

Response: Sarah Augustine

Sarah Augustine reflected on this issue of Vision in conversation with guest editors Pablo Kim Sun and Sarah Kathleen Johnson in December 2025. An edited version of that conversation is presented here.

Could you tell us a bit about yourself and your role with the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery?¹

I'm Sarah Augustine. I'm the co-founder and executive director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery. I'm a Tewa descendant and a displaced person. That's how I define myself. I am racially Tewa, but politically a Tewa descendant because of the laws in my country and how they define who is allowed to claim that definition.

As you reflect on reading this issue of *Vision*, are there key themes that you would like to highlight?

Your introduction does such a beautiful job outlining the themes of the whole issue. I am so grateful for the framework that you created, because I think it's a model for Christian activists who are trying to grapple with all of this and for Christian theologians. There are a couple of themes that I would like to highlight.

You mention that faith is contextual, and I think that is really an important framing. For me that is consistent with what Vine Deloria expresses in his book *God Is Red*. Vine Deloria is the predominant voice in twentieth-century US Indigenous theology. He talks about how our understanding of the divine is not universal, but particular. I think that really resonates with Indigenous spirituality in general. Although there is no pan-indigeneity, in many of the indigeneities I've encountered, including my own, it's so deeply tied to land, and not an abstraction.

You talked about how decolonization and working with Indigenous communities can't just be based on intention but must also pay careful attention to impact. Those of us who are academic types are talking conceptually when most Indigenous Peoples in the US are really living in the trenches of oppression. And so when we bring our theoretical intentions to communities of poor and oppressed people there is a disconnect there when it turns out the people that we're interacting with are living in a completely different reality.


With this in mind, I would add three more themes. First, we have to reckon with power dynamics, understanding who has power, and how

1 The Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, <https://dismantlethedoctrine.org/>.

power works in the context of institutions. Second, we have to reckon with an understanding of how trauma works as well, as Mollee Moua explores in her reflections. Third, I want to add a dimension to the model of decolonial practice this issue of *Vision* introduces, which is the material. Beyond theoretical, beyond theological, beyond spiritual, we must attend to the material as well. How do we, as people of faith, move beyond prayer and worship to dismantling structures?

There are laws and policies that define reality for all of us, not just Indigenous Peoples. But our oppression as Indigenous Peoples is framed by laws and policies, and those we call structures. And so, dismantling structures is what our people cry out for when we cry out for justice. So, sharing a potluck is nice on some level, but really what we need is partners in the struggle to dismantle systems of oppression. And that is absolutely the work of the church.

I disagree that for Christians decolonization is about our own institutions. It's also about shaping our world as the beneficiaries of the Doctrine of Discovery—the prevailing body of law that is the law of the land today and that defines oppression for Indigenous Peoples and advantage for settler communities. That has to be dismantled. And whose job is it to change the



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law? The churches. These are the institutions that have the moral authority to take action, and yet generation after generation choose not to.

I really want to put that challenge out there, that there is material work as well as spiritual work. I don't want to dismiss the spiritual work within the context of the cosmology that I've learned from my Elders that's so crucial and important. But the material outcome can't be dismissed.

The spiritual grounding for the material work of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery is described on your website: “We are a group of people who work together to mobilize Christian church communities to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery and follow Indigenous leadership. We proclaim an Anabaptist spirit of discipleship rooted in the call to love of neighbor, seeking right relationship and reconciliation through active non-violence.” Part of the theme of this issue of *Vision* is “Decolonial Discipleship,” and *Vision* is an Anabaptist journal. Could you say more about how the Coalition understands an “Anabaptist spirit of discipleship”?

In our Coalition, we define decolonization as the relinquishment of subjugated people. In order for there to be freedom, those people who have the

power have to relinquish control of those that are subjugated. And so I think this is also a call to the church.

From my point of view, Anabaptist discipleship moves beyond belief into collective action. Discipleship is living as a collective into the mandate that Jesus voices in Luke 6. Jesus says, reading from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,” and he addresses what those things are, namely “release for the captive, restoration of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the announcement of the year of our Lord’s favor,” which is jubilee—the just reordering of human systems. Anabaptist discipleship acknowledges that there’s something beyond the first step, which is belief. Even in the baptismal covenant, you’re entering into a life of discipleship, not just crossing a boundary of belief.

