



**Indigenous People, Creation, and the Christian Church:  
a Tragic History in need of Redemption**

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I begin my presentation with the words of my people's Lakota Sioux language, *hau mitakuyepi*. Translated into English this means, *hello relatives*. The Sioux people greet one another with these words, and not just fellow human beings. To the Sioux, as with virtually all Indigenous people, everyone and everything exist in a state of relationship; people, animals, fish, birds, insects, every living thing; and even that which to the Western mind is not living: earth, winds, waters, rocks, and the stars and planets of the Cosmos. When Lakota people pray, or whenever we speak, we typically conclude with the phrase *mitakuye oyasin*, which means, *all my relatives*. To Indigenous people, the Universe is a living being, alive and well. Or at least it was in the past, with regard to our beloved Mother Earth.

Things changed in the past 500 years, which is quite recently considering the estimated age of our planet. Unfortunately, much of it has to do with religion - the Doctrine of Discovery in particular. Originating in the 1400s and consisting of various edicts and manifestos initially from the Bishop of Rome and later enforced by other religious leaders, including Queen Elizabeth I, the Doctrine of Discovery gave ecclesiastical sanction to the seizure of land and subjugation of the Indigenous residents of Africa and the Western Hemisphere under the supposed auspices of divine right and the guise of evangelism. The specific nature and purposes of this doctrine are initially evident in a papal bull issued by Nicholas V in 1452 granting his blessing to the king of Portugal to go to the western coast of Africa to "capture, vanquish and subdue the Saracens, pagans and other enemies of Christ, and put them into perpetual slavery and to take all their possessions and their property." Similarly, the Romanus Pontifex (1455) sanctified the seizing of non-Christian lands by all European Catholic nations and encouraged the





enslavement of native, non-Christian peoples in Africa and the New World. Pope Alexander VI's *Inter Caetera* in 1493 attempted to regulate these practices by asserting that one Christian nation did not have the right to establish dominion over lands previously dominated by another Christian nation, with the overall goal of holding the Church together. It was not until the *Sublimus Dei* (1537), issued by Pope Paul III, that the Indigenous inhabitants of the New World were recognized as humans with souls. At that juncture, subjugation of the Natives was discouraged, and emphasis was placed on indoctrinating them into the Catholic faith for their salvation. The intent of the Doctrine of Discovery can thus be summarized as a blessing on the dispossession of land, wanton theft, slavery, and enforced indoctrination, all in the name of God, and for the perceived good of the world. In the centuries that followed, the Western Hemisphere, once populated by tens of millions of Indigenous people of many nations and tribes, with their own languages, social customs and spiritual expressions, was utterly devastated. Entire tribes were wiped out due to murder, pestilence, famine, and war. In the United States Supreme Court decision of *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823), Chief Justice John Marshall found that Christian European nations had assumed ultimate dominion over the lands of America. Native people lost their rights to complete sovereignty as independent nations, retaining only a right of occupancy as allowed by the government.

This brings us face to face with the essential difference between Indigenous people and the Western World regarding Creation. Indigenous people look at all of Creation as our relative; the Western World has tended to look at Creation as its possession. To the Indigenous mind, Creation cannot be possessed any more than





one can possess another human being as a subjugated slave. If slavery is immoral, why not land theft and exploitative possession?

Indigenous religion, in its variety of expressions, is grounded in the experience of cooperation rather than conquest, and adjustment to *what is*, rather than forcing *what is* to become something else. Dr. John Bryde, a professor of psychology who worked for decades with the Lakota in South Dakota, refers to this as “adjustment to nature” and describes it as follows:

“Adjustment to nature is one of the most important of the Indian values and it is one of the strongest in the minds of the people today. Adjustment means to get along with something. Nature means all things, including men .... The first reason for the value of adjustment to nature is that the Indian looks at the world and sees himself as part of it .... The Indian sees each thing in the world as related to everything else.... Since the Indian and everything around him, including all men, all come from the same mother, the earth, they have the same blood in them and they are, therefore, mysteriously related. Now, if you are related to someone, if he is part of the same family, you don’t try to beat him down in order to get ahead of him. You work with him and get along with him. That is why, in the Indian value of adjustment to nature, you get along with everything, because you are related to everything, part of everything, and everything is a part of you.”

As Bryde indicates, for Native people, adjustment to nature involves not just human relationships, but the entire Cosmos. Being in a right relationship with all Creation is at the heart of Indigenous culture, values, spirituality, and personality development. Paramount in this is one’s direct connection to the Earth and all its





features. Indigenous philosopher Gregory Cajete refers to this as the “ensoulment” process:

“Native people expressed a relationship to the natural world that could only be called *ensoulment*. The ensoulment of nature is one of the most ancient foundations of human psychology. This projection of the human sense of soul with its archetypes has been called the participation mystique, which for Native people represented the deepest level of psychological involvement with their land and which provided a kind of map of the soul. The psychology and spiritual qualities of Indigenous people’s behavior reflected in symbolism were thoroughly in-formed by the depth and power of their participation mystique with the Earth as a living soul. It was from this orientation that Indian people developed responsibilities to the land and all living things, similar to those that they had to each other. In the Native mind, spirit and matter were not separate; they were one and the same. Indigenous people projected the archetypes that they perceived in themselves into the entities, phenomena, and places that were a part of the natural environment they encountered. They understood the roots of human meaning as grounded in the same order that they perceived in nature. They experienced nature as a part of themselves and themselves as a part of nature.”

Cajete further describes the sacred significance of Indigenous relationship to the land and the spiritual ramifications of geographical dislocation:

“The connection of Indian people to their land was a symbol of their connection to the spirit of life itself. The loss of such a foundational symbol





led to a tremendous loss of meaning and identity; only in the most recent generations has revitalization begun. Inner kinship with the Earth is an ancient and natural extension of the human psyche and its severance can lead to a deep split in the consciousness of the individual and the group, in addition to social and psychological problems that can ultimately be healed only through reestablishing meaningful ties. Reconnecting with nature and its inherent meaning results in a healing and transformational process for Indian people.”

One of the essential flaws of the Doctrine of Discovery is that it fails to acknowledge the sacredness of the relationship between humanity and the Cosmos, specifically the land. In doing so, it takes the soul out of the Earth and out of the Indigenous person as well. When the land was taken from Indigenous people, everything was taken. Our home, our culture, our spirituality, our understanding of the Cosmos, our very identity. Land theft murders a culture and a people. The key to healing, transformation and redemption is through re-establishing this relationship.

Indigenous spirituality does not recognize a dichotomy of sacred and secular; everything is sacred. While often discarded as the heresy of pantheism, this is not inconsistent with the Christian faith, as exemplified by the Episcopal liturgical phrase in reference to God, “all creation worships you.” Life, for Indigenous people, involves living in what is referred to by elders as *relational harmony*. That is, living in a state of balance with the Cosmos where we are equal participants in the mystery of life along with everyone and everything else that is. This sense of relational balance, which has similar understandings in Eastern





religions such as Taoism, is not a goal that can be achieved, but a way of life that results in our living with a sense of authenticity and wholeness.

It is time, and has been for many years, for all the people of the Christian faith, and all people for that matter, to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, learn from the wisdom of Indigenous people, and commit ourselves to living in right relationship with God, humanity, and all of Creation.

Mitakuye Oyasin

