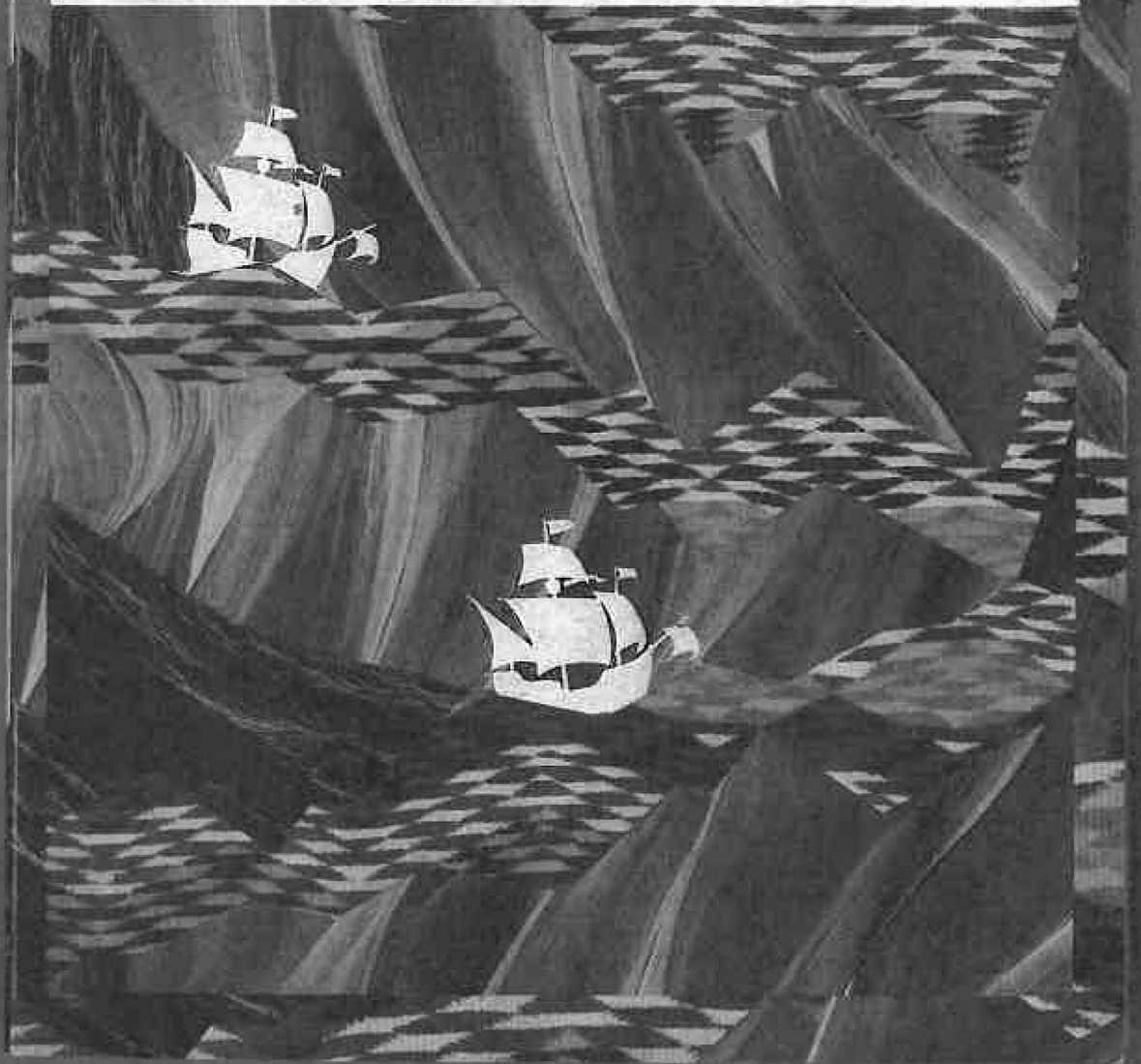


INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY
MARK CHARLES AND SOONG-CHAN RAH

Unsettling Truths

THE ONGOING,
DEHUMANIZING
LEGACY OF THE
DOCTRINE OF
DISCOVERY



CHAPTER FIVE

A Dysfunctional Theology Brought to the "New" World



ON MARCH 3, 2015, at the invitation of US House Speaker John Boehner, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a joint session of the United States Congress. The speech was controversial on many levels, and some even considered it to be unconstitutional. Article II, Section 2, Clause 2 of the United States Constitution states that the President "shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties."¹ The Obama administration was working hard to finalize the terms for a nuclear treaty with Iran. The Republican Speaker of the House went behind the back of the Democratic president and invited the Israeli prime minister to address (technically, to lobby) a joint session of Congress. A political slight of this magnitude was without precedent.

