

# Five hundred years of Anabaptism and colonization

Sarah Augustine

I have the great privilege of sitting on the “Anabaptism at Five Hundred” advisory group put in place by MennoMedia about two years ago. It has been wonderful to join with diverse Anabaptists in creating resources to commemorate our shared identity. While I am a Mennonite woman, I am also Indigenous. As a Tewa (Pueblo<sup>1</sup>) woman, it is impossible for me to engage in this celebratory look into our Anabaptist history without also viewing the history of Anabaptism through the lens of my people. Let me start with a side-by-side look at the history of Anabaptism and my own Tewa people.

## Anabaptist and Tewa history

Sixty years after Michael Sattler was speaking into the Schleitheim Confession in 1527, Spanish conquistador Juan de Onate had established control of the lands of my people, perpetrating the Acoma Massacre in 1599 to enforce absolute obedience to his authority. The armed resistance of the Acoma Pueblo to Onate’s rule was met with swift and brutal retribution. Eight hundred to one thousand men, women, and children were massacred, nearly stamping out the entire Acoma pueblo. Survivors were sold as slaves, signaling to other Pueblos that survival would require complete acquiescence to Spanish rule.

Nearly forty years after Dutch Mennonites began their migration from the Netherlands to settlements in New York in 1644, my people were engaging in the Pueblo revolt of 1680 in defense of our spirituality and religious leaders, who were executed for practicing traditional ceremony deemed by Catholic overlords to be sorcery. We were able to hold our

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1 A note about my people: The Tewa people were named *Pueblo* by Spanish colonizers. *Pueblo* is the Spanish word for *house*. My ancestors lived in communities of homes they made from clay, raising crops and sheep in the territory now known as the Southwest United States. When the Spanish encountered us, they named us for the structures of our communities. The word *Pueblo* is used in two ways: (1) the entire tribal group; and (2) a community of Pueblo people in a specific place. Today, there are nineteen remaining Pueblos in northern New Mexico.

traditional territories for twelve years, but by the Mexican American war of 1846 nearly two hundred years later, our lands were annexed in their entirety by our new colonial overlord, the United States.

I have heard it said by Mennonite friends and colleagues whom I respect that Catholics, not Mennonites, perpetrated genocide, colonization, and enslavement on my people. That may be true, since Mennonites began settlement in New Mexico in 1908, just a few years before New Mexico became a state.<sup>2</sup> However, I know Mennonites living on my homeland today, while I remain a displaced person—what the United Nations calls “internally displaced”—a person expelled from my own homeland

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but within the borders of my country of origin.<sup>3</sup> Five hundred years into the colonization of my people, the descendants of conquistadors and Anabaptists alike enjoy the bounty of my peoples’ sacred lands and waters.

When Anabaptists found sanctuary and blessed land in North America, they were moving into territory that had been effectively cleared of Indigenous Peoples by way of genocide. It is estimated that

one hundred million Indigenous People lived in the Western hemisphere prior to 1492, a number that declined by 96 percent by 1900, when just four million Indigenous People were alive in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>4</sup> In the United States by 1900, just two hundred thousand Indigenous People remained alive.<sup>5</sup> Historian David Stannard termed this massive extermination “the worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed.”<sup>6</sup> The spoils of this genocide went to the descendants of Christians. The Doctrine of Discovery articulated that Christians alone were authorized and empowered by God to own, improve, and govern land. All sovereign-

2 Harlan Unrau, “New Mexico (USA),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=New\\_Mexico\\_\(USA\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=New_Mexico_(USA)).

3 United Nations High Commission on Refugees, <https://emergency.unhcr.org>.

4 Russel Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 42.

5 US Bureau of the Census, *Indian Population of the United States and Alaska, 1910* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1915), 10.

6 David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46.

ty flowed to Christian European monarchs by mandate of the Catholic Church. Anabaptists may not have wielded the sword that struck down my people, but they certainly benefitted from it.

In the cosmology I have been taught by my elders, the soil of our homeland—the place now called New Mexico—is sacred because it is made from our ancestors. The remains of all our relatives—the human people that came before us, the four-legged ones, the winged ones, the standing

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green nation of plants and trees, the insect people—all make up the soil. This includes the invisible ones, the microbes that give soil life and enable crops to grow. We as living Tewa people are part of this cycle of life, the land-and-water protectors who are alive now. Everywhere we look on our lands is sacred, from the high places where the holy ones dwell, to the river valley, to the ex-

pansive desert that looks barren to the casual observer. Yet we have been removed from our lands, generation by generation, most recently when the United States government deemed our home “empty” and therefore a good place to develop the atomic bomb.

