

THE DOCTRINE DOCUMENTARY

A feature-length, character-driven documentary film project is currently in the making. Directed by Gwendolyn Cates and co-produced with Robert J Millar (Eastern Shawnee), it endeavours to generate public awareness and catalyse change of what is now known as the Doctrine of Discovery.



Originally known as Manifest Destiny, the Doctrine was codified in the 15th century by [Papal Bulls](#) (decrees or orders) that gave European explorers the right to claim and exploit “discovered” lands on behalf of their Christian monarchs, and a mandate to convert, enslave or kill non-Christian inhabitants. The most relevant of those Bulls was issued in 1452 under the title, [Dum Diversas](#) (until different). It read in full:

“We grant you [Kings of Spain and Portugal] by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, duchies, counties, principalities, and other property [...] and to reduce their persons into perpetual servitude.” [Dum Diversas 1452](#).

Although originally stemming from Roman Catholicism, the Doctrine enshrined the belief that all European Christians had the right, and moral imperative, to conquer, enslave, and dominate the rest of the world. The United States Supreme Court expressly [adopted the Doctrine of Discovery in 1823](#), as did many other courts and governments around the world.

“The principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands.” US Chief Justice John Marshall, [Johnson v McIntosh, 1823](#).

That is the world view which, since the 15th century, was used by almost all white colonisers to justify engaging in genocide, ethnic cleansing, and colonization of indigenous people of colour. In fact, the Doctrine is still used to this day to [expropriate Indigenous lands](#) and [undermine Indigenous rights](#) around the world.

Although the Doctrine is increasingly discredited and [denounced internationally](#), there are reports in this country of public servants asserting, when challenged to adhere to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* in negotiations, that only the Doctrine of Discovery can apply and that [the matter cannot be discussed](#).

While not all white people and/or Christians adhere to it, if we are honest, they have been privileged by the Doctrine – especially over the indigenous nations that they colonised.

In a way there is something sad about those who cling to the Doctrine still. But it's also unsurprising. Why would they let it go when it underpins the fiction of superiority, quiets the fear of inferiority and, to this day, has never publicly been repudiated by the Vatican or any government?

The upcoming documentary will follow Indigenous activists from around the globe who are fighting the ongoing impact of the Doctrine and are striving to convince the Pope to formally rescind the archaic Bulls. It will also educate and empower indigenous nations to protect their Indigenous homelands from Aotearoa to the Amazon and the Arctic. I look forward to its premiere in the next year.