

# The Doctrine of Discovery beast and the slaughtered lamb

## A sermon on Revelation 7:9–17

Katerina Friesen


Did you ever play “finder’s keepers” as a child? Basically, whoever finds a lost item gets to claim ownership over it. Finder’s keepers may be innocent enough for children, but it’s a dangerous principle applied politically and economically. Yet that’s what happened with the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery is a complex legal and philosophical framework that started as a series of papal bulls—official decrees by the pope in the fifteenth century—that provided religious justification for Christian European conquest of those who were not Christians. It is otherwise known as the “Law of Christendom.” Under its legal framework, land in the New World could be claimed under the Christian ruler of the explorer or conquistador who first “discovered” that land. If the land was not ruled by a Christian sovereign, it was considered uninhabited, even if Indigenous peoples lived there. Basically, “finder’s keepers.” If I had to pick an image to represent the Doctrine of Discovery, it would be Theodor



de Bry’s 1594 copper engraving, captioned, “Columbus as he first arrives in India, is received by the inhabitants and honored with the bestowing of many gifts.”

The cross shown in this image would later be replaced by a nation's flag marking its territory—or forts and settlements that marked expanding boundaries over and against other nations' land claims. For the United States, the Doctrine of Discovery (DoD) developed into Manifest Destiny, the idea that it is America's right and providential destiny to expand. What was first an explicitly Christian European claim to land became generalized to include all European settlers.<sup>1</sup>

Just because the so-called discovery of new lands for Europe happened five hundred years ago doesn't mean the legal framework for conquest is



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now dead. It has morphed and adapted, but the DoD is still very much alive in dispossessing indigenous peoples of their lands. Its impacts have been what I've called the "3 E's"—enslavement, extraction, and extinction.<sup>2</sup>

I am part of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition that was formed in 2014 with like-minded Anabaptists committed to joining Indigenous peoples and ecumenical groups around the world in dismantling the DoD. Sarah Augustine, the coalition's co-chair, has pointed out that, like the

institution of slavery, the DoD was a structure that was put in place historically and thus is something that we can dismantle in history. At one time, it was *perfectly legal* to own other human beings as slaves. And it is currently *perfectly legal* in many places around the world for Indigenous People's lands to be taken and their lives to become disposable. Christian powers set up this structure, but today corporations and international financial institutions continue this structure.

As with slavery, the Bible and Christian teachings have been used to justify and support the DoD. As with slavery, this system is lucrative and thus hard to give up. It is difficult—probably impossible—to disentangle ourselves and our investments from this current system of exploitation.

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1 See Steven Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2008).

2 See the fact sheet at <https://dofdmverno.org/learn-more/>.

And, as with slavery, our coalition believes it will take a movement like the abolition movement to bring it down.

### Revelation and the beast

Christian scriptures have been used to support the DoD, but they can also be used to resist the DoD in its current forms. Our text comes from Revelation 7:9–17. The book of Revelation describes a dream of John of Patmos that is filled with vivid symbolism, confusing meanings, and gory images. It speaks of a cosmic struggle between God and the powers and principalities of Empire. Christ is at the center of the dream as a lion in sheep’s clothing—a slaughtered lamb who is seated on the throne, triumphant over the principalities and powers of evil.

I see the Doctrine of Discovery as part of the horde of principalities and powers that wage war against Christ. It is not just a legal framework over indigenous land tenure, but it has spiritual dimensions as well. Inspired by the Revelation passages that are full of images of animals, dragons, and beasts, I drew a picture of the DoD as a monster. That way, we can better understand its dimensions, discern its presence in our world, and struggle against it.



### *Terra Nullius*

The Monster is blind in its dollar-sign eyes because of the principle of *terra nullius*. This is a legal principle dating back to Roman law that says the land is empty unless it is ruled by a Christian prince. Under *terra nullius*,

Indigenous peoples were not considered to be fully human. They didn't really count because they were not baptized and were instead defined as "infidels and heathens." Today, government policies still consider Indigenous peoples to be backward or "undeveloped." Some countries, like Suriname, don't even legislatively recognize Indigenous people and their lands or rights.