As an Indigenous woman and activist, engaging in that collective is seeking justice in peaceful means because of that mandate of Jesus. Freedom for the oppressed is not a metaphor. We’re living into that process of struggling for and also embodying a different way of being in the world.

Can you say more about how this vision of discipleship is lived out in practice in the work of the Coalition?

In the Coalition, we follow the leadership of Indigenous Peoples. There are land and water protectors with whom we’re in relationship who come to us with a policy objective or focus. We organize Christians to support that policy focus. We don’t define what the focus or outcome is—it’s up to Indigenous leaders to do that. What we’re doing is activating Christians—settler-descended people who are beneficiaries of these structural injustices and who hold these values together—to awaken to injustice and to join in the process of liberation by following the leadership of Indigenous land and water protectors.

Everything that we’re doing is rooted in spirituality, and we always seek to embody a posture of loving-kindness. That has to be our posture because that’s our mandate: “to love one another.” And so we’re encountering conflict constantly, because when you are stepping into something as intercultural as working for justice, there’s going to be a constant onslaught of conflict. And we seek to encounter that conflict with a posture of love and kindness.

The second part of the theme of this issue is being an “intercultural church.” A lot of social justice organizations and institutions predominantly engage with white people and we rarely see people of color being involved. If new immigrants and people of color are not part of this important work, there is a risk of perpetuating colonial patterns. At the same

time, we miss the wisdom and participation of many who are essential to making this a truly collective and transformative effort. These are some of the reasons why we want to hold together interculturality and decolonial discipleship. What was your experience of this in decolonial work?

I want to be clear that our Coalition is mainly made up of white settlers. We do have people of color in positions of leadership, and Indigenous people, and those numbers are growing slowly. These are tricky waters to navigate, and I don't want to say we figured it all out. We don't have five easy steps to liberation.

Originally, we as a Coalition began by targeting church institutions because these are the beneficiaries of colonization. These are the institutions and the individuals and families who have gained the most from systems of domination. And so, if you think about the struggle to end slavery, for example, it's hard to imagine those people whose bodies are enslaved being able to give all the work to end slavery. It takes the people who are the beneficiaries, which is the voting people, the Christians who are settler-descended.

As we have been on this road people of color have found us and joined us, especially young people. But I don't go recruiting Indigenous people or people of color, because we're trying to shape the context where it's possible for those people with power to relinquish that control. And it's not the work of Indigenous people or people of color to train the beneficiaries how to do that. Some of us do that. We're the bridges. I think it's really a special person who's willing to come along and accompany those people who have been the primary beneficiaries. To me the work of Indigenous activists is to lead their movement for liberation. What we're trying to do in the Coalition is train Christians to accompany that.

Now after eleven years, we've started to contextualize some of our materials into Spanish. What we're doing is contextualizing, not just translating. We're going to communities of Spanish-speaking people in North America and asking them to share their colonial stories. We're taking the time to build those relationships.

Recent immigrants who are subjugated are some of the people that are the most supportive of colonial structures because they hope they're going to serve them too. When I was in college, I did this big study on immigration at Northwestern University. We found that by the third generation immigrants were done. In the first generation, they're very hopeful and gung-ho. The second generation is raised by the first generation, so they're still quite hopeful. But by the third generation, they're subjugated and no longer hopeful. That study was about systemic poverty across generations. It took three generations to realize that integration is not possible—they're stuck in that subjugated space.

In some ways, the book *Healing Haunted Histories*² is a story of another immigrant community—Russian Mennonites on the Canadian prairies. How does the approach to decolonial discipleship and restorative solidarity in the book fit within the approach of the Coalition?

I'm grateful for the framework and I think this book has been much discussed. I think the pathway that it's created has a shadow side, which is meeting the needs of a group of beneficiaries who are able to engage in self-analysis continuously without actually investing in making justice. I'm not saying that's inherent in the project, but I'm saying it's a risk. It's the shadow side that is casting everything through an individual lens.