Furthermore, because the speaker was white and the president was black, many interpreted it as a racist move. Not only was Netanyahu vehemently opposed to the proposed nuclear treaty with Iran, he was actively campaigning for re-election. Speaking to a joint session of

Congress could be interpreted as a political endorsement by the United States for the prime minister and his party. As a result, about thirty members of Congress boycotted the speech.

Netanyahu faced a daunting task. He was addressing an extremely partisan and divided Congress. His speech was being broadcast to a racially divided and politically unsettled US public. He had to find a way to thread the needle and get as many people as possible on the same page and in agreement with him. So early in his speech he hit on one of the most unifying and bipartisan themes in US politics, American exceptionalism. He said, "Because America and Israel, we share a common destiny, the destiny of promised lands."²

THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY AND THE PROMISED LAND

The narrative of American exceptionalism finds an early expression in the colonial history of North America. In 1630, on a ship bound for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, a Puritan pastor who would come to serve as the governor of Massachusetts, preached a sermon titled "A Modell of Christian Charity." He invoked the Old Testament passage in Micah "to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God." He exhorted the colonists to "uphold a familiar commerce . . . delight in each other, make other's conditions our own. . . . The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as *his own people* (emphasis ours) and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of his wisdom power goodness and truth then formerly we have been acquainted with."³ Winthrop envisioned the new colony as a community expressing care and love towards each other. These qualities exhibited by the commonwealth of Massachusetts would demonstrate that they were uniquely God's people and deserving of special favor from God. He

envisioned the Puritans as God's people among whom God dwells with great delight.

In the second half of his sermon, Winthrop sought to motivate the colonists towards a divine destiny: "He (God) shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England: for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."⁴ The "City upon a Hill" reference is taken from the teachings of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16). Winthrop, therefore, proclaimed the colonists to be those who had been endowed with a special, spiritual favor by God, whose life and example would be a shining light into all the world. Through their very embodiment, they would perform evangelism in a broken and sinful world.

Puritans in the New World believed themselves to be especially favored by God, the vessel through which the light of the gospel would shine forth into this dark world. Winthrop concluded his sermon by quoting from Deuteronomy 30. The Old Testament passage reveals God reiterating for Moses and the people of Israel the threats and promises of his land covenant with them. God instructs them that if they obey him, he will bless them, and they will flourish in their land, but if they disobey him, he will curse them and exile them from the land. Winthrop goes on to quote: "But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship and serve other Gods. . . . It is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it." However, Deuteronomy 30:17-18 concludes with

the statement "whether we pass over the Jordan to possess it." John Winthrop changes "the Jordan" (a river) to "vast sea." The change in language reflects the fact that their ship didn't cross a river, it crossed an ocean—specifically, the Atlantic Ocean.

Drawing from Jesus' exhortation to be a city on a hill and referring to the land covenant that the God of Abraham established with the people of Israel, Winthrop asserted that the colonists were on the shores of their own promised lands, about to take possession of them. While not directly referencing the papal bulls of the Catholic Church and the Doctrine of Discovery, the understanding of chosen-ness and the legacy of promised lands align closely with the worldview and theological imagination found within the Doctrine of Discovery. The colonists claimed their identity as the chosen people. The narrative of European supremacy, now fully realized in the European body and mind, compelled them to seek out the mantle of being God's chosen people, which had been previously reserved only for the Jewish people. This dysfunctional theological imagination now affirmed the European body as superior to the Native body that already inhabited the Americas.

The conflation of Old Testament Israel with US history becomes even more troubling with the trajectory of Deuteronomy and the historical narrative in the book of Joshua: "However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you" (Deuteronomy 20:16-17). According to this passage, promised land for one people is God-ordained genocide for another. Winthrop's assertion of a special status for the Puritans in the New World justified the resulting genocide of the existing population in the American continent. A dysfunctional social and theological imagination influenced by the assertions of the

Doctrine of Discovery allowed Native genocide to be understood as a holy act of claiming the promised land for European settlers, akin to the claiming of the Promised Land and the subsequent destruction of the people of the land by the chosen people of Israel.

So when Netanyahu publicly ordained both the United States of America and the modern nation state of Israel as having "promised lands," he revealed the very dysfunctional and codependent relationship that exists between the two countries. The US needs Israel's Old Testament legacy of promised lands to justify the history of enslavement of African people and ethnic cleansing and genocide of Native people. The modern nation-state of Israel needs the continued flourishing of the United States as a shining city upon a hill to justify their current unjust actions against the Palestinian and Bedouin people.