The concept of *terra nullius* developed over time and can be seen in the view that European settlers' uses of agriculture were better than hunter-gathering and Indigenous ways of subsistence. Under *terra nullius*, Europeans had more of a right to the land because they could make it "productive" through farming or other methods of land use. European governments believed they also brought culture and civilization to "uncivilized" peoples and places. Of course, harmful versions of Christian mission played into these tropes.

Mennonites are not exempt from these views. Mennonites were often invited in by the state—in places like Russia, Canada, and Paraguay—and were often used to settle Native lands and claim them for the state through agriculture. Take, for example, this quote by Mennonite historian H. S. Bender:

*We have a future Mennonite state in mind, where, if possible, all Russian Mennonites in unrestricted freedom may establish and develop their life and their culture again. A further specific advantage of the Paraguayan Chaco in cultural respect is the fact that today there exists no culture. Therefore there will be no danger that the Mennonites with their German culture may perish in a foreign culture.*<sup>3</sup>

## Entitlement


The second dimension of the DoD monster that I see is that of entitlement. In my picture, I've drawn a tree that the beast has ripped out of the ground, displaced people still clinging to its roots. The mouth of the beast is an open gold mine, with a serpentine tongue of gold coming out of it. Around its bald head are stumps of felled trees. The DoD is based on theologies of entitlement to land and riches. Because early European explorers and governments identified with God's covenant people, the

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3 From Calvin Wall Redekop, Victor A. Krahn, Samuel J. Steiner, eds., *Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith and Economics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 127, italics mine. Note: there were and are many different Indigenous tribes in the Chaco!

*chosen* people, they believed they had a divine mandate to own and exploit Indigenous land and resources. They could do whatever they wanted with the land because they represented God's rule and had the blessing of the pope to exercise dominion over foreign people and lands.

This past summer, I traveled with a group of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) students and community members on a pilgrimage on the Trail of Death, the route of the 1838 forced removal



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of about eight hundred and fifty Potawatomi people from northern Indiana. This was one of many such removals that cleared land for European settlement, including Mennonite and Amish settlers. As we journeyed and met with descendants of those who were removed, we both lamented the displacement of the First Nations from where we now live and encountered some of our

own underlying entitlement issues. The feeling of entitlement to private property runs deep in our American veins and can be seen in our anger at people trespassing on “our” land, the idea that we can do whatever we want so long as it's on our property, and the ways we go to great lengths to protect what we own. Whatever happened to the theology of Psalm 24:1, “The Earth is *the Lord's* and everything in it”?

Indigenous peoples around the world today lack full legal title over their land. They are not *entitled* to their own land because of the original entitlement of colonial powers, which stripped them of their sovereignty and their right to say what happens on their land.<sup>4</sup>

### **Christian and European rule**

In the picture I drew, you see the beast wearing a crucifix and holding a bloodied sword. This is because the violence of the DoD took place in the name of Christ. Historically, we can see this violence made manifest in the different forms of cultural genocide that decimated food sources like the buffalo and banned the speaking of Indigenous languages and in the establishment of Indian boarding schools by the US government in 1819

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4 The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) is an incredibly important standard that established a universal framework for the human rights of Indigenous Peoples and their self-determination. See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.

under the Civilization Fund Act. Christian societies were charged with civilizing children with a program of forced assimilation. The expressed philosophy of this program was to “kill the Indian, save the man.”<sup>5</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada has offered a space for story sharing, grief, and the start of repentance of this legacy of residential schools, yet the United States has not yet made steps in this direction, to my knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Today, genocidal violence continues under international financial structures. We can trace the flow of wealth and capital to former Christian, European powers, no longer under colonialism but under a new form of colonialism through neoliberal economics, expressed in free trade agreements, International Monetary Fund loan policies, and international development banks.

The DoD shows us that colonialism and the global capitalist economy it paved the way for were not and are not *secular* economic systems but have deeply *religious* roots. The question for followers of Jesus is, What

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religion do we follow? Do we follow the false religion of Empire or the religion of Jesus, the persecuted Palestinian Jew who sides with the poor and dispossessed? The ongoing violence we are encountering today under the DoD is a result of a false religion, a heretical and horrible perversion of Christianity that can only be countered with *true* religion, which, as James 1:27 says, means looking after the most vulnerable (orphans

and widows then) in their distress. It means defecting from the entitlement that separates us from God to stand with Jesus and the oppressed in direct opposition to the beasts of destruction.