Given the reality of my Indigenous People, I wonder how we should commemorate the Anabaptist tradition that is now five hundred years old. Our shared reality is defined by the colonial experiment—the colonization of what was blithely called the “new world.” In this reality, the (Christian) descendants of European settlers benefit from the systems that were designed to annihilate and remove Indigenous Peoples and possess our lands completely.

Historically, Anabaptists responded to the colonial experiment by settling fertile farmlands cleared of Indigenous Peoples. Anabaptists are the beneficiaries of a violent, colonial system that continues to advantage Christian and European descendants even as it removes Indigenous Peoples from our lands and subjects us to structural violence. Mennonites have referred to themselves as “people of the land” and “the quiet in the land.”<sup>7</sup> Since land is a primary feature in the imagination and story of Anabaptist settlers, Anabaptists are inexorably linked with the original

7 Laura L. Camden and Susan Gaetz Duarte, *Mennonites in Texas: The Quiet in the Land* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

peoples of the land, the original land and water protectors, Indigenous Peoples. Mennonites and Indigenous People share a history. Indigenous removal from our sacred lands meant safety and prosperity for Anabaptist communities. Anabaptists may need to take a new posture five hundred years into an identity as followers of Jesus. Perhaps it is time to be quiet no more.

### **Anabaptism and decolonization**

Like the many generations of Mennonites who have come before me, I am committed to living out the call of Jesus as a peacemaker in community. My mentors in the Mennonite church have encouraged me to be humble, seek justice, and listen to the Spirit in community, not insisting on my own way. I have taken these teachings seriously, and I have committed myself to them.

Anabaptist tradition prioritizes internal spiritual discernment expressed in outward action. Discipleship, or *nachfolge*, broadly means forsaking one's own desires and self-interest to live out Christ's teachings.<sup>8</sup> Anabaptist theology likewise emphasized self-surrender or yieldedness, where God's will is made manifest only to those who have surrendered their individual will. The German term for this concept is *Gelassenheit*, or submission.<sup>9</sup> Discernment takes place in the workings of community, where those in the body discern the will of God together, yielding to each other in the process. Humility and yieldedness are interpreted as outward signs of discipleship.

I suggest here that these elements of Anabaptism call us to engage in decolonization, acknowledging our role in the context of settler colonialism. *Decolonization* means that the colonizing powers and their beneficiaries relinquish control of a subjugated people and then identify, challenge, and restructure or replace assumptions, ideas, values, systems, and practices that reflect a colonizer's dominating influence.<sup>10</sup> As we live into an

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8 William Klassen and Hans-Juergen Goertz, "Discipleship," GAMEO, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Discipleship>. The authors write, "In their understanding the individual responds to the call of Christ, forsakes his life of sin and self, receives a new nature, comes under the lordship of Christ, and takes Christ's life and teachings as normative for himself and for the church, and indeed ultimately for the whole social order. His faith in Christ thus finds expression in 'newness of life.'"

9 Robert Friedmann, "Gelassenheit," GAMEO, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gelassenheit>.

10 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "decolonize," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decolonize>.

understanding of our role in settler colonialism, we have the opportunity to interpret Christ's teachings from the lens of the most vulnerable, those who are living with the structural violence caused by colonization. We can discern together our response in community, engaging with Indigenous relatives to form a decolonizing stance. A crucial way to commemorate the Anabaptist tradition is to decolonize the theology of empire and commit to indigenizing our theology, identity, and actions as a people of God.

## Imagining decolonization

In my role as a member of the "Anabaptism at Five Hundred" advisory group, I have been on the team imagining the *Anabaptist Community Bible*. In this ambitious project, the editors of the Bible asked five hundred groups of Anabaptists to form Bible study groups and submit their notes, which will contribute to the Bible's marginal notes. These notes cover every passage in the Bible. Each group or congregation who signed up was randomly assigned a few passages from the New and Old testaments and provided prompts to help them respond collectively. In this way, the *Anabaptist Community Bible* engages in a core Anabaptist value, the collective interpretation of Scripture in community together.

