

White Exceptionalism and the Doctrine of Christian Discovery

Exceptionalism is the belief that you or your group is so fundamentally superior that you live by a different moral standard than others. Particularly within certain groups—religious groups, groups based on skin color, a civilizational heritage, or wealthy and powerful elites – there is a tendency to think that our superiority makes us only accountable to our own group.

The belief that European civilization and culture are superior to any other culture is an example of exceptionalism: no other culture can approach what Europeans (and White Americans) have contributed to the world in terms of religion, music, art, philosophy, economy, laws, and governance. European Christian exceptionalism was expressed during the Age of Discovery and colonialism. White American exceptionalism continues to evolve out of this cognitive and ethical flaw.

From the exceptional point of view, the impossibility of replicating the exceptional state makes the realization of our state of being depends upon the other becoming like us. Because the other will never be as exceptional as us, we feel justified to impose our values and understanding of what is good upon others, by force if necessary. Moreover, the exceptional do not feel bound by those standards as we often claim exclusive insights into a higher morality.

The Doctrine of Christian Discovery was developed by 15th Century European monarchies and the Christian Church as a means of legitimizing the claiming and colonizing of lands outside of Europe, a doctrine that continues to impact Indigenous People around the world. The Church framed the enslavement, genocide, theft of land, and other abuses inflicted upon non-Christians as acts that glorified God because Christian Europe domination made it possible for Native People to know the love of Christ and salvation.

The Doctrine, one of the very first international law principles, established the ritual of discovery for European sovereigns to automatically acquire property rights in native lands and gain governmental, political, and commercial rights over the indigenous inhabitants without their knowledge or consent. The belief in Christian and European superiority over non-Christians and non-European civilizations has defined and shaped the relationship between Native People and settler governments.

United States applied these Discovery elements to Native People. The U.S. governments actively engaged in genocide of Native People, forced their removal to reservations, and strove to erase Native Peoples' cultures, legal systems, and governments. As one Residential Indian boarding school superintendent stated: "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

The Doctrine is not just a relic of the discovery and settling of land by England in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. This White exceptionalism view of Indigenous people persists as is evident in the current laws and policies of the United States and other settler nations. The United State still restricts Indigenous peoples' property, governmental, and self-determination rights. These white assumptions of exceptionalism remain dangerous legal and historical fictions.

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