And what a terrible beast we face! It’s been on the loose for five hundred years, perhaps more if you think of the ways the Spirit of Conquest has morphed over time. Its impacts have been destruction and desecra-

5 Quote by Capt. Richard H. Pratt, founder of a residential school for Indian youth in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1879. See Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004).

6 Mark Charles (Navajo) has been calling for a Truth and Conciliation Commission for truth-telling about the impacts of the DoD in the United States. See <http://wireless-hogan.blogspot.com/2014/12/doctrine-of-discovery.html>.

tion of land and Indigenous communities around the world. Many Indigenous peoples in the United States tie high rates of alcoholism, health issues, sexual abuse, homelessness, and suicide in their communities and on reservations to the original sin of colonial violence and their loss of rights and sovereignty through the DoD.

Surely it will take a much more powerful beast to slay this monster! Surely we need something much bigger and stronger, a ferocious divine Rottweiler or something! Yet looking to our text from Revelation, what do we see on the throne as an answer to the Powers? A slaughtered *lamb*!

### **Hope in the slaughtered lamb**

Revelation 7:9 speaks of tribes from every language and tongue gathered around the throne of the slaughtered Lamb: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

As with Pentecost, I see this as another reversal of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), when people attempted cultural and linguistic hegemony and thought they could reach God through their own power. Here in Revelation 7, God is not depicted on the heights of power, accessible through growth and dominion, but as a lamb, slaughtered and at the center of this powerful throng of martyrs. God is embodied in the crucified and resurrected Christ, in solidarity with these victims of violence as one whose life has been taken, yet who is triumphant over death. Significantly, the languages of those gathered are still alive! The forces of assimilation and conquest have *not* won out, and the nations have survived “the great ordeal” (v. 14).

Anthropologists have recognized that the survival of languages is intrinsically connected to a people’s self-determination and sovereignty. When people have the rights to their land, they are able to continue cultural practices like native languages that are tied to their land and their cohesive identity in relation to the land. I see this vision of the tribes gathered, each praising the Lamb in their own tongues, as an indication and celebration of Indigenous sovereignty. The sovereignties of the tribes are restored under the sovereignty of the Lamb. The Lamb’s sovereignty does not overtake and diminish the sovereignty of the tribes but uplifts and restores their identities and affirms linguistic and cultural diversities.

Revelation offers us a vision of hope, one that declares that the Lamb is sovereign, and the Powers are not! In Christ’s death and resurrection,

the beasts have already been defeated. According to New Testament scholar Loren Johns, this is why no battles are depicted in Revelation between the dragons and beasts and the Lamb.<sup>7</sup> The Lamb has already conquered and has done so in a way altogether different than the expected bloody conquest of rulers, like those acting under the DoD. Christ's rule has been established through nonviolent resistance to evil and through love and solidarity with the victims of religious and state-sanctioned violence, to the point of death. This understanding of Christ, Johns writes, is central to the Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse. We as Christ's followers are called to wage battle against the forces of evil and conquest in the same manner: "consistent, nonviolent resistance born of clear allegiance to God that may well result in death."<sup>8</sup>

For the sake of the future of life on our planet, which hangs in the balance, for the sake of our own salvation, and for the sake of the victims and survivors of the repeated assaults by the DoD, let us stand together and wage battle in nonviolent resistance against the beast! We bear the flag of the slaughtered Lamb, the one who died an unjust death and yet rose in life victorious. The Great Ordeal is nearly over, but the future is not closed, so let us press on together with these words of hope:

*The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.  
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;  
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.  
(Rev. 7:15–17)<sup>9</sup>*

## About the author

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7 Loren Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into Its Origins and Rhetorical Force*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock: 2003), 185.

8 Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 183.

9 This sermon was originally preached at Fellowship of Hope in Elkhart, Indiana, in April 2016.