

The Establishment of Christian Hegemony through the Doctrine of Discovery

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Abstract: This essay examines the establishment of Christian hegemony through the theological and legal framework of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery (DoCD), tracing its roots from medieval Europe to its application in the Americas. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial theorists, the work interrogates how Christian identity was formed in opposition to the “proximal” and “distal” other – Jews, Muslims, pagans, and later Indigenous peoples – through a dominion theology that fused religious exclusivity with political supremacy. Historical case studies from Ireland, Iberia, the Baltics, and the Canary Islands demonstrate how conquest, conversion, and legal codification operated as laboratories for colonial domination. Particular attention is given to papal bulls such as *Dum Diversas*, *Romanus Pontifex*, and *Inter Caetera*, highlighting a key linguistic shift from conversion to “bringing them back to the faith,” reframing colonization as restoration rather than invasion. The analysis also highlights the Canary Islands’ role in shaping the DoCD. It offers a critical reading of the 1513 *Requerimiento*, situating it as both a ritual of possession and a theological performance of atonement and absolution. Integrating the insights of Steven T. Newcomb (Shawnee/Lenape), Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Gil Anidjar, the essay argues that Christian dominion theology is rooted in enslavement, exploitation, and extraction, and is structurally embedded in international law and modern governance. Ultimately, it contends that the legacy of Christian hegemony persists in contemporary settler-colonial systems, where religiously infused legal frameworks continue to rationalize dispossession and subjugation. By tracing this genealogy, the essay seeks to expose and dismantle the theological underpinnings of domination.

Keywords: Christian hegemony, Dominion Theology, Colonialism, religion, and law

*The lord [Cacique] Hatuey thought for a short while and then asked the friar whether Christians went to Heaven. When the reply came that good ones do, he retorted, without need for further reflection, that, if that was the case, then he chose to go to Hell to ensure that he would never again have to clap eyes on those cruel brutes. This is just one example of the reputation and honour that our Lord and our Christian faith have earned as a result of the actions of those ‘Christians’ who have sailed to the Americas.*¹

– Bartolomé de las Casas

In May 2023, we participated in a series of workshops entitled “Indigenous Peoples and Religious Modes of Othering: A Comparative History of Religions Perspective.” These workshops were held at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, and the Diversity Studies Centre, Oslo (DISCO) at Oslo Metropolitan University. Indigenous Values Initiative, Syracuse

1. Bartolomé de las Casas chronicled the now iconic story of the Taíno Cacique Hatuey’s resistance to Spanish imperial domination. After he had been captured and before he was burned at the stake, an anonymous priest offers Hatuey the chance of conversion, which he rejects. Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. and trans. Nigel Griffin (Penguin Books, 1992), 27–29.

University Henry Luce Project, and the American Indian Law Alliance sponsored them. Some excellent research and relationships were formed out of these workshops, and the experience remains truly memorable and transformative for us. Thanks to these workshops, many of these participants were able to be part of the Syracuse University December 2023 conference entitled “The Religious Origins of White Supremacy: Johnson v. M’Intosh and the Doctrine of Christian Discovery,” the JCREOR special issue vol. 5 no. 2 (2024): *From Indigenous Religions to Indigenous Values*, as well as several other publications.² One of the outcomes of this series was opening us up to exploring the theological and discursive framework found within the rhetoric of “religious modes of othering.” The framework and rubric of the history of religions provided us with a new perspective on the discourse of the “other.” Betty was rightfully struck by the peculiarity of this framing and highlighted how alien it is to her as an Onondaga Nation, Snipe Clan woman to think of any living being as somehow other and not a relation. Her response to the question led to Adam attending and presenting at “Signs of the Times: Interdisciplinary Responses to Religious Nationalism,” which was held March 20–22, 2025, at the University of Notre Dame. This essay addresses two interwoven questions: first, how is Christian hegemony established through the rhetoric of othering, and second, how do the Doctrine of Discovery and Christian hegemonic othering contribute to responding to Gil Anidjar’s provocative question, “What is the effective history of Christianity?”³

In agreement with Anidjar and other postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, we posit that the effective history of Christianity is found in its theological and jurisprudential justifications of domination, othering, and Manichean dualistic binaries. While Manicheism was declared a heresy for some Christians, it is nevertheless rather impossible to outlaw ideas.⁴ Through the creation, preservation, and reification of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery as one of the lynchpins of Christian hegemony, we see this preservation of the binary mode of dividing the world. Part of what makes the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Christian hegemony so insidious is that, unlike other religious traditions, Christianity has become institutionalized, universalized, and abstracted in a civilization, structuring politics, law, and identity.⁵ Through this universalization and abstraction, it can fade into the background and become simultaneously visible and invisible, thus making it possible to speak of white supremacy, white nationalism, and European secularism, etc., all of which elide the Christian origins and present locative inherent within those concepts.

Theory and Method

Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous essay “What a Difference a Difference Makes” examines the concept of the other through two primary lenses: the *proximate other* and the *distal other*. Smith uses many examples to build his theory, but for this essay, we will focus on the colonization of the Americas as our point of

2. Philip P. Arnold, Sandra Bigtree, and Adam DJ Brett, “Preface and Introduction: From Indigenous Religions to Indigenous Values,” *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion* 5, no. 2 (2024): ii–x, <https://doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v5i2.108>; Philip P. Arnold, Sandra Bigtree, and Adam DJ Brett, “200 Years of Johnson v. M’Intosh (JVM): Indigenous Responses to the Religious Foundations of Racism,” *CrossCurrents* 74, no. 4 (2024): 391–399.

3. Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 256.

4. Samuel Cohen, “Schism and the Polemic of Heresy: Manichaeism and the Representation of Papal Authority in the *Liber Pontificalis*,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8, no. 1 (2015): 195–230.

5. Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2008); Anidjar, *Blood: The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code*, directed by Sheldon P. Wolfchild, produced by Steven T. Newcomb and Sheldon P. Wolfchild (38 Plus 2 Productions, 2015), documentary, 1 hr., 2 min., <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/dominationcode>.

connection with Smith.⁶ Smith defines the *proximate other* as the one that is *near* (culturally, geographically, or biologically) but marked as “different.” It is another form of othering marked by *relationality*, which is often more unsettling because the differences, no matter how minor, are more significant and distinct than those that involve greater physical distance. The key features of the proximate other are first nearness, which makes addressing differences more pressing. Second, hierarchy and power are central. Proximate others are ranked in status and subjected to systems of domination through superordination and subordination. Third, and perhaps most famously, classification is a political act. Using parasites, Smith highlights how parasites are categorized by their mode of relationship to the host – an ever-prescient political metaphor for human social dynamics. Fourth, interactions take precedence over essences. The other is not inherently different but becomes marked as Other through asymmetrical social interactions and exploitative power applications.

