

João Chaves - Influence in the Americas

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SPEAKERS

João Chaves, Tanner Randall

Tanner Randall 00:03

We acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee the indigenous people on whose land Syracuse University now stand. May the information you glean from this podcast motivate you to uphold indigenous values protect Mother Earth and honor indigenous treaties the doctrine of Christian discovery started in the Catholic Church. Its ramifications most popularly known in American government framework, but we should stop and ask ourselves wasn't colonization across the entire Americas? Where did it also leave its stain? Welcome to the doctrine of Christian discovery. I'm Tanner Randall, your host from good faith media. We're producing this podcast at the religious origins of white supremacy conference in December of 2023 at Syracuse University in New York. This year is particularly special because it's the 100th anniversary of Johnson V. Macintosh, the supreme court proceeding that installed the framework of the doctrine of discovery within American government. We will be talking about the different ramifications of the doctrine of discovery and how it led to indigenous values and land being stolen as well as white supremacy and the general idea of revitalized indigenous culture. The doctrine of Christian discovery originating from the Vatican spread in infected every continent. Today we'll be talking specifically about the Americas focusing on Latin America and South America. Brazil, for example, colonized by the Portuguese still has lingering effects from the colonization that took place years ago. We'll also talk about how Christian nationalism has infected a lot of the countries around Latin America and South America and caused extremism in different government frameworks. But why do we feel like this is still okay? Why do people still buy into these religions? Well look no further than the doctrine of Christian discovery. We would like to thank our sponsors who made this podcast possible Many thanks to the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University, indigenous values initiative, American Indian law Alliance, American Indian community house, good faith media, tenants era and towards our common public life. We appreciate your support. I'm Tanner Randall with Good Faith Media. Our guest on this episode is Dr. João Chaves. João is a professor of religion at Baylor University in Texas. His focus is in the religion and the history of religion in the Americas, the influence of us Protestantism in Latin America, and the development of Latin America and Latinx religious networks in the United States. Dr. Chaves also has a particular interest in Brazilian government framework. And that will be a major topic of discussion today. Hi, I'm here with João Chaves. And we're talking about the history and implications of the doctrine of Christian

discovery, specifically, in the Americas, with a particular focus in Latin America and South America to get started, this week, at our conference, we're discussing the 200th anniversary of Johnson v McIntosh, the document that in place, doctrine of Discovery's principles within the United States framework, but I'd like to pivot in our conversation and subject area of this conference to speak specifically related to South America or Latin America. Could you provide an example of the doctrine of Christian discoveries influence in these areas? And if it's in government framework, within the many countries in that region?

João Chaves 04:22

Yeah, of course, the Doctrine of Discovery in terms of the papal bull dealt directly with the Portuguese and Spanish. So there's direct influence in my own country of Brazil, which has roughly half the area and half the population of South America. And it's, it's every indigenous peoples in Brazil. I still fighting issues related to the presumption of appropriation that came with the Portuguese and continued on in many different governments, as a matter of fact, one very recent example that happened in Brazil, but you can see some strong connection. So that kind of dispositions is the controversy on that what in Brazil became known as the legislation called *marcador temporal* or temporal marker in which the some more conservative groups in government wanted to say that before whichever indigenous land that had not been earmarked, demarcated, before the constitution of Brazil was promulgated. It could no longer be demarcated for indigenous peoples, which, which was understood by indigenous communities there as a pretext for further land appropriation. The ultimately, the legislation was not implemented, it did not pass the Supreme Court, but it represents the kind of spirit that has been historically present in the history of Brazil. And it continues in different ways, especially in terms of more contemporary Brazilian history, in the Bolsonaro administration, in what that have represented, but it has been more deeply than that, a continuing legacy of Brazil since the Portuguese government or the Portuguese Empire was there, as a matter of fact, Brazil is the one colony that houses the Empire, when the whole court from Portugal fleeing from Napoleon, went to Brazil and established itself there. So you have even a very strong accents of that particular disposition, disposition and presumption of ownership of those names.

Tanner Randall 07:13

It's interesting you say, you said that, even though that *marcador temporal*, was not implemented, I think it's important to realize that the spirit is still there, like you mentioned, and just having that image on a national level is so destructive to indigenous peoples, because it puts out the framework that, you know, it may have not worked now, but it's something they're trying to achieve. So they may still keep trying to chip away at those indigenous rights. And so I'm curious to kind of ask you about what's the atmosphere around that issue? Are they're being are there improvements, or they're still trying to encroach on indigenous land? Well,