Building on this good idea, together with the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, I asked a few dozen groups and congregations to respond to their assigned scriptures using a decolonizing lens.<sup>11</sup> This process is a process of imagination—calling on communities across North America to imagine a theology decolonized. We essentially called

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11 In particular, I asked groups to reflect on the following questions for a decolonization lens: In this passage, who is in control of land, labor, and capital? In what ways are women, foreigners, or the sick and vulnerable portrayed in this text? What is the message conveyed for the most vulnerable in this text? Does this text lift up the narrative of the powerful or the weak? How might we read this text from the margins? What would the most vulnerable feel or respond to what is going on in the text? What might we assume (from our own racial/cultural/economic backgrounds) that goes unsaid in this text? Many of us have learned a routine interpretation from childhood, Sunday school, theological preparation, etc. What might be an alternative interpretation? Are there characters who are inanimate in the passage – land/water/animals? What would they tell us if they could speak? What might be the perspective of the land? What might justice look like for the person/character/group with the least power in this story? Is there good news in the text for those who do not have enough? And/or is there an invitation of sacrifice/relinquishment to those who control the resources? If the text is not good news for the most vulnerable, what might be your challenge to the text? What shifts in our perspective or imagination if we imagine the main characters in the text are Black and/or Indigenous People?

on groups of Anabaptists across the United States and Canada to rethink our theology, focusing responses from the margins.

In the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, we are actively working to decolonize our theology. We are challenging theologies

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of supersessionism (or replacement theology) and Christian supremacy. We are prayerfully learning how to stand with the marginalized, creating and centering a theology from the margins. Decolonized theology is a theology that relin-

quishes control of a subjugated people. What has been done in the name of Christ must be undone in the name of Christ.

Decolonization requires challenging our knowledge, our understanding of life, and our value systems to dismantle harmful, colonial power structures and establish noncolonial, life-giving systems. For Anabaptists in North America in 2025, decolonization must also mean collectively relinquishing control of land. As scholars Amam Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes write, “We cannot decolonize without recognizing the primacy of land and Indigenous sovereignty over that land.”<sup>12</sup>

Many Christians I encounter across the country respond to me with anxiety followed quickly by sadness when I propose land return as a strategy for seeking repair with Indigenous Peoples. A common refrain I hear is, *I am not willing to give up my home and turn it over to Indigenous People, so I can't join you in dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery.* Like the rich young man who encounters Jesus in Matthew 19, the cost is just too high. In response, I suggest we center land return not in our individual actions but in our actions as a collective.

This requires some imagination. Even though our Anabaptist tradition centers community prominently in discernment and discipleship, we are still embedded in an individualist culture and tend to think through the lens of personal over corporate action. It is hard to imagine what relinquishment of control via land return might look like for us as a collective. Land bequests are a significant source of wealth for our church institutions, and Anabaptists are part of a society that advantages white skin and the beneficiaries of historical wealth accumulation. These realities lead us to consider questions like these: What would it mean for Anabaptists to

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12 Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes, “Towards the ‘Tangible Unknown’: Decolonization and the Indigenous Future,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): iii.

join together to return land as it flows into the hands of our church institutions? How might we imagine seeking right relations with Indigenous Peoples by returning this land? Following the example of Zacchaeus, can we imagine returning a portion of the land that comes into our control? How might we use our collective voice to advocate for and with Indigenous relatives seeking land return from our public institutions? What would it mean for us collectively to stand with Indigenous Peoples in negotiating return of state and national lands held by the public?

### **Imagining indigenization**

In an interview with Max Rameau on the Next World podcast, Judith Le Blanc makes the point that decolonization focuses a locus of action on a system of oppression—colonialism.<sup>13</sup> She urges Indigenous activists to struggle for *indigenization*, which she defines as reclaiming and restoring indigeneity. Indigeneity, she goes on to say, is our relationship and responsibility to land. For Indigenous People, this often means a struggle for land rights and rights to water. I especially appreciate Le Blanc’s urging to focus the locus of action on what I would call a struggle *for life* rather than focusing the locus of action *against systems of death*. Here in the United States, I see that as settler colonialism.

As Anabaptists accompany Indigenous leaders in their movements for self-determination and land and water protection, we are contributing to indigenization by lifting up Indigenous voices and ways of life. I long for such indigenization. As Anabaptists, we can work together as our forebears did to envision a new world and seek to build it: the kin-dom of God. As a step toward indigenization, we can form right relationship with our Indigenous siblings—relationship where power is balanced and those who now hold power share it with those who do not.

### **About the author**

Sarah Augustine, a Pueblo (Tewa) descendant, is cofounder and executive director of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition and cofounder of 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).

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13 <https://dignityandrights.org/2023/09/listen-our-struggle-is-to-indigenize-judith-le-blanc-of-native-organizers-alliance-on-the-next-world-podcast/>