In summary, the proximate other is marked by nearness, urgency, hierarchy, power, categorization, interactions, and essences. Thus, the proximate other represents a relational and political kind of difference that is more threatening and complex because of its closeness. Standing in juxtaposition to the proximate other is the *distal other*. Smith defines the *distal other* as conceptually and/or geographically distant. Smith’s key example of the distal other is the Indigenous nations and peoples of Turtle Island, who were enjoying their original free and prior existence before the arrival of the discovering colonizers. The *eurochristian* settler colonists lacked sufficient imagination, vocabulary, and desire for relationality to understand what was happening. They could only reinscribe the “new world” in “old world” terms.⁷ In this essay, we will use Osage scholar Tink Tinker and Roger Green’s formulation of *eurochristian* as the primary descriptor for the particular hegemonic Christian worldview we will be examining. Tinker and Green write:

We propose we call this category *eurochristian*. This is not a claim to religious identity on the part of the authors of this book, but rather that the worldview of these invader peoples was indeed shaped by and developed enmeshed with european christianity. Teaching in a liberal christian school of theology for three and a half decades, Tinker persistently argued that colonialism is christianity. And christianity is colonialism.⁸

The lands became Eden, and the people were “Indians” because, to the *eurochristian* colonizers, they looked like the proximate other of the “East Indies.” This case of mistaken identification and the desire to reclassify and reinscribe the “new world” with the “old” will become a long-serving leitmotif; see further

6. Jonathan Z. Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 251–302.

7. George E. “Tink” Tinker and Roger Green, “‘eurochristian,’ or What Are We Going to Do with White People—Revisited, Part 1,” *New Polis* (blog), February 16, 2023, <https://thenewpolis.com/2023/02/16/eurochristian-or-what-are-we-going-to-do-with-white-people-revisited-tink-tinker-and-roger-green-part-1/>; George E. “Tink” Tinker and Roger Green, “‘eurochristian,’ or What Are We Going to Do with White People—Revisited, Part 2,” *New Polis* (blog), March 1, 2023, <https://thenewpolis.com/2023/03/01/eurochristian-or-what-are-we-going-to-do-with-white-people-revisited-tink-tinker-and-roger-green-part-2/>; George E. “Tink” Tinker and Roger Green, “‘eurochristian,’ or What Are We Going to Do with White People—Revisited, Part 3,” *New Polis* (blog), March 17, 2023, <https://thenewpolis.com/2023/03/17/eurochristian-or-what-are-we-going-to-do-with-white-people-revisited-tink-tinker-and-roger-green-part-3/>; George E. “Tink” Tinker and Roger Green, “‘eurochristian,’ or What Are We Going to Do with White People—Revisited, Part 4,” *New Polis* (blog), April 9, 2023, <https://thenewpolis.com/2023/04/09/eurochristian-or-what-are-we-going-to-do-with-white-people-revisited-tink-tinker-and-roger-green-part-4/>.

8. Tinker and Green, “‘eurochristian,’ Part 1.” Capitalizations are original.

the over 1,000 cities in the United States renamed after biblical places to all the places named after saints and/or colonizers.⁹

The second marker of the distal other is epistemological disruption. Over time, the otherness of the “new world” has been continually reinscribed with the language and theology of the old world – a theological terraforming. Once there is an epistemological rupture and the otherness is recognized, an epistemological shift can lead to a linguistic and conceptual shift. For Smith, the central distinction between the proximate other and the distal other is critically distilled down to one issue. The distal other requires an ontological and epistemological overhaul.

On the other hand, the proximate other requires only political negotiation. The distal other is necessarily epistemologically disruptive, and even when the encounter is planned for, it is radically different and requires the invention of new language and frameworks to be understood. Most commonly, instead of learning the worldview of the distal other, they are coerced and forced through domination into adopting the dominator’s worldview. This point will remain crucial for our essay today.

What I am taking from Smith is that difference is never natural. Second, power and hierarchy are always relational, political, and linguistically constructed. Third, classification is a political act. The proximate other serves as a mirror, providing a reflective point for one to be unsettled, shocked, and dismayed by the similarities, power dynamics, and differences.

Christian Hegemony: The Foundation of The Enlightenment

Numerous etiologies can be traced when telling the story of the rise and development of Christian hegemony. The question arises: where does one begin? Is it with the Manicheans? Constantine? The Crusades? Or the Age of Discovery? Paul Kivel defines “Christian hegemony as the everyday, systematic set of Christian values, individuals, and institutions that dominate all aspects of US society. Nothing is unaffected.”¹⁰ We aim to broaden this definition to encompass all settler-colonial societies and those dominated by settler-colonialism. Christian hegemony serves as an ideological simulacrum, lacking a single origin moment. Instead, it gains legitimacy through consistent theological and jurisprudential appeals and *post hoc* justifications. To quote Jessica Buckelew, “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth that conceals that there is none.”¹¹ Therefore, we are going to focus not on the moment of origination but instead on concretization – the moment where the hegemonic nature of Christianity begins to take on its full force. Following Shawnee and Lenape scholar Steven T. Newcomb, after the end of the Crusades, the Roman Catholic Church and the crowns of Europe looked at the growing influence of Muslims on the continent and the persistence of pagan pre-Christian beliefs. So began the theological handwringing and concerns about the cash within their coffers.¹² They were looking across the Mediterranean Sea, the Continent of Africa, and the Canary Islands.

Having recently returned from research trips to London and Dublin, we would like to trace this line of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery from the Crusades through Ireland and Pope Adrian IV’s papal bull

9. Paul Kivel, “Christian Place Names,” *Challenging Christian Hegemony* (blog), May 17, 2010, <https://Christianhegemony.org/christian-place-names>.

10. Paul Kivel, *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony* (New Society Publishers, 2013), 3.

11. Jessica Buckelew, “The Man Who Sold the World: The Long Con of Discovery,” *American Indian Law Journal* 3. (2014): 378.

12. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*; Tonya Gonnella Frichner, “The Preliminary Study on the Doctrine of Discovery,” *Pace Environmental Law Review* 28 (2010): 339; Wolfchild, *Unmasking the Domination Code*.

Laudabiliter (1155). Adrian IV granted his fellow countryman, King Henry II, dominion over Ireland. While there is no extant copy of *Laudabiliter*, the only known text comes from the Norman-Welsh chronicler Giraldus Cambrensis, leading to long-standing debate over its authenticity.¹³ Regardless, later popes endorsed England's conquest of Ireland: Alexander III confirmed it in a 1172 letter to Henry II, and Urban III reportedly sent a crown for one of Henry's sons to be crowned king of Ireland, though this never occurred. Instead, Henry's son John received the title *Dominus Hiberniae* from his father, a designation retained by English rulers in Ireland until the late Middle Ages. Thus, his successors ruled Ireland as *Domini Hiberniae* or the *Dominators of Ireland*.¹⁴ After breaking with the Roman Catholic Church, King Henry VIII reconquered Ireland and set up permanent English plantations with the Crown of Ireland Act in 1542. His daughter, Queen Mary, a Catholic, would reassert her control over Ireland with the 1555 bull "*Illius, per quem Reges regnant*," from Pope Paul IV, naming her as Queen over Ireland and asserting her dominion. Queen Elizabeth I would likewise follow Henry VIII's suit and lead a further conquest of Ireland, further entrenching English rule over the island.¹⁵ Tracing this history of Ireland demonstrates how the English saw the Irish as not only inferior but also uncivilized, as Nicholas Canny underscores the English were convinced "that, in dealing with the native Irish population, they were absolved from all normal ethical restraints."¹⁶ Noted scholars like Canny, Hans Pawlisch, and Robert J. Miller (Eastern Shawnee) would agree that Ireland was the proving ground for tactics that would be deployed by the English in the Americas.¹⁷

The Irish help to highlight the contours of Christian hegemony when turned upon one's neighbor. The English monarchy and the Roman Catholic and Protestant leadership regarded the Irish as "uncivilized in their ways, godless in religion, barbarous in their law, obstinate as regards instruction, foul in their lives: *Christians in name, pagans in fact*," to quote noted Catholic theologian Bernard of Clairvaux.¹⁸ Geraldine Heng sagely emphasizes the last part of Bernard of Clairvaux's statement, that the Irish can never be Christian enough for the church. This is a leitmotif that will continue across the Atlantic in the Americas as well. Indigenous peoples can become Christian in name, but they will remain in the eyes of the church *pagans*. What we see here with the Roman Catholic and Protestant collaboration in the domination of Ireland is a dominion theology whereby the dominator is the authentic, pure, and civilized Christian and Indigenous peoples are damned to be uncivilized pagans, and no amount of conversion and faithful

13. Robert J. Miller, "The Doctrine of Discovery," in *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies*, by Robert J. Miller, Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt, and Tracey Lindberg (Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199579815.003.0001>; Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 15–55.