Christopher Columbus, anointed as the "discoverer" of America, operated under the claims of the Doctrine of Discovery. The church acknowledged Columbus as doing evangelistic work for the church and specially favored by God. The elevated narrative of Christopher Columbus would fuel the dysfunctional theological imagination that exceptional people discovered the New World and replaced less valued bodies on the American continent. The Doctrine of Discovery influenced the perspective that the "discovery" of the Americas was a God-ordained act that demonstrated the superiority of the exceptional European Christian. This doctrine sustained a strong influence over Western society beyond the conflict between the Catholic nations of Spain and Portugal. It would seep its way into the social imagination of the European powers that would find no challenge to the assumption that they were the chosen people, endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights, and able to bring civilization and Christianity to a savage "New World," which would serve as their promised land.

ANGLO-SAXON EXCEPTIONALISM

The Doctrine of Discovery not only shaped the imagination of the European powers and spurred their imperial and colonial ambitions—it also helped to shape the social and political foundations of the United States. The social imagination of the founding of the United States derived from the application of the long-standing Doctrine of Discovery intersecting with a Puritan worldview that elevated the value and worth of Anglo-Saxon peoples. The myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority contributed to this ongoing dysfunction established by the Doctrine of Discovery.

Kelly Brown Douglas in her work *Stand Your Ground* traces the origins of the Anglo-Saxon identity back to a first-century text titled *Germania*, written by the Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus.

In *Germania* Tacitus provides a meticulous portrait . . . of the Germanic tribes . . . “a distinct unmixed race . . . with fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames.” Tacitus commended these Germans for their bravery and strong moral character. . . . Tacitus portrayed these ancient Germans as possessing a peculiar respect for individual rights and an almost “instinctive love for freedom.” This was evident, he said, by the way in which they governed themselves . . . and most final “decision[s] rest with the people.” . . . According to many later interpreters, Tacitus was describing the perfect form of government.⁵

Douglas notes that “even though the precise ethnic makeup of these Germanic tribes was not certain, they are considered the progenitors of the Anglo-Saxon race. Tacitus’s ethnological description spawned the construction of the Anglo-Saxon myth.”⁶ The description of these Germanic tribes provides the beginnings of the claim to exceptionalism for European people. They held certain characteristics such as lighter skin and lighter hair, which were linked to a superior capacity for self-governance and, therefore, they could claim status as an exceptional people.

This narrative of European superiority and the correlation to the physical features of Europeans coupled with the proclamations of the Doctrine of Discovery would result in the self-perception of exceptionalism for the European body and mind. This perspective would find its way to the British Isles and find a narrative home in the myths of the British people. Historian Hugh A. MacDougall explains the four main components of the Anglo-Saxon mythology:

(1) Germanic peoples, on account of their unmixed origins and universal civilizing mission, are inherently superior to all others, both in individual character and in their institutions. (2) The English are, in the main, of Germanic origin. . . . (3) The qualities which render English political and religious institutions the freest in the world are an inheritance from Germanic forefathers. (4) The English, better than any Germanic people, represent the traditional genius of their ancestors and thereby carry a special burden of leadership in the world community.⁷

This mythology would take hold among a group of religious reformers who would see themselves in the narrative of purity. In England, "the Pilgrims and the Puritans thought the Church of England did not go far enough in the eradication of Catholic and Norman abuses." They would see themselves as a pure faith and people that would uphold the purity of the Anglo-Saxon lineage as well as religion. These reformers (the Pilgrims and the Puritans) would "transport the Anglo-Saxon myth to America" and eventually have "the greatest impact on America's religious and political culture."⁸

Seeing themselves in the line of a special people that combined the best of exceptional European peoples, the colonial settlers of the American continent would indeed be especially endowed by their Creator to be a chosen people with a promised land to claim.

The Pilgrims and Puritans fled from the Church of England to build a religious institution more befitting Anglo-Saxon virtue and freedom. They considered themselves the Anglo-Saxon tenant that was continuing a divine mission. . . . They saw themselves "as the Israelites in God's master

plan." . . . These reformers' exodus from England was first and foremost a religious mission. . . . A part of their mission, therefore, was not simply to build a nation that was in keeping with their Anglo-Saxon political heritage, but also to build a religious nation.⁹

The worldview of the Pilgrims and the Puritans was profoundly shaped by the dominant European perspective. They were formed by the worldview established by the Doctrine of Discovery and reinforced by the myth of the exceptional nature of the pure Anglo-Saxon people. As the Puritans found their way to New England, these sensibilities and narratives would dominate the formation of the nascent United States. "According to Tocqueville, (1) Americans found their origins in Puritan theology, (2) the civilization they build displaced a wilderness, and (3) their pursuits were directed more toward making the most of life here on earth. . . . The portion of Englishmen who settled in America were going to be focused on taming the wilderness and building civilization in North America."¹⁰ The imagination of a civilized people conquering the wilderness aligned with the biblical narrative of God's chosen people. Israel wandered through the wilderness and emerged from a nomadic, primitive experience to conquer a pagan people. The wilderness represented an uninhabited and wild land that required discovering and taming by exceptional people.

