

Doctrine of Discovery: Verbatim

The term “Doctrine of Discovery” refers to the legal and religious justifications used to seize Native lands. It first appears in 15th Century Papal Bulls (edicts) that gave early explorer the right to claim “discovered” lands and enslave and/or convert the pagan inhabitants. Papal Bulls typically cited as part of the Doctrine of Discovery include Romanus Pontifex and Inter Caetera. The Church of England had its own version, the Royal Charter of 1496. Below are excerpts from English translations.



Romanus Pontifex (1454) Pope Nicholas V to the King of Portugalⁱ

Nicholas, bishop, servant of the servants of God. for a perpetual remembrance....

... [W]e bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who, like athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith ... not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us ...

[We grant to King Alfonso the right] to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed ... and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors [their] kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit ... [W]e do by these [documents] forever give, grant, and appropriate to the aforesaid King Alfonso and his successors ... the provinces, islands, harbors, places, and seas whatsoever, how many soever, and of what sort soever they shall be ...

Inter Caetera (1493): Pope Alexander VIⁱⁱ

Portugal and Castile (Spain) had been vying for African colonies for a century prior to Columbus' voyage. According to Nativeweb: “On the theory that the Pope was an arbitrator between nations, each kingdom had sought and obtained Papal bulls at various times to bolster its claims, on the grounds that its activities served to spread Christianity.” Inter Caetera was sought by Castile to counter Portugal's claims.

Alexander, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to the illustrious sovereigns, our very dear son in Christ, Ferdinand, king, and our very dear daughter in Christ, Isabella, queen of Castile ...

... Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself. ...

[Columbus and his men] discovered certain very remote islands and even mainlands that hitherto had not been discovered by others; wherein dwell very many peoples living in peace, and, as reported, going unclothed, and not eating flesh. Moreover, ... these very peoples living in the said islands and countries believe in one God, the Creator in heaven, and seem sufficiently disposed to embrace the Catholic faith and be trained in good morals. ...

[In the] countries already discovered are found gold, spices, and very many other precious things ...

[We] give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs ... all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south, by drawing and establishing a line [from the Arctic pole to the Antarctic pole, starting one hundred leagues from the Azores and Cape Verde. ... [N]one of the islands and mainlands, found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered ... [can be claimed if they] be in the actual possession of any Christian king or prince ...

We trust in Him from whom empires and governments and all good things proceed, that, should you, with the Lord's guidance, pursue this holy and praiseworthy undertaking, in a short while your hardships and endeavors will attain the most felicitous result, to the happiness and glory of all Christendom.

1496 Royal Charter of the Church of England

King Henry VII granted a charter to John Cabot and his sons to claim lands not already "discovered" by Portugal and Spain.ⁱⁱⁱ Cabot was to pay a fifth of his trips' profits to the King.

Be it known and made manifest that we have given and granted ... for us and our heirs, to our well beloved John Cabot ... full and free authority, faculty and power to sail to all parts, regions and coasts of the eastern, western and northern sea, under our banners ... to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians. ... John and his sons or their heirs and deputies may conquer, occupy and possess whatsoever such towns, castles, cities and islands by them thus discovered ... as our vassals and governors lieutenants and deputies therein, acquiring for us the dominion, title and jurisdiction ...

Questions

- How did you feel reading these passages? Did a particular passage stand out?
- How do you see the legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery? Do you think it is ancient history or do you see ways it shows up today?
- What Indian stereotypes (like Cleveland Indians Chief Wahoo, right) do you still see today? What are the implicit messages?



ⁱ The Doctrine of Discovery website: <http://doctrineofdiscovery.org/>

ⁱⁱ Nativeweb: <http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/indig-inter-caetera.html> and <http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/indig-romanus-pontifex.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ [Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage website](#)