14. "Pope Adrian IV: Bull *Laudabiliter* (Grant of Ireland) (1155), with Commentary," in *Church and State through the Centuries: A Collection of Historic Documents with Commentaries*, ed. and trans. Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall (Biblio & Tannen, 1967), 53–55; Miller, "Doctrine of Discovery." Hibernia is the classical Latin name for Ireland.

15. Crown of Ireland Act 1542, 33 Hen. 8 c. 1 (Ire.), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aip/Hen8/33/1>; "The Papal Bull of 1555 Conferring the Title of King of Ireland on Philip II of Spain," in *Magnum Bullarium Romanum*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (1743; facsimile reprint, 1965), 315, transcribed by François R. Velde, Heraldica, accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.heraldica.org/topics/national/ireland_docs.htm; Miller, "Doctrine of Discovery."

16. Nicholas P. Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established, 1565–76* (Barnes & Noble Books, 1976), 122.

17. Canny, *Elizabethan Conquest*, 133–34; Hans S. Pawlisch, *Sir John Davies and the Conquest of Ireland: A Study in Legal Imperialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8; Miller, "Doctrine of Discovery," 15–16; Heng, *Invention of Race*.

18. Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted in Heng, *Invention of Race*, 38 (emphasis Heng's).

Christian witness will change the fact that, for the dominators, the Irish will remain *pagans in fact*, even after conversion and famously preserving Christian manuscripts like *The Book of Kells*.

Here, we see a dominion theology that calls for “othering.” Portraying an Indigenous group like the Irish as primitive, uncivilized, and pagan allows the English to feel better about stealing their land and ruling over them. Of course, there are two stubborn problems with this logic. The first is how to handle converts to Christianity. Bernard of Clairvaux’s view is that the convert still isn’t truly Christian.

The second problem is how to approach a vernacular Christianity that developed differently from English Catholicism and English Protestantism. Bernard of Clairvaux is a notable example. Geraldine Heng, a leading medievalist scholar, argues:

Among neighbors in Latin Christendom, Ireland presents a resonant example of how even commonalities of faith can be adroitly manipulated to subserve colonial interests. English invasion and occupation of Ireland required a theological hermeneutic that insinuated difference of a fundamental kind between the Christianity of the colonized (rendered as inferior, defective, and deviant) and the Christianity of their Anglo-Norman colonizers (assumed as superior and normative).¹⁹

In Heng’s interrogation of the invention of race in the Middle Ages and her sifting through a tremendous amount of primary sources, she concludes that colonial interests and the desire for domination lead the colonizer to seek theological justifications that serve their interests. This then allows them to remake and refashion their theological hermeneutics to become even more self-reinforcing, thereby insulating them from theological and legal challenges to their claims of domination. The Christianity of the dominated, whether vernacular or through conversion, is perceived as inferior to that of the assumed normative and superior Christianity of the dominator, and this, of course, also becomes tied to race and class.

The theological hermeneutic of domination and othering was not only applied against the Irish but also against Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. Pope Innocent IV encouraged the forced conversion of Muslims while also creating a theological justification for worldwide papal intervention.²⁰ Innocent IV believed “the pope’s responsibility for the souls of all men, Christian and non-Christian alike, justified papal intervention in the functioning of infidel societies.”²¹ He asserted his dominion and responsibility for the souls of all humans, while also recognizing a soul hierarchy, like the one within the Catholic Church. To illustrate, “the infidels are sheep of Christ [...] although not of the flock of the Church.”²² In an Orwellian twist, all sheep are equal, but some are more equal than others. Innocent IV, while positioning himself in a role of theological dominance, was compelled by the Mongol Empire to acknowledge the military and legal limits of his ability to claim total control over their lands. Consequently, the discussion about Christianity becomes a secondary form of conquest. When military strength is insufficient, maintain the flow of goods and rely on the theological weight of conversion to gradually expand territory. Here, two traditions emerge: Innocent IV’s pragmatic approach of recognizing Indigenous sovereignty and property rights until military and/or theological strength prevails, and a contrasting tradition by his student Hostiensis (Henry of Segusio), who breaks with his teacher and argues that there can be no legitimate political control or ownership of land

19. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 37–38.

20. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 50n32.

21. James Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels: The Church and the Non-Christian World, 1250–1550*, Middle Ages Series (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 9.

22. James Muldoon, *Canon Law, the Expansion of Europe, and World Order*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS612 (Ashgate, 1998), essay IV, 171.

without papal approval. As Pawlisch notes, “The paradigm most favored by ambitious rulers and governments was, of course, the Hostiensis model, which proved so useful to Spanish expansionists in the sixteenth century.”²³ Hostiensis becomes especially significant in the Americas because, as Bartolomé de las Casas documents in his three-volume treatise *Historia de las Indias*, these arguments will be used to justify the colonization of the Americas.²⁴

Moving beyond Ireland and exploring the continent, there are more examples of this dominion model of theology. We now turn to Pope Innocent III, the man who inspired Innocent IV. Innocent III is best known for his decretals and the Fourth Lateran Council.²⁵ We want to highlight several canons from the council: Canon 68, which required Jews and Muslims to wear special clothing so that Christians could easily identify them; Canon 69, which assumes that Jewish people blaspheme Jesus and, based on this assumption, prevents them from holding office; and Canon 70, which forbids Jewish converts to Christianity from practicing any Jewish customs. This canon portrays converts as permanently suspect of being Christian in name only. Finally, this council shows the close relationship between church and state: “Convicted heretics shall be handed over for due punishment to their secular superiors.” For Pope Innocent III and his successors, civil authority is an extension of the church’s authority and is under the church’s control. This thinking continued and found further expression when Pope Boniface VIII issued *Unam Sanctam* (1302) in response to challenges to papal authority by King Philip IV (Philip the Fair). Boniface VIII, in trying to control Philip IV, issued one of the most extreme claims of papal authority. Similar to Hostiensis’s work, *Unam Sanctam* was used by some thinkers to justify Spain’s claim to the Americas.²⁶

As James Muldoon argues, medieval canon lawyers and theologians tended to group non-Christians – and as we have demonstrated, at times even converts – as *extra ecclesiam* (outside the church) and therefore inferior and thus other. He writes:

The canonists tended to lump together the various kinds of people who were not members of the Church, so that legal principles and practices developed for dealing with one class of people defined as *extra ecclesiam* were applied to another class. Thus, when the canonists came to consider the situation of non-Christians who lived beyond the bounds of Christendom, they began by extending previous discussions of non-Christians living within Europe to fit the new peoples whom they encountered.²⁷

Christendom was and remains shaped by its encounters with neighboring cultures. The formation of its theological identity is rooted in domination, which relies on an “other” that allows the self to be seen as superior. This Christian hegemony is reinforced through encountering groups like the Irish, Muslims, and Jews and reframing them as “other.” However, this dynamic did not end with these groups, as the Teutonic Knights expanded into the Baltic regions of Europe. Lithuania was the last pagan nation in Europe to convert to Christianity officially. As our colleague Eglutė Trinkauskaitė has highlighted, in 1251, Grand Duke Mindaugas was baptized, and he became king in 1253, though it was not until 1413, with the fall of Samogitia in the western part of the country, that the process of Christianization extended to this region.²⁸ Nonetheless, similar to Ireland and other Indigenous contexts, traditions and practices persisted. The

23. Pawlisch, *Sir John Davies*, 9.

24. Muldoon, *Canon Law*, essay VI, 312n33.

25. Muldoon, *Canon Law*, essay VII, 31–66.

26. Muldoon, *Canon Law*, essay VI, 316n43.

27. Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels*, 3.

