

# The Roots of Christian Nationalism Go Back Further Than You Think

Robert Jones, Author of *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*

Across the last few decades in the U.S., we have experienced widespread debates and even violent conflicts over American history. Battles like these typically erupt during times of social change, when cultural convulsions shake the foundations of old ways of knowing and living. Identity, rather than policy, drives divisions. History becomes the new front line in the culture wars, as claims about who we are as a nation inevitably turn on competing narratives about when and how we arrived at this place.

The term “white Christian nationalism” has recently emerged in the social sciences and the media as a way of describing the worldview that has burst onto the public stage in the wake of Trumpism and the “Make America Great Again” movement. The toxic blend of ethno-religious identity politics was reflected in the prayers and religious symbols participants carried at the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, and it has become central to the trajectory of the contemporary Republican Party, two thirds of whom identify as white and Christian.

But if we see these recent trends against the long backdrop of western history, we can see that the phenomenon this term describes has far deeper roots than the post-Obama MAGA backlash. Our two political parties are increasingly animated by two starkly conflicting moral visions that have struggled for ascendancy since the first Europeans landed on these shores five centuries ago. *Is America a divinely ordained promised land for European Christians, or is America a pluralistic democracy where all stand on equal footing as citizens?* Most Americans embrace the latter vision. But a desperate, defensive, mostly white Christian minority continue to cling to the former.

**To fully understand the deep roots of today’s white Christian nationalism, we need to go back at least to 1493**—not the year Christopher Columbus “sailed the ocean blue,” but the year in which he returned to a hero’s welcome in Spain, bringing with him gold, brightly colored parrots, and nearly a dozen captive Indigenous people. It was also the year he was commissioned to return to the Americas with a much larger fleet of 17 ships, nearly 1,500 men, and more than a

dozen priests to speed the conversion of Indigenous people who inhabited what he, along with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, still believed were Asian shores.

**The return of Columbus in 1493 also precipitated one of the most fateful but unacknowledged theological developments in the history of the western Christian Church: the creation of what has come to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery.** Established in a series of 15th-century papal bulls (official edicts that carry the full weight of church and papal authority), the Doctrine claims that European civilization and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races, and religions. From this premise, it follows that domination and colonial conquest were merely the means of improving, if not the temporal, then the eternal lot of Indigenous peoples. So conceived, no earthly atrocities could possibly tilt the scales of justice against these immeasurable goods.

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The Doctrine of Discovery merged the interests of European imperialism, including the African slave trade, with Christian missionary zeal. *Dum Diversas*, the initial edict that laid the theological and political foundations for the Doctrine, was issued by Pope Nicholas V on June 18, 1452. It explicitly granted Portuguese king Alfonso V the following rights:

“To invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] 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.”

This papal decree, and others that extended and developed its principles, provided the moral and religious justification for an unfettered European colonial race for “undiscovered lands” and fertilized the blossoming African slave trade. The most relevant papal edict for the American context was the bull *Inter Caetera*, issued by Pope Alexander VI in May 1493, with the express purpose of validating Spain’s ownership rights of lands in the Americas following the voyages of Columbus the year before. It praised Columbus and again affirmed the church’s blessing of and interest in political conquest, “that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian

religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.”

While the Doctrine of Discovery has escaped scrutiny by most white scholars and theologians, Indigenous people and scholars of color have long been testifying to these Christian roots of white supremacy, while dying from and living with their damaging effects. Indigenous scholars such as the late Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota, Standing Rock Sioux), Robert J. Miller (Eastern Shawnee of Oklahoma), and Steven T. Newcomb (Shawnee/Lenape) have been highlighting, for over 50 years now, the centrality of this critical theological and political turn.

**As I've continued my own reeducation journey over the last 10 years, I have come to consider the Doctrine of Discovery as a kind of Rosetta Stone for understanding the deep structure of the European political and religious worldviews we have inherited in this country.**

The Doctrine of Discovery furnished the foundational lie that America was “discovered” and enshrined the noble innocence of “pioneers” in the story we, white Christian Americans, have told about ourselves. Ideas such as Manifest Destiny, America as a city on a hill, or America as a new Zion all sprouted from the seed that was planted in 1493. This sense of divine entitlement, of European Christian chosenness, has shaped the worldview of most white Americans and thereby influenced key events, policies, and laws throughout American history....