I am going to talk about this in the context of "All My Relations" by Denise Climenhage, who is of Cree and German Brethren in Christ descent. She talks about "kahkiyaw niwahkomakanak," which is that all living things have a spirit and are related, which is different from centering the experience of the individual. I have learned from my Elders across multiple tribes this very idea.³

I respect the idea of calling a narrow group of Anabaptists to this kind of reflection—this is really the experience of Russian Mennonites and not all Mennonites. But we need to get beyond the individual experience where we reflect on our ancestors and on our spiritual lines. Caleb Kowalko quotes Frances Latchford, "They impressed me with myself." These identities we form have to move beyond self-edification and work for collective liberation.

It's very common for people to come to me after I speak and say, "I have some Indigenous ancestry." I say, "Great, you're so welcome, we're so glad you're here. And by the way, you don't just get to claim that once in a while. The obligation is that you join in the movement for liberation for our people. That's how you can be Indigenous every day of your life. You don't have to wait for an invitation. That day is today. Can we join together as a collective in struggling for liberation on behalf of our ancestors?"

The way we relate to others in that web is through mutual obligation as opposed to individual-level identity. Brian Quan describes this sense of obligation in relation to the Confucian principle of harmony. I think in some ways the *Healing Haunted Histories* framework is really focused on individual

2 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021).

3 Sophie Pierre, a tribal Chief of the Ktunaxa Nation, describes how any policy has to reflect the benefit of all living things, and anything that doesn't reflect the benefit of all living things is a pointless endeavor. If there's winning and losing, it's in a very narrow, time-bound situation. You win today, but if your opponent loses, then everybody loses in time. We need to look at a different timeline than what's happening right now at the individual level. You can watch her lecture at <https://dismantleddiscovery.org/resources/indigenous-speaker-series/>.

identity. I long for a moment when we move beyond individual identity and redefine our collective identity as the body of Christ. This understanding is described by Denise Climenhage when she talks about all my relations.

Reconciliation has to move past individual action. That's what was expressed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, with 94 recommendations that are primarily structural. Those Calls to Action are almost always institutional. At what point will we as a collective engage in that path of justice?

Ched and Elaine's model falls short of that. I'm not saying it's bad, and it's not a critique; I'm just saying we have to take another step. Because we're still centering the idea that we had this horrible experience as Russian Mennonites and we were oppressed. Yes, that happened, but meanwhile, right here, right now, we have the opportunity to work for liberation together.

This is an issue of *Vision* full of stories. Are there stories that resonate with you in particular ways?

Peter Haresnape wrote about how he was a settler to the Fens first before he was a settler to Canada. He described how he encountered decolonization as a volunteer for Christian Peacemaker Teams. He talked about arriving by invitation, witnessing, showing up, to be supportive of land and water protectors without claiming the story, and putting his body side-by-side with Indigenous land and water protectors to prevent their harassment and intimidation, centering their aims, not his own aims. I related to his story because I also relate to the Fen folk who were talked about like pagans and throwbacks and rebels when they were defending their territory. Peter wrote, "I know that settlers believe in their deepest fears that if the settler state is abolished, they will be swept away by a tide of living justice." And then to that, he responds, "I know that perfect love casts out fear." I love that. I relate to that so much, and I appreciate how he's defining so concretely not only what decolonization looks like, but the fear that's at the center of how we don't do that.

I viscerally related to Sue Park-Hur's essay where she was talking about gathering a spoonful of dirt because her teacher told her, "Don't forget the land you came from." It reminds me of a poem by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: "Take me as a relic from the mansion of sorrow; / . . . Take me as a toy, a brick from the house / So that our children will remember to return." And I love that, because my people also are people of a diaspora. We have been scattered, as we sometimes say from the UN definition, "as refugees in place." We're excluded from our own homes, our own lands, and yet we can't leave the country because we're citizens of only this country.

There is a story that I would like to share in relation to the story Sarah shared about encountering the teacups in the Anglican church. You talk about coming into this space and identifying with it as part of your heritage that reminds you of your grandmothers. It's important to grapple with how different people enter the same space, and how they experience what these symbols mean. You're saying these teacups help you to locate your place in the family of things.