28. Philip P. Arnold and Sandra L. Bigtree, hosts, “Beekeeping, Mushrooms and Sculptures: A Glimpse into Traditional Lithuanian Life with Eglutė Trinkauskaitė,” *Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery*, podcast, season 3,

Christianization process, driven by papal bulls and Crusades across Europe, was part of the larger project of Christian hegemony and imperialism.

The discussion of the Irish, pagans, Jews, and Muslims within Christian Europe is essential to our discussion of dominion theology and othering within Christian thought and hegemony because it helps to provide a broader historical context for the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, Christian hegemony and nationalism, and the problem of identity formation through the dominating encounter with the other. In considering how these earlier encounters shaped subsequent colonial practices, David Abulafia asks the essential question of “in what respects did the status accorded to the Jews and Muslims within the Christian kingdoms of Spain influence thinking about the status of the newly-discovered and newly-conquered peoples of the Atlantic world?”²⁹ Rady Roldán-Figueroa provides a compelling response, but we want to zoom out beyond both scholars to situate the enslavement, exploitation, and extraction associated with the Doctrine of Christian Discovery within a longer history of theologies of domination and persistent Christian hegemony.³⁰

Tracing the development of dominion theology through Christian hegemony, we see profound similarities emerging within the Christian treatment of pagans, Muslims, and Jews. However, as Abulafia, Roldán-Figueroa, and other scholars have noted, there are significant differences in how and why these groups were subjected to domination. For example, according to Augustine’s theology, Jewish people were condemned to serve Christians as punishment for their rejection of Christ. Likewise, Roman Catholic canon law prohibited Jews from being forcibly converted but also restricted their legal and social standing. The theological justification of Christian dominion over Jewish people thus came to shape the social and legal order and provide a precedent for later colonial projects.³¹

Abulafia rightly notes that Queen Isabella was a complicated figure. In her letters to Ovando, she asserts both that Indigenous peoples “are our subjects and vassals” who should not be enslaved and authorizes Ovando to apply the *encomienda* system to Indigenous peoples. Parenthetically, the *encomienda* system involved forced labor in exchange for Christian instruction and “protection.” (Abulafia wants to distinguish between slavery and forced labor, which for us is a distinction without a difference.) Isabella asserts her dominion over the original free sovereign nations of Abya Yala/Turtle Island, seeing them as her subjects and vassals whom she can subject to the *encomienda*. Here we begin to see the transformation of the system of hegemonic domination being applied, with the colonizers creating a system of domination that attempted to pit Indigenous peoples against one another on the island of Hispaniola. From the perspective of the colonizer, these distinctions mattered; however, from the point of view of Indigenous peoples, they amounted to a distinction without a difference. Christianized Indigenous peoples and Taínos

episode 4, 56 min., 11 sec., accessed August 2, 2024, <https://podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org/season3/episode-04/>; Eglutė Trinkauskaitė, “Christian Nationalism in the Lithuanian Context,” *CrossCurrents* 74, no. 4 (2024): 483–500.

29. David Abulafia, “Servants, Slaves or Subjects? Jews, Muslims and Indians as Royal Property,” in *From Al-Andalus to the Americas (13th–17th Centuries): Destruction and Construction of Societies*, ed. Thomas F. Glick, Antonio Malpica, Fèlix Retamero, and Josep Torró (Brill, 2018), 359–382.

30. Rady Roldán-Figueroa, “The Requerimiento and the Theological ‘Knot’ of European Expansionism: Jews, Muslims, and the Arawakan-Speaking Peoples of the Caribbean in Juan López de Palacios Rubios’s Juridical Theory of Dominion (1512),” *Critical Research on Religion* 13, no. 2 (2025): 133–150, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032251344343>. We are thankful to Newcomb for this tripartite articulation of three main outcomes of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery; see Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*; Wolfchild, *Unmasking the Domination Code*.

31. Abulafia, “Servants, Slaves or Subjects?”

would still be sold into enslavement. Indigenous enslavement, while in violation of what Queen Isabella said was licit, continued in practice.³²

Returning to the parallels between Muslims, Jews, and Indigenous peoples, there is no complete and free subjectivity under Christian hegemony; instead, subjectivity is recognized only when the dominator wants something, usually labor and tribute. The theological and legal hair-splitting that was performed in the comfort of the Castilian court served to absolve the dominator of their transgressions. Playing language games with concepts like *servi* and *liberi et ingenui* is the privilege of the dominator.³³ From an Indigenous perspective, this move obscures *de facto* and *de jure* domination.³⁴ These language games cast an obscurantist and theologically pietistic veil over the commission of genocide. As we have seen with the Irish, Lithuanians, Muslims, and Jews, their status as “subjects” and even “converts” did little to stop enslavement and exploitation by Christian rulers and the Church, to say nothing of the exploitation and extractivist harms inflicted upon Mother Earth, the natural world, and all living beings. Therefore, within eurochristianity, what we see is the “Indian” becoming yet another category and classification of subjugated peoples. This new category is not created *ex nihilo* but instead *ex profundis* by drawing on previous encounters with the other. The legal status granted by the colonizer to the colonized means little when eurochristian domination was enforced through Christianization and genocide.

Informed by medieval practices, tested and refined in Iberia, Ireland, the Baltics, and the Caribbean before being exported to Turtle Island, dominion theology continued to reshape Christianity. This emerging theology was justified through legal doctrines (papal donation, canon law) and enforced by the state and civil society. The theologizing of conquest wove theology and empire together into a Gordian knot. Tribute systems, racial hierarchies, freedom, and subjectivity became the theological and jurisprudential tools of domination. Conquest disguised as protection.

Doctrine of (Christian) Discovery

In response to our recent articles on the Doctrine of Discovery, we have spent this time tracing the contours of Christendom’s encounter with the “proximate others,” largely before the emergence of the Doctrine of (Christian) Discovery, in the hope of providing a public sketch of what we envision will be a longer-form collaboration where we trace a genealogy of dominion theology, or what Newcomb calls the domination code. We believe that to uproot the poison tree of Christian nationalism, we must trace its root system. We are often asked to define the Doctrine of Discovery succinctly, which is difficult. We therefore offer four definitions: 1) that of American Indian Law Alliance (AILA) founder and Ancestor, Tonya Gonnella Frichner (Onondaga Nation, Snipe Clan), 2) Newcomb’s, as outlined in the UN Preliminary Report, 3) the AILA’s, and 4) that provided by the Indigenous Values Initiative.³⁵ For this article, we will be using Vine Deloria’s:

[T]he treaties with Native Americans have been negotiated, ratified, and concluded under a cloud of impotence so that clear promises have dissolved into rhetoric when put to the judicial test. Federal Indian law

32. Abulafia, “Servants, Slaves or Subjects?,” 369–370.

33. Abulafia, “Servants, Slaves or Subjects?,” 373.

34. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*.

