

# THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY



## What is the “Doctrine of Discovery?”

The Doctrine of Discovery is a historical philosophical, legal, and political framework originating from a series of papal laws in the 15th and 16th centuries. These papal laws granted Euro-Christian monarchs the moral and legal rights to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous Peoples. This doctrine is based on several core entitlements and assumptions

1

**SUPREMACY OF EUROPEANS AND EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY**

EUROPEANS BELIEVED IN THEIR SUPERIORITY OVER NON-EUROPEANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS

2

**ENTITLEMENT TO SEIZE NON-EURO CHRISTIAN LANDS AND POSSESSIONS**

EUROPEAN CHRISTIANS WERE GIVEN THE RIGHT TO TAKE OVER NON-EURO CHRISTIAN TERRITORIES, WATERS, AND PROPERTIES.

3

**EXPLOITATION FOR PROFIT**

EUROPEAN CHRISTIANS COULD EXPLOIT NON EURO-CHRISTIAN LANDS, WATERS, AND PEOPLE FOR ECONOMIC GAIN, AND ESTABLISH SYSTEMS TO RETAIN ECONOMIC PRIVILEGE

4

**POLITICAL AND PHYSICAL DOMINATION OVER NON-EUROPEANS**

COLONIAL GOVERNMENTS WERE FOUNDED ON THESE PRINCIPLES, LEADING TO THE SYSTEMIC SUBORDINATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

## Evolution from Religious Laws to Governments and Legal Systems

The Doctrine of Discovery was based on the dehumanization of non-Europeans and non-Christians, denying them property and human rights. Europeans established colonial governments on Indigenous lands, often to regulate land ownership and reallocate lands to settlers. Legal systems were also established based on these principles, as seen in the famous case *Johnson vs. McIntosh* (1823) in the so-called United States. This case set a legal precedent for the extinguishment of native land rights worldwide, including Aotearoa.



## Relationship to Racism

The Doctrine of Discovery played a foundational role in shaping contemporary racism. It was propagated during a period of global imperial expansion, allowing racist theories to be spread, enforced, and “baked” into governments and institutions as they were established worldwide. These ideas were used to justify practices like the European and Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Notably, they contributed to the establishment of racialized categories and characteristics, perpetuating racism for centuries.

# Beyond Religious, Legal, and Political Systems



The Doctrine of Discovery has permeated various aspects of society, including social systems, education, and economics. During the Enlightenment Period, scholars developed racist scientific theories based on these ideas, which were then used as the basis for growing colonially racist governments and policies. Today, many of these scholars' works remain a part of academic curricula, and their theories continue to underpin racist governments, legislation, economic privilege, and policies across all spheres, including health, environment, education and justice.

## Why Indigenous Leaders Seek Its Rescission



The original papal laws' entitlements have remained unchanged and continue to drive Indigenous dispossession and racialized disparity. Indigenous peoples worldwide have called upon the Vatican to officially revoke these papal laws in order to undermine the Doctrine's force globally. Colonial governments are urged to repudiate and remove the Doctrine of Discovery from their legal and political systems. Since 2012, the United Nations has recommended member states repudiate the Doctrine, yet no nation has yet reported compliance. Repudiating the Doctrine is crucial for Indigenous justice and the elimination of colonial racism.

## The New Zealand Government's Position

The New Zealand Government's stance can be characterized as "passively supportive" of retaining the Doctrine of Discovery in legislation, policy, and practice. Prime Minister Hipkins stated that the Doctrine is not relevant to New Zealand, emphasizing the Treaty of Waitangi as the guiding framework. The Department of Conservation, as New Zealand's state party representative at the 2021 IUCN World Conservation Congress, abstained from voting on a motion to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery, failing to engage with Māori on the matter. This has raised concerns among iwi leaders.

For further information

[www.rangiratanga.co.nz](http://www.rangiratanga.co.nz)

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