfully, churches in Canada, including St. Paul's United Church of Canada in Dundas, Ontario, include in their worship bulletin a Land Acknowledgment: "We gather with respect, recognizing we are on the traditional and treaty lands of the Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee peoples. This place is also connected to the histories of the Erie, Neutral, Wendat

and Mississauga peoples."[6] Repudiation must become more than a denominational resolution that sits on a website or in a church archive.

That same aforementioned principle applies to racism more broadly. If the Church is going to act prophetically, it must confront racism not only when it appears as prejudices of the individual but also when it is embedded within systems and institutions. This can be challenging because it requires examining an extensive number of policies, including but not limited to those concerning land, education, economic opportunity, environmental justice, housing, criminal justice, and access to resources. It means not only asking but also thoroughly discussing who benefits from existing systems and who continues to bear their burdens.

This work is also significantly theological. We are reminded that Scripture declares, "The earth is the Lord's"[7] (Psalm 24:1), not the possession of those who have the greatest military, political, or economic power. The Christian witness calls us toward a vision of humanity in which no person or people is considered less worthy because of race, culture, religion, or ancestry. Repentance requires more than acknowledging that something wrong happened in the past. Repentance, in its true definition, means turning around and choosing a different way of living.

Acting prophetically means having the courage to name injustice. This means that doing so can occur even when there are challenges to comfortable narratives or institutions. This means moving from confession to transformation. The Body of Christ must listen to the voices and experiences of Indigenous peoples. This means centering their voices and experiences, challenging racist structures, advocating for justice, and examining where Christianity continues to benefit from systems created through colonization.

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[6] St. Paul's United Church, Dundas, *[Worship Bulletin, September 27, 2026],* September 27, 2026, PDF.
[7] The New Interpreter's Study Bible. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, page 772.

Not only must prophetic action occur at the institutional and broader level, it must also occur at the interpersonal level. Christians cannot only confront racism when it is codified in laws or institutional policy. They must also challenge racist assumptions, language, stereotypes, and practices that emerge within congregations, families, classrooms, and our everyday relationships.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a tragic lesson on what happens when Christianity becomes aligned with domination (not denomination) rather than liberation. For the Church to be prophetic, the body of Christ must embody the gospel by standing with those who have been marginalized, telling the truth about our history, repairing relationships, and working toward a society in which the dignity and sovereignty of every people are honored.

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