35. Gonnella Frichner, “Preliminary Study”; American Indian Law Alliance, “Doctrine of Discovery,” March 8, 2018, <https://aila.ngo/issues/doctrine-of-discovery/>; Indigenous Values Initiative, “What Is the Doctrine of Discovery?,” Doctrine of Discovery Project, July 30, 2018, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/what-is-the-doctrine-of-discovery/>.

begins with a sleight-of-hand decision that proclaimed that the United States had special standing with respect to ownership of the land on which the Indigenous people lived. This nefarious concept was called the “Doctrine of Discovery.”³⁶

Recently, scholars have begun drawing connections between the treatment of Jews in early modern Europe and the colonial encounters with Indigenous peoples in the Americas. The noted Italian historian of the Inquisition, Adriano Prosperi, makes a compelling case for the similarities in *Il seme dell'intolleranza*. He shows that the dehumanization of Jews in Spain – particularly through the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* (“purity of blood”) – emerged alongside the Catholic Monarchs’ efforts to conquer and dominate non-Christian peoples in places like the Caribbean and Canary Islands. Prosperi’s insights are crucial for understanding how religious and racial intolerance developed in tandem with European expansion. The language and conceptualization of the purity and impurity of blood are eerily reminiscent of the language of blood quantum, which would later be applied to Indigenous peoples, and the one-drop rule, which would later be applied to Black folks in the Americas.³⁷

Likewise, noted Jewish historian Jonathan Boyarin, in *The Unconverted Self* (2009), explores similar themes. He examines how Jews, Muslims (especially Moriscos), and Indigenous peoples of the Americas were conceptually linked in early modern thought. Boyarin notes that some Europeans even speculated that Native Americans were descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel. Jews and Indians alike were accused of stubbornness, sensuality, and a failure to embody reason – traits that, in the eyes of Christian thinkers, called their full humanity into question. While figures like Bartolomé de las Casas defended the humanity of Indigenous peoples of the Americas (though notably not the humanity of Indigenous African Arrivants), such efforts were exceptions to a broader pattern of exclusion. Together, Prosperi and Boyarin offer invaluable frameworks for understanding how early modern Europeans struggled to place unfamiliar peoples – whether Jews, Muslims, or Indigenous Americans – within their Christian dominionist worldview.³⁸

Canary Islands

Noted legal scholar Robert J. Miller (Eastern Shawnee) argues that the Canary Islands played a pivotal role in the formation of the international legal framework we now call the Doctrine of Discovery. In the early fifteenth century, Spain and Portugal were vying for seafaring dominance, and the Canary Islands were central to their struggle for control of the seas. As the contest intensified, Pope Eugenius IV felt the need to intervene in 1434. He issued a bull banning all European interference in the islands, ostensibly to protect converted and unconverted Indigenous populations. However, Portugal quickly appealed the ban by framing its colonial project as a religious mission. The Portuguese crown claimed that the islanders lacked proper religion, law, writing, and civilization, and that their conversion and submission to Portuguese authority had improved their condition. This appeal helped reshape the logic of the Doctrine of Discovery. Instead of arguing that Indigenous peoples had no property rights (*dominium*), Portugal

36. Vine Deloria Jr., “Conquest Masquerading as Law,” in *Unlearning the Language of Conquest: Scholars Expose Anti-Indianism in America*, ed. Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows, aka Don Trent Jacobs) (University of Texas Press, 2006), 96.

37. Adriano Prosperi, *Il seme dell'intolleranza: Ebrei, eretici, selvaggi; Granada 1492* (Laterza, 2012); Abulafia, “Servants, Slaves or Subjects?”

38. Jonathan Boyarin, *The Unconverted Self: Jews, Indians, and the Identity of Christian Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2009); Abulafia, “Servants, Slaves or Subjects?”

claimed a Christian duty to guide and civilize them under papal authority. Pope Eugenius IV agreed and issued the bull *Romanus Pontifex* in 1436, authorizing Portugal to convert and govern the Canary Islanders on behalf of the Church. This established a model in which European powers justified colonization by appealing to their supposed responsibility to protect and civilize non-Christian peoples.³⁹

This theological and legal innovation would be successively expanded by subsequent papal bulls. Pope Nicholas V's *Dum Diversas* (1452) authorized Portugal "to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed."⁴⁰ In *Dum Diversas*, the categories of Saracens, pagans, and enemies of Christ wind up encompassing everyone. The bull creates two classes of people: the dominators and those they seek to dominate. The categories of enemies lumped together in *Dum Diversas* have porous boundaries. Their scope is limited only by the imagination of the eurochristian. From our contemporary historical vantage point, the term that might possess the most linguistic stability is perhaps "Saracen." Like "infidel," "Saracen" is a holdover from the Crusades. John V. Tolan's *Saracens* explores how Christian writers from the seventh to the thirteenth century constructed images of Islam and Muslims – whom they often called "Saracens" – in ways that reflected their fears, prejudices, and religious certainties.⁴¹

A central theme in the book is how Christians used inherited biblical, classical, and patristic frameworks to understand Islam – whether by casting Muhammad as a heresiarch, Muslims as idolaters, or Islamic rule as divine punishment. By examining texts such as apocalyptic literature, missionary writings, chronicles, and polemical treatises, Tolan argues that these constructions were not based on actual knowledge of Islam but served to contain its challenge to Christian theological and political dominance. He also shows how these narratives laid the groundwork for long-term Western attitudes toward Muslims and Arabs, persisting even into modern colonial ideologies.⁴² In *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), the pope authorizes

industry that sea might become navigable as far as to the Indians who are said to worship the name of Christ, and that thus he might be able to enter into relation with them, and to incite them to aid the Christians against the Saracens and other such enemies of the faith, and might also be able forthwith to subdue certain gentile or pagan peoples, living between, who are entirely free from infection by the sect of the most impious Mahomet, and to preach and cause to be preached to them the unknown but most sacred name of Christ [...].⁴³

Romanus Pontifex admits that the great Henry the Navigator departed from the expected path of conquest. Therefore, the papal bull seeks to issue an *ex post facto* justification for Henry's acts of domination and dehumanization. The bull continues its explanation of Henry's past, present, and future actions and those of others like him. *Romanus Pontifex*'s primary interest is imperial expansion,

39. Robert J. Miller, "The International Law of Colonialism: Johnson v. M'Intosh and the Doctrine of Discovery Applied Worldwide," *Canopy Forum*, March 30, 2023, <https://canopyforum.org/2023/03/30/the-international-law-of-colonialism-johnson-v-mintosh-and-the-doctrine-of-discovery-applied-worldwide/>; Robert J. Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 13–14.

40. Nicholas V, *Dum Diversas* (1452), in *Bullarium Patronatus Portugalliae Regum in Ecclesiis Africae, Asiae atque Oceaniae*, ed. Levy Maria Jordão, vol. 1 (Ex Typographia Nationali, 1872), 22–23, English translation at <https://aila.li/nicholas/>.

41. John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (Columbia University Press, 2002).

42. Tolan, *Saracens*.

43. Nicholas V, *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), Doctrine of Discovery Project, Indigenous Values Initiative, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/the-bull-romanus-pontifex-nicholas-v/>.

exploitation, and extraction. Using polemical and insulting language, the document continually works to link “other such enemies of the faith” to Islam while also acknowledging that the other is neither Muslim nor Christian. This papal bull also hints at a larger mythic quest: to find the Christian King Prester John and form an alliance with the Indians “who are said to worship the name of Christ.” Notice that even here, there is suspicion about the devotion and faith of non-eurochristians. Throughout, *Romanus Pontifex* mentions “Saracens” ten times, “pagan” four times, “infidels” eleven times, and “enemies” seven times, which demonstrates its preoccupation with creating and defining a villainous other who must be attacked to try and “reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”⁴⁴ The primary vilified proximate others are Muslims, with Pagans and others finishing second and third, respectively.