João Chaves 07:57

most certainly, most certainly. And there are many market forces that, that also push those kinds of moves in the Amazon, it might be deforestation for land for cattle growing, for example. It might be other ways of land appropriation that happened in the Amazon. I mean, there are many different forces moving in the direction. And again, this is not new. It is it is a struggle. The indigenous people in Brazil have had for a long, long time. As a matter of fact, I was just in the Amazon in in May, in the head a few

conversations with religious leaders in a new project that I'm working on. And you can see how that kind of encroachment happens. Although it is it is complexified because evangelical Christians in Brazil have done an effective job at recruiting some indigenous leaders to do part of that very work. So it is complex. It is not a black and white issue, but it is an issue and a mentality that that is disseminated via different avenues, including some indigenous Brazilians that have or at least perform a certain disposition that is similar to those of Oregon President evangelicals and other forms of conservative Christianity is that recruitment employed in different ways? Of course, it's difficult always to make judgments about where or to what extent we should account for local agency. It especially if you're not part of particular ethnic cultural groups, but it's definitely a complex issue that continues to move on and includes also conservative leaning native Brazilians and all the forces. So it's not our Autobot versus Decepticon good versus evil very clearly shown exactly as one would like to, as one would like to be. But it is more complicated. And

Tanner Randall 10:22

I think that it's always challenging for me to come to terms with the fact of like, these evangelical or the evangelicalism, converting indigenous peoples to Christianity, and how that kind of promote can lead to the promotion of the doctrine of discovery. And so I'm kind of curious to hear your opinion on how the, it's sometimes radicalized or even on more nuanced level, how evangelicalism has affected, particularly Brazil in promoting the Doctrine of Discovery, because I know in the United States, the we had the assimilation school system, and I know some people will call them genocide schools, because there was so much cultural damage in the implementation of Christianity. And it almost led to kind of the acceptance of some of the things we see happening in American Indian population. So if you could speak to that, I would appreciate it. Yeah.

João Chaves 11:23

Well, let me step back a little bit and talk about the form of evangelicalism that I think manifests the most clear disposition of domination. And it is the sort of conservative southern evangelicalism that that went to Brazil, in its sustainable phase, and more explicitly, with Confederate exiles, who upon losing the war, here in the United States in 1865, fled to different places where they could imagine would allow them to reconstruct the old South Brazil was one of those places was the most prominent 1000s of families, Southern feminist went to Brazil, because Brazil remained a slaveholding. Country for 23 years after the end, this vote was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. Wow. No idea. Yes, it is in this confederate enclaves that we have Baptist, Presbyterian Methodist churches starting. It is the place that that receives many pioneer missionaries that go from there, into the various evangelistic crusades in different parts of, of Brazil, and including the Amazon, and all the different places that that genealogy continues. Today, those denominations, they build seminaries, and they, they translate literature, they control our men, mostly American missionaries, even when prisoner legislation do not allow them to do that. They found ways to control publications. And you can see those that transnational connection between us forms evangelicalism in Brazil, going on, throughout over a century, and it continues today. during the dictatorship, that dictatorship under which I was born, is a right wing dictatorship. There was America, US supported, you see a leadership, a government that wants to suppress progressive forms of Catholicism, particularly Obliteration theologies, and part of that suppression included giving structural benefits to evangelicals who they saw as better transmitters have the kind of religious ideology that would help authoritarian governments thrive. It is then that assemblies

of Dad's leaders and Baptist leaders among others, get concessions to have radio and television shows and in gain other forms, forms of governmental support. It is also that coincides with increased urbanization, that, that accounts for the explosive growth of Protestantism in Brazil. Even when I was growing in Brazil, I would not believe if someone will tell me that by 2030 or 2033, Brazil was going to become a majority of angelical country but we are on track to do that. And, and part of that story is Also that kind of support that Protestant that from the dictators during those times. And you see over and over again, the kind of message of, of Christian superiority that is not interested in ecumenical or interfaith conversations, is not interested in being welcoming to practitioners of Afro Brazilian religions or indigenous ways of being, and as a matter of fact, are the kinds of evangelicalism that support the very socially conservative dispositions that you see here. And one example very recent, again, to go back to recent developments in Brazil, is the fact that Steve Bannon, who was campaign manager and advisor for Donald Trump was also an adviser of the Bolson arrows. You and then you see, insurrections going on here, in the selections down there, you'll see the NIO of elections that will not go their way happening here. And you'll see those denials happening there. So the kind of us Brazil relationship, especially in terms of Christian conservative networks, is a story with a long genealogy and continues today and continues to strengthen today. I'll just say one more story, and I'll stop. When I was the May. One of the persons we interviewed was the leader of the evangelical caucus in the Brazilian Congress. Congressman, in during that conversation, he mentioned that he had a meeting with the folks of from Capitol ministries and OCA that that, that also work here in Washington DC, is strengthening networks have to political conservative conservatism's of different ways. And they always also support those networks there. So I'm not sure if that addresses your concern directly. But I do want to highlight that these transnational conservative connections have a long history. And they continue to strengthen. And they continue to organize, they're extremely well organized and are ready organizing in the Brazilian case, a comeback to the presidency, given the Bolsonaro did not did not win his bid for reelection. Its