In the United States, we had a systematic slaughter of bison by colonial powers. The purpose of that eradication of bison was to eradicate a people, particularly the people of the plains, to cripple that people by destroying the food supply and neutering their ability to resist this process of settlement and colonization. There were huge piles of bones that were then exported to England for the production of china. And so the end of the bison created this symbol of civilization in England.

The Coalition is working together with the tribes of the Wind River Reservation and their bison reintegration project.⁴ They're trying to build bison herds to reintegrate a very important species into the care of the land. The church can help not only by buying and returning land (and the majority of land on the reservation is owned by the church), but also in shifting laws and policies nationally and regionally. Laws need to change to transfer these bison from being livestock, which can be governed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (the federal government), to wildlife, which is governed by tribal authorities. This is a bid for self-determination that is tangible, material, and rooted in the land.

I'm trying to extend this metaphor of the teacup. I'm not saying we shouldn't have teacups. I'm not saying it's wrong or bad. I'm saying it doesn't mean the same thing to everybody. Something that has this understanding of belonging can also be a symbol of oppression. None of us here, or any of us alive now, created the systems that enslave us all. And all of us have an opportunity to dismantle those things, in relationship with each other, and on behalf of our ancestors, whoever they are. Each one of us is a representative of the ones who came before, and we have the opportunity to work for justice now, on their behalf. What a privilege is that! What a joy to be alive now, and to have the opportunity to do that.

We hope that this issue of *Vision* will inspire readers to hold together commitments to interculturality and decoloniality—to join together as people from across cultures in the shared work of dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery and its ongoing legacies of harm. What call to action would you offer to churches?

4 Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative, <https://windriverbuffalo.org/>.

I don't think it's tricky. I know that a lot of scholars talk about it being tricky, but it isn't. Some of us are oppressed, and others of us aren't. The ones that aren't need to work for the liberation of the ones that are. It's not hard.

Some people say to me, we need to work in relationship with Indigenous people. A lot of people ask me, how do I find Indigenous people to relate to? Wherever you are, look for the tribe near you, or any tribe; it doesn't have to be near you. Find out what their legislative agenda is. If you're working for that legislative agenda that is changing laws and policies and structures for the liberation of the people, believe me, in time you will have a relationship.

That's the essence of Jesus's ministry. This working-class Palestinian healer was not compliant with the rules of the empire. He was expressing a different way of being in the world, a different centering than individualism, a different centering than the empire, a different centering than the religious leaders, but instead centering the collective in love, establishing the kingdom of God, a different way of being that is actually the expression of the Creator's dream for creation, the reconciliation of all things.

Christians have lost that vision, if we ever had it. Now it's like, we are so wealthy, and we give thanks for our excess, and we're willing to share the breadcrumbs with the less fortunate. Give me a break! That is not it! We have to work together for something else. This is something I ask church leaders all the time: We are charged by Jesus with establishing the kingdom of God. Will we do it? Or will our generation punt like all the generations before us?

We have a chance right now. We're alive right now. People who created the systems that we're living under, they're not smarter than us, they're not more creative than us. They did that. We could do something else, we could choose to, but that is risky. Which of us will risk being willing to live for justice? We can open our eyes and see our our siblings, not just in humanity but across creation, who are struggling for survival.

My people, the Tewa people, are dwindling every year. Indigenous tribes across the board are shrinking. We are shrinking, not because we don't want to flourish, but because the strongest, most powerful empire the world has ever known has made it their policy objective to eradicate us from the surface of the earth. How can the Christian church say, "We want to have a potluck with you"? Save our lives! Join us in the struggle to be able to live in this world!

About the author

Sarah Augustine, a Pueblo (Tewa) descendant, is cofounder and executive director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery and cofounder of the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund, where she has worked in relationship with vulnerable Indigenous Peoples since 2005. She is the author of *The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* (Herald, 2021) and coauthor with Sheri Hostetler of *So We and Our Children May Live: Following Jesus in Confronting the Climate Crisis* (Herald, 2023).