With added emphasis, *Romanus Pontifex* repeats the dominion formula of *Dum Diversas*: “to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”⁴⁵ *Dum Diversas* and *Romanus Pontifex* seek to authorize domination and dehumanization and legitimize the actions of those who engage in these practices. The effect these documents had on people across the globe is horrifying and genuinely damaging. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the recursive and entirely self-referential nature of these documents. Their primary purpose is to legitimate a framework of domination and dehumanization. They provide a *theological* and *jurisprudential* alibi for harm. These papal bulls are meant to adjudicate the power struggles between the monarchs of Europe and ensure that the Church also maintains its power.

These papal bulls authorize enslavement, exploitation, and extraction all in the name of Christian dominion. Dispossession and domination are the tools of Christian hegemony. *Romanus Pontifex* assumes that the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church of India would be at war with Muslims and that the pagan peoples living around them are also in need of conversion. Non-Roman Catholic Christians, Muslims, and the pagans living in India are all seen as inferior to Roman Catholics and in need of proper salvation. In short, Ireland, Iberia, the Baltics, and the Canary Islands were all theological and legal proving grounds. Conversion, civilization, and Christian dominion are all inextricably linked. There is no distance between the Church and secular governance; even when they are at odds with one another, theological rhetorical appeals are utilized in the resolution of their disputes. The Doctrine of Christian Discovery, first applied to the proximate other through conversion, the civilizing mission, and Christian dominion, became central to its application to the distal other. This assumption of eurochristian theological, legal, and civilizational dominance still influences settler-colonial law today. Examples include the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s “Homeland Heritage” campaign and its use of John Gast’s *American Progress* (1872), which provides the most succinct visual encapsulation of Manifest Destiny and its antecedent, the Doctrine of Christian Discovery.⁴⁶

44. Nicholas V, *Romanus Pontifex*.

45. Nicholas V, *Romanus Pontifex*.

46. Sara J. Moslener, “DHS’s ‘Homeland Heritage’ Campaign Highlights Danger of Innocence Myths of a White Christian America,” *Religion Dispatches*, July 30, 2025, <https://religiondispatches.org/dhss-homeland-heritage-posts-highlight-danger-of-innocence-myths-of-a-white-christian-america/>; Robert Michael Ruehl, “Manifest Destiny,” Doctrine of Discovery Project, March 23, 2023, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/blog/manifest-destiny/>.

Since 1917, the definitive English translation of many of these papal bulls has been Frances Gardiner Davenport's *European Treaties*.⁴⁷ However, as our colleagues Sebastian Modrow and Melissa Smith have noted, Davenport's essential work has its limitations. Therefore, Modrow and Smith are working on a new annotated translation of the papal bulls.⁴⁸ As they note in the preface to their new translation of *Inter Caetera*, there are actually three bulls by that name. In 1456, pope Callixtus III issued the first *Inter Caetera* (1456), which followed on the heels of *Romanus Pontifex*.⁴⁹ The 1456 bull affirms the aforementioned bulls and grants Portugal the sole right of conquest as far as India and much of Asia. Callixtus III threatened any Christian rulers who interfered with the Portuguese conquest with excommunication. Pope Alexander VI, Callixtus III's nephew, would issue two subsequent bulls with the same name based on his uncle's work. The third bull, issued on May 4, 1493, has one significant change: it draws a dividing line from the North Pole to the South Pole, "one hundred leagues to the west and south of any of the islands that are usually called the Azores and Cape Verde."⁵⁰ These bulls represent a conscious attempt to avert conflict between the two empires by drawing a fine line of demarcation, a unilateral attempt to carve up the world as if it were a cake.

Inter Caetera has a three-step argument. First, Catholicism is the only true faith and the sole instrument necessary for salvation. All other religions are savage, and their practitioners are infidels. Thus, the different forms of faith are only blasphemous recantations of the "original" and supreme Catholic faith. Second, the others are committing treason and insurrection against the Church and Crown. The theological subtext here is that all humans are Christian, and all land and souls already belong to the Church; thus, the Pope is free to parcel them out as he wishes. Third, colonial conquest is the suppression of theological and social insurrection by any means necessary, with the aim of saving the souls of defectors by creating the political, social, and religious infrastructure necessary for reversion through enslavement and exploitation.

One of the things that is helpful about Modrow and Smith's new translation is that it highlights a subtle linguistic shift in how Christian domination was being framed and understood. Previously, we have highlighted how there was, at least in theory, a distinction between being a traditional Indigenous person and a Christianized Indigenous person, but that this difference did not amount to much protection under domination. What we can see with *Inter Caetera* is a further erasure of that distinction.

Among other works pleasing the divine majesty and close to our heart, this indeed stands out the most: elevating the Catholic faith and the Christian religion, especially in [these] our times, as well as extending and spreading it everywhere, securing the salvation of souls and *subduing the barbarous nations and bringing them back to the faith* [*ad fidem ipsam reducantur*] itself.⁵¹

Unlike the previous bulls, which speak of converting non-Christians, this phrase, "bringing them back to the faith" (*ad fidem ipsam reducantur*), frames the evangelization of Indigenous peoples as a *return*

47. Frances Gardiner Davenport, ed., "The Bull Romanus Pontifex, January 8, 1455," in *European Treaties Bearing on the History of the United States and Its Dependencies*, Papers of the Department of Historical Research, no. 254 (Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1917), 9–27, <http://archive.org/details/eurotreatiesus00daverich>.

48. Sebastian Modrow and Melissa Smith, "The Papal Bull Inter Caetera of May 4, 1493," introduced and translated by Sebastian Modrow and Melissa Smith, Doctrine of Discovery Project, June 13, 2022, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/inter-caetera/>.

49. Papal bulls are typically named after their opening words, which can lead to some confusion, as is the case here. Cf. Modrow and Smith, "Papal Bull Inter Caetera."

50. Modrow and Smith, "Papal Bull Inter Caetera."

51. Modrow and Smith, "Papal Bull Inter Caetera." Emphasis and Latin added.

to Christianity rather than an introduction to it. As Modrow and Smith point out, the Latin verb *reducere* (from which we get “reduce”) literally means “to lead back.” It implies that these so-called “barbarous nations” were once part of the Christian fold and have now strayed. This subtle linguistic move reveals a deeper theological and political strategy. By portraying Indigenous peoples as *lapsed* or *fallen* Christians – rather than entirely foreign to the faith – the Church could claim a jurisdictional and spiritual authority over them from the outset. Here, the distinction between pagan and heretic is elided. Regardless of an Indigenous person’s religion and culture, it is assumed that they are in fact Christian and must be returned to the faith. However, they are not allowed access to any of the rights of being a Christian because they are not European. Here, the pope is not just authorizing the conquest of new lands – he is also asserting an ancient, albeit interrupted, universal dominion of the Church. *Inter Caetera* (1493) expands Christian dominion to include the newly encountered distal others, and the response to this encounter is to assume that the Indigenous peoples of Abya Yala/Turtle Island are not only inferior to eurochristians but also in need of being brought back to the one true faith. Instead of conversion, reversion.

Inter Caetera portrays colonization as a form of *restoration* rather than invasion. It justifies domination as a sacred duty to bring lost souls back into the Church’s fold. It also dismisses the legitimacy of Indigenous religions by claiming that Christianity is their true faith and that Catholicism is their rightful spiritual home, requiring them to submit to the authority of the pope as commanded by God. In this way, *Inter Caetera* does more than define geopolitical boundaries; it embeds a theological fiction into international law. The idea that Indigenous peoples could be “brought back” to a faith they never claimed allows the Catholic Church to morally justify empire, dispossession, and forced conversion under the pretense of spiritual salvation. To slightly modifying the previous quote from Bernard of Clairvaux, Indigenous peoples can be Christian in name but will always remain pagan in practice and thus are subject to domination. Dominion theology asserts that there are the dominators and the dominated, and these categories override concepts of salvation and damnation. No matter what an individual does, no amount of loyalty or devotion can make an Indigenous person part of the ruling class because the issue of “*limpieza de sangre*” (“purity of blood”) remains. Newcomb sharply summarizes the Doctrine of Christian Discovery as a “Domination Code” based on two linked goals: domination and dehumanization. This code forms the core of dominion theology. Examining the history of the relevant papal bulls shows how they combine these two aims into a single framework. At its foundation, this domination code rests on three main elements: enslavement, exploitation, and extraction.⁵² We refer to this as dominion theology.