The motif of an exceptional, chosen people ordained by God to tame the savage world of the Natives of North America became the driving narrative for the colonial settlers. Steven Newcomb points out that the mental models of the early colonists would shape the formation of American jurisprudence and governance:

The Chosen People—Promised Land cognitive model serves as a significant part of the conceptual and religious backdrop. . . . This model is the source of the perspective that the American people of the United States are a new "chosen people" analogous to the chosen people of the Old Testament. According to this view, and in keeping with the Conqueror model, "God" is

considered to have granted the United States the divine right to conquer and subdue the "heathen" or "pagan" lands of North America.¹¹

This mindset of the exceptional white European/American conqueror taming a savage new world is used by politicians even in the twenty-first century. On Friday May 25, 2018, President Trump gave the commencement address at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. About one-third of the way through his speech he attempted to affirm and motivate the graduates by reminding them of America's past military conquests when he said, "There is nothing Americans can't do. Absolutely nothing. In recent years and even decades, too many people have forgotten that truth. They have forgotten that our ancestors trounced an empire, *tamed a continent* (emphasis ours), and triumphed over the worst evils in history."¹²

From the unchallenged assertion of the Doctrine of Discovery put forth by the widely accepted heresy of Christendom, there arose a narrative of European supremacy. The Doctrine of Discovery provided a theological foundation for the assertion of white superiority. This religious and theological perversion would intersect with a self-perceived exceptionalism that would elevate the mythical Anglo-Saxon people who were fair in skin, fair in hair, and excelled in self-governance. These exceptional Anglo-Saxon people crossed the vast Atlantic Ocean (akin to the Israelites crossing the Jordan River) to take possession of a newly discovered land (i.e., discovered by true image bearers of God and not by the savages that dwelled there) in order to establish a shining city on a hill. These pure and exceptional people would establish a nation that far surpassed the existing systems and peoples and would be a shining light and beacon to the world.

The dysfunctional impact of a worldview that affirms white American exceptionalism not only has a historical precedent but a current expression. Contemporary American politics are rife with

examples of an American exceptionalism that continues to dominate American self-perception. The language of exceptionalism masks an unequal economic system, a failing educational system, and a crumbling society. The assumptions of an exceptional nation that stands as a city set on a hill with a desire to stretch from sea to shining sea undermine any necessary course correction.

Wilsey notes that "it may be safe to suggest that *exceptionalism* has largely replaced *patriotism* as a word expressing American conceptions of national devotion. That is not surprising, since exceptionalism became the rallying cry of both Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney in their presidential campaigns during 2011 and 2012."¹³ In the 2008 election, the vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin accused the presidential candidate Barack Obama of not believing in American exceptionalism.¹⁴ Throughout his first term in office, President Obama would seek to redefine that term, but towards the latter half of his second term, as every US politician does, he ultimately ended up embracing it.¹⁵

By the time the 2016 elections rolled around, the language of American exceptionalism had become deeply embedded in the American political ethos. The eventual winner of the 2016 presidential race, Donald Trump captured the imagination of a large segment of the American populace with the slogan, "Make America Great Again." Implicit in this statement was the exceptional nature of American society and history. What the Trump campaign was able to establish was the mediating narrative and metaphor that to make America great *again* would harken back to a time when the United States was defined by a white Protestant identity. American exceptionalism would not be connected to diversity or pluralism, but instead American exceptionalism would be connected to the reclamation of the American narrative by white Americans.

This is not solely a Republican problem. The myth of American exceptionalism is a bipartisan and unifying theme for most every American. One of the major challenges for a nation that believes in its own exceptionalism but also has a simplistic two-party political system is that when any flaw is uncovered that might blemish the exceptional nature of the whole, that flaw is blamed on the opposing political party (or any other available scapegoat). That way the mythology of American exceptionalism can remain intact. The problem is isolated and contained within a substandard subset, while the whole remains exceptional.