Noted postcolonial scholars Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde are illustrative here. They are correct in their assessment that the colonized cannot do anything to become equal to the eurochristian colonizer, and, in fact, trying to navigate and achieve equality within that system is part of the problem. In his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon offers a powerful critique of how racism and colonialism shape Black consciousness and identity. He explores how Black people are alienated in a world built on white supremacy. Fanon argues that colonialism – and we would add dominion theology – doesn’t just take land or labour; it rewrites how people understand themselves. Black people, he says, are trapped in a system that defines them through whiteness. They wear “white masks” to survive in a racist world, adopting the language and customs of the colonizer, but in doing so, they lose touch with their own identity. This creates deep psychological pain. For example, speaking the colonizer’s language can be a way to seek legitimacy and demonstrate alignment with the colonizer/dominator. However, this is a trap as it leads to self-erasure

52. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*; Wolfchild, *Unmasking the Domination Code*.

and deculturation, not acceptance. While Fanon is primarily focused on Black people, we believe that his analysis also applies to Indigenous peoples.⁵³

Fanon develops the concept of the “zone of nonbeing,” a space characterized not only by social exclusion but also by ontological denial.⁵⁴ To be Black in a white Euro-Christian supremacist world is to exist outside the scope of full humanity. Humanity and human rights are then recognized only by the European Christian oppressor, which is why, even after the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was still necessary. Indigenous rights were not regarded as part of universal human rights by UN member states. Once again, we see Fanon’s critique of European notions of reason, freedom, and humanity. These notions claim to be universal, but in practice exclude Black, Indigenous, and all colonized peoples. He ends with a powerful call for Black liberation, urging Black – and, we would add, Indigenous – peoples to reject imposed colonial identities and reclaim themselves and their original, free, and prior ways of existence, advocating for equality and dignity.

As Lorde famously said, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁵⁵ The insidious nature of dominion theology lies in its integration into the complex web of international law and society. It is continuously reified and sustained through the ongoing rhetoric of othering, which portrays Indigenous nations and peoples in their original, free, prior, and traditional ways as somehow inferior to modern “civilization.”

Lewis R. Gordon examines Fanon’s concept of the “zone of nonbeing” by connecting Western civilization – viewed as synonymous with eurochristianity – to its colonizing and dominating theological motives. Eurochristianity presents itself as rational and moral, while oppressing anyone seen as deficient and therefore other.⁵⁶ The other remains perceived as lacking and in need of salvation or discipline. To grasp the so-called rationality behind colonialism and domination, Gordon explores the concept of theodicy. Theodicy is a branch of theology that seeks to explain, in this case, God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence in the face of evil and injustice. Essentially, it asks why God allows one group to dominate another. More broadly, it questions why the “Supreme Source of Legitimacy” permits one nation to colonize another. Gordon correctly notes that even secular reflections on the reasons for colonialism still rely on a Euro-Christian dominion theology. The former makes God’s omnipotence explicit, while the latter conceals it. Eurochristian dominion theology maintains that the colonized will rationalize the system of domination and accept the message that they deserve oppression, becoming tools of their own subjugation. This requires Black, Indigenous, and people of color to live in self-deception and tolerate cognitive dissonance between what is and what ought to be. When these groups develop critical consciousness, they begin to question whether the Christian hegemonic system aligns with liberatory goals.⁵⁷ For Gordon, an answer to the theological questions posed by Christian domination can be found in Fanon’s final line – “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” – which is a prayer for ongoing resistance rooted in embodied freedom, not submission to colonial logic or mere recognition.⁵⁸

53. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Grove Press, 1967).

54. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 82–108.

55. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 94–101.

56. Lewis R. Gordon, “Through the Zone of Nonbeing: A Reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* in Celebration of Fanon’s Eightieth Birthday,” *CLR James Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005): 1–43.

57. Gordon, “Through the Zone of Nonbeing.”

58. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 181.

Requerimiento: Rituals of Blood and Gold

In 1513, the *Requerimiento* was written by noted Castilian jurist Juan López de Palacios Rubios.⁵⁹ It provides a stark example of the theological and legal justification for Christian dominion. The document was designed to justify the conquest of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island/Abya Yala, not to the Indigenous peoples who were about to be encountered, but instead to the troops and clergy who were about to carry out the conquest. Officially, the document was meant to be read aloud to Indigenous peoples in a language they could not understand before Spanish forces engaged them in warfare and claimed their lands. Not only was it read aloud in a language that was unintelligible to the original inhabitants of Turtle Island/Abya Yala, but it was also frequently read from the boats. Some have suggested that the goal of the *Requerimiento* was to serve as a formal declaration giving Indigenous peoples the chance to submit peacefully to Spanish rule and Christian conversion:

[I]f you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us.⁶⁰

The *Requerimiento* begins by claiming that God gave authority over the Earth to the Pope, who then granted the Spanish Crown authority over the Americas. It continues by stating that the pope gave Spain the right to take possession of “newly discovered” lands and peoples. The document asserts that Indigenous peoples must accept Spanish rule and Christian teachings. It further claims that if they do not do so, then the Spanish would be justified in making war against them and seizing their property, without guilt. This is a classic case of blame-shifting. The entire document is a tautology. Any resistance will bring destruction upon Indigenous peoples, but acceptance also means destruction. In either case, the Spanish claim they are not to blame. The document is a prime example of how theology and law conspire to legitimize colonization and conquest. This document forms a core part of dominion theology, which holds that eurochristians had the divine right to claim non-Christian lands.

Scholars grapple with what to make of such a cynical and cruel theological and legal tool. The *Requerimiento* is a stark and shocking example of colonial logic, where reckless violence is portrayed as not only divinely approved but also lawful. Bartolomé de Las Casas reportedly did not know whether to laugh or cry.⁶¹ This legal fiction turned conquest into a “just war,” rooted in medieval canon law and the idea that Christian rulers had the right to spread the gospel, and that Indigenous peoples had the obligation to hear and accept it. William S. Goldman quotes Stephen Greenblatt, calling the *Requerimiento* a “strange

59. Juan López de Palacios Rubios, “Requerimiento” (1513), in *American Beginnings: The European Presence in North America, 1492–1690*, National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, June 1, 2006, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/requirement.pdf>.

60. Palacios Rubios, “Requerimiento.”

61. William S. Goldman, “‘Islands of the Ocean Sea’: The *Requerimiento* and European Expansion in the New World,” *Republic of Letters* 5, no. 3 (2016): 1–9.

blend of ritual, cynicism, legal fiction, and perverse idealism.”⁶² Despite the mixed reactions of laughter and tears, the *Requerimiento*’s purpose is deadly serious: it legally and theologically justifies violent conquest. However, the question remains: what should we make of this document? In *Ceremonies of Possession*, Patricia Seed argues that it should be viewed as a ritualized performance of sovereignty designed for Euro-Christians rather than for the benefit of Indigenous peoples’ understanding. Supporting her case, *she points* out that, starting in 1514, Pedrarias Dávila – a Spanish aristocrat who fought the Moors in Granada and later became governor of Nicaragua – used the document not as a legal tool but as a ceremonial protocol. This makes sense because the document closely follows the conventions of a ceremonial protocol: a formal declaration of authority, an offer made, followed by a threat if the offer is rejected. The ceremonial use of the document enabled the Spanish to claim that their acts of enslavement, exploitation, and extraction were not only legally justified but also morally valid.⁶³

Therefore, the *Requerimiento* is a legal act aimed at fulfilling the principles of just war doctrine. Seed argues that reading the document aloud was a ritual of possession similar to planting a cross or flag.⁶⁴ Both are rituals of claiming territory that continue today, such as planting the U.S. flag on the moon.⁶⁵ As Seed and Miller might agree, the *Requerimiento* was not an isolated anomaly. Instead, it was part of a larger imperial bureaucracy that used ceremonies, rituals, and documents to turn conquest into lawful governance. This shows how European colonial powers ritualized domination, embedding it in legal procedures to make conquest appear organized and just. Even when these powers see themselves as secular rulers, theology resurfaces whenever the ritual is performed again.⁶⁶ More recent scholarship, such as Roldán-Figueroa’s, criticizes Seed’s view, arguing that it portrays the *Requerimiento* as a shallow performance, overlooking its religious importance, legal details, and theological roots.⁶⁷ While Seed considers the document a symbolic claim of empire, others argue it must also be seen as part of a deeply Christian worldview that genuinely – though forcefully – linked conquest with conversion and salvation. We agree with this view and suggest that the ritual surrounding the *Requerimiento* is not just a ritual of possession but also a ritual of atonement and a preemptive granting of absolution.

As we trace the contours of dominionist theology, we can identify several central categories within this theological formation. We have discussed the other. Fanon and Lorde help us to identify bodies as another category, and Anidjar identifies blood as a third. He argues that blood holds a unique, formative role in Western Christendom. While blood is ritually and symbolically important across many religions (including Eastern Christianity, Temple Judaism, and Islam), only in Western Christendom does it become the basis for racial thinking, legal discrimination, and economic organization.⁶⁸ As Anidjar highlights, during the medieval period, there was a transformation in Eucharistic theology whereby people began to believe that their participation in the Eucharist transmuted their personal blood and gave them Christian

62. Goldman, “Islands of the Ocean Sea”; Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 98.

63. Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69–99.

64. Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession*, 69–99.

65. Robert J. Miller, “The International Law of Colonialism: A Comparative Analysis,” *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 15, no. 4 (2011): 847.

66. Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession*, 69–99.

67. Roldán-Figueroa, “Requerimiento and the Theological ‘Knot’”; Yanay Israeli, “The Requerimiento in the Old World: Making Demands and Keeping Records in the Legal Culture of Late Medieval Castile,” *Law and History Review* 40, no. 1 (2022): 37–62.

68. Anidjar, *Blood*.

blood, distinct from non-Christian blood. This is where the Spanish doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* returns once again, in the binary opposition between Christian and non-Christian blood, evident not only in Spain but also in England, as illustrated by Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.⁶⁹

Bernard of Clairvaux's theology is once again illustrative as he develops the doctrine of *malicidium*, or the killing of evil. "The soldier of Christ [...] is safe when he kills, even safer when he is killed. If he is killed, it is for his own good; if he kills, he does it for Christ."⁷⁰ When taking the Eucharist, Christ's blood enters the body, and since Christ was fully divine and fully human, does taking in even just a drop of Christ's blood mean that one begins to have a divine nature? Is one inherently superior to others? This becomes a less absurd a proposition when one considers the divine right of kings and doctrine of papal infallibility. If they can have divine powers and are distinct amongst humans, it is not too far a stretch to assume the superiority of all Christians over others, especially those who have tainted blood, like Jews, Muslims, and pagans.

Another important element we want to highlight in the shifting Eucharistic theologies of the medieval period is the conflation of sacrifice and justice. In atonement theology, Christ dies for the sins of humanity. He sacrifices himself to God for all humanity. To provide a brief overview, early Christianity saw Christ as God, priest, and sacrifice all in one – a self-offering received by God in love, not out of juridical necessity. However, it is in Western medieval theology that this sacrifice was reoriented toward satisfying God's justice and wrath, aligning with legal frameworks. This shift changed the believer's role from a passive recipient of grace to an active participant in meeting the demands of divine justice. This legal-sacrificial synthesis contributed to a mindset where violence, including shedding the blood of "infidels," could be seen as righteous.⁷¹ Anidjar demonstrates how the theological and sacrificial history of blood leads to the construction of the villainous other in Christian political thought. In medieval Europe, Jews and Muslims were imagined as separate "bodies" of opposition; in modern contexts, similar binaries persist, as we saw with Fanon. Whether framed as protecting Jews from Muslims or vice versa, the logic of enmity toward the other remains Christian in structure, even if it is not overtly religious.

Eucharistic theology helps us to understand the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. The bread is the body of Christ, and the wine is the blood of Christ. As Anidjar persuasively argues, for atonement to occur, blood must be shed.⁷² Traditionally speaking, atonement is reparation or expiation for sin. Following the logic of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and domination, the sin that was committed was Indigenous peoples falling away from the faith they didn't know they had (*Inter Caetera*). Therefore, for them to atone for their "sin," blood must be shed. However, instead of the shedding of Christ's blood – as a propitiation for sin to satisfy God's wrath against sin and sinners – it is the shedding of Indigenous peoples' blood (*Requerimiento*). This shedding of Indigenous blood serves as a propitiation for sin to satisfy the wrath of God's emissary on earth, the Pope, against sin (Indigenous peoples falling away from the faith), and sinners (the acts of the conquistadors). The ritualized shedding of Indigenous peoples' blood through conquest grants the conquistadors absolution for the atrocities they commit against the ones who died for their sins.

69. Anidjar, *Blood*, 1–33.

70. Anidjar, *Blood*, 134.

71. Anidjar, *Blood*.

72. Anidjar, *Blood*, 48–49.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Anidjar is right: Christianity is not only a religion but also a civilizational formation that shapes law, politics, the economy, and concepts of the human. The contemporary framework of international law and human rights is inseparable from the Christian dominionist theology that rests at the heart of the Enlightenment project. The imagined secularism of the contemporary world of international law and policy is not secular at all. Rather, it is steeped in a particular form of Christian hegemony – dominionist theology – that provides a comprehensive and integrated political, theological, and legal worldview founded in domination. The dominion theology of Western Christendom continues to structure not only our thought but also our governance and economics.⁷³ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us that “words create worlds.”⁷⁴ This current world of late capitalism and rising authoritarianism is the world created by Christian dominionist theological and legal thought.

Anidjar is correct in challenging the popular view that Europe, and by extension the West, has become less Christian. He argues that Europe is “as Christian as it has ever been, not because nothing has changed in Europe, but because the enemy is the same enemy thought along the same lines, using the same concepts and the same denegations and the same the same technologies of rule.”⁷⁵ Modern secular states still operate within Christian-inherited binaries between acceptable and unacceptable blood, between the saved and the damned. Anidjar asks, “Can Christianity exist without its others?”⁷⁶ If Christianity remains steeped in dominion theology and nationalism, the answer is no.

73. Anidjar, *Blood*.

74. Abraham Joshua Heschel, preface to *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

75. “#FMK Round Table: Gil Anidjar—On the Christian Question (Part 2),” lecture recording, Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade, April 24, 2013, posted by FMK Beograd, YouTube, 33 min., 38 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYoEWCXmUto>.

76. “#FMK Round Table: Gil Anidjar—On the Christian Question (Part 3),” lecture recording, Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade, April 24, 2013, posted by FMK Beograd, YouTube, 1 hr., 41 min., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJWWqanM1mk>.

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