After her win in the South Carolina primary, Hillary Clinton responded to the Trump Campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" by telling the cheering Democratic audience that "America never stopped being great." On July 27, the day before taking the stage at the Democratic National Convention to accept her party's nomination, Hillary tweeted to her approximately sixteen million Twitter followers: "America is great already." And on July 28, 2016, in her acceptance speech of the nomination for president by the Democratic party, Hillary Clinton once again reminded her supporters (and the world) that "America is great." But she didn't stop there. She told the audience that "America is great because America is good."¹⁶

The 2016 presidential candidates from both the Republican and Democratic parties agreed on America's history of exceptionalism. They both agreed that our past, our foundations, and our history were great. Where they disagreed was if America was great in 2016. Donald said no, while Hillary was adamant that we were. On October 9, 2016, in the third presidential debate, Hillary repeated her position when she said, "And I think it is very important for us to make clear to our children that our country really is great because we are good." And Donald Trump concurred: "Well, I'll actually agree with that. I agree with everything she said."¹⁷ In the 2016 presidential campaign the

candidate from the Grand Old Party was a white land-owning male who was campaigning to make America explicitly white supremacist, racist, and sexist again. The Democratic candidate was a white woman who was pleading for the opportunity to help keep our nation's white supremacy and racism implicit.

At the 2016 Democratic National Convention, President Obama jumped into the fray and told the cheering audience that "America is great already." And Cory Booker, an African American senator from New Jersey, in his endorsement of Hillary Clinton, acknowledged that in our foundations Natives are referred to as savages, women are never mentioned, and black Americans only counted as 3/5th of a person. Most national politicians do not have the courage to mention even a single flaw in our country's foundations. That Booker mentioned all three was unprecedented. But he kept his political ambitions intact when he concluded that section of his speech by telling the audience, "But those facts and other ugly parts of our history don't detract from our nation's greatness."¹⁸

When movements, institutions, or nations that believe in their own exceptionalism cry out for equality and justice, the voices of the marginalized are neutered. When the roots of the mythology of exceptionalism are threatened, and in order to maintain the greater national narrative, those marginalized voices who have found some stake in the broader system will even neuter themselves. The dysfunctional imagination that was expressed through the Doctrine of Discovery not only found roots in the founding of the United States, it continues to perpetuate into all aspects of American life.

Exceptionalism finds expression not only in the political structures of US society but is amplified in the context of the US church as well. The white American church continues to envision itself as the main missionary thrust of the church even in the twenty-first century. While the growth of the church continues in the non-Western world

in unexpected regions like China, India, Central America, and sub-Saharan Africa, the white American church will reject immigrants and refugees from these regions as not reflecting the Christian values of the West. It is noble for the exceptional white American church to go help those "over there," but not for them to come over here to a nation reserved for exceptional white Americans. This assumption of exceptionalism hinders the work of reconciliation as a dysfunctional imagination of white supremacy and exceptionalism continues unabated in the US church and in US society.

You cannot discover lands already inhabited.

In this prophetic blend of history, theology, and cultural commentary, Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah reveal the far-reaching, damaging effects of the "Doctrine of Discovery." In the fifteenth century, official church edicts gave Christian explorers the right to claim territories they "discovered." This was institutionalized as an implicit national framework that justifies American triumphalism, white supremacy, and ongoing injustices. The result is that the dominant culture idealizes a history of discovery, opportunity, expansion, and equality, while minority communities have been traumatized by colonization, slavery, segregation, and dehumanization.

Healing begins when deeply entrenched beliefs are unsettled. As other nations have instituted truth and reconciliation commissions, so do the authors call our nation and churches to a truth-telling that will expose past injustices and open the door to conciliation and true community.

"Unsettling Truths is a righteous and integral narrative that must be heard and absorbed if we are to move forward with any sense of national dignity and morality. Rah and Charles are courageous in this scholarly telling of these historical truths; the question is, Are we courageous enough to listen?"

Randy Woodley

author of *Shalom and the Community of Creation*

"This book provides not only critically needed information about the generally misunderstood political and legal status of Native nations, it provides a paradigm-shifting approach for how to understand the United States (and other settler nations) from a biblical perspective."

Andrea Smith

board member of the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies

"Why should I endorse a book when I do not agree with some of its historical judgments? Answer: for the same reason you should read it. Charles and Rah attack a pernicious principle (the Doctrine of Discovery), review an evil history (the United States' treatment of Native peoples), challenge a persistent stereotype (American exceptionalism), and psychoanalyze white America (in denial about the nation's history). The entire book, even when you think things could be evaluated differently, will make you think, and think hard, about crucially important questions of Christian doctrine, American history, and God's standards of justice."

Mark Roll

author of *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*



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