Tanner Randall 17:28

interest. I did not know about the kind of way the United States politics reflects Brazil's. And I think that we could learn a lot from dissecting both environments. It kind of it brings me to a question of, and this is going to be a little bit of a two part question. First is, you know this, you said that Brazil is on track to be majoritarian, the majority of evangelicals, correct by 2030. So how did the Christian religion spread so fast? And was there an atmosphere ripe for people wanting some sort of institutionalized religion? What is that kind of like, because I know, with indigenous peoples, you'll hear some of the converts say, we knew there was a great spirit out there and Christianity, contextualize our belief. And so they found great comfort in that. So tell me a little bit about that environment. And I'll wait for my next question after this.

João Chaves 18:32

Oh, that there are many answers to that question. I, I will say a couple of things. One thing is that in the in the case of Brazil, which was a predominantly Catholic country, it was not as much a what happened was not necessarily as much a move from non organized religion to organized religion, but rather from one organized religion to another part of that, of those that change that shift has been articulated as the crisis in the Catholic priesthood for example, there is not enough leadership, or Protestantism historically has capitalized on urbanization. Brazil organizes very fast. But then another. Another point

that sociologists and scholars of Brazilian religion have pointed out is how the translator ability of Pentecostalism works productively when he enters into conversation with Afro Brazilian religions. The growing edge of Christianity in Brazil today is Pentecostalism and within Brazil and Pentecostalism. There is a very large As a group of a large number of Afro Brazilians will join that group to the extent that as problematic as the same might be some Brazilian scholars would say that the blackest religion in Brazil is actually Pentecostalism, rather than for Brazilian religions that still remain a very important part of Brazilian life and culture. So, you know, folks who study conversion, they often talk about conversion as something that happens when there is a particular crisis of opportunity in the group that changes affiliation, right, or changes ideology, that kind of solutions that the group entering or offering a new ideology has for the crisis, or how that group can optimize the those opportunities, and then the context in which that happens, right. And so many of these are like cultural alignment with a particular kind of ideology that is offered, the probability of conversion of change of affiliation happens. And I think that in the case of Brazil, or urbanization, that Christ is in the priesthood from the Catholic Church, the vernacular way in which Pentecostalism develops that adapts itself very quickly to different to different situations, certainly account for some of that shift. Because the Protestantism in Brazil, it's different versions grew so fast, that that is not just natality rate is not just birth rate, although that is a very good predictor of religious growth, there is a lot of conversion from Catholicism or from Afro Brazilian religions, to Protestant streams also interesting,

Tanner Randall 21:58

because it's always different from country to country, why religion takes hold. And I think that it's really important to recognize, you know, whether it be a community that is disadvantaged, being susceptible for, you know, organizational help and leadership and getting brought into religion, or if it's not, as far as a transition as people think, like you're saying, in Brazil, it was more of a Catholic church to Protestantism, which is rather natural, or not natural is not the correct word, but is an intuitive change that somebody could make. And so I think that looking at, you know, whatever conversion, it may be, in whatever religion of AB converted to, and a lot of the times, and what we're talking about in this conference is how that results in extremism and white nationalism and things of that sort. And so, I guess this is leading into my last question here, of when you see religion of a person and kind of bleeding in to government structures, you know, it's one thing to say, my life and decisions are based off of my own religion or preferences, it's another to project those into a system. So what kind of mechanisms? Should we identify and try to correct within governments like that of Brazil and other in South America are not correct, but be critical of and be aware of in Brazil and other South American countries? Yeah. Well,

João Chaves 23:34

I, I think that what we have in Brazil today, in some ways, in some ways in the US two are different in competing narratives for the future of the nation, right. So a different stories about our present, and different imaginations, of what the future can be based on our understanding of the present. Perhaps my historian, my historian disposition takes over when I talk about those myths, but I think they're important. And part of what I see happening in Brazil, is precisely that you see, the, on these Protestant groups that are really important for some of these religious right networks. They tell a particular story about Brazil that mirrors some of the dispositions in terms of the doctrine of discovery. And they want Brazil to become some sort of a Christian country, right. So when you see red a big red flag is when

you see a particular group of people wanting the values and the particular interpretation of social life that that religion has or that version of that religion have them be Come the basis of the legislation for a whole nation. And we certainly see that in these conservative evangelical groups that are in coalition with conservative Catholic groups that want to have a particular view of our family must look like right. So what kind of marriages that will then going to allow, or they want to a particular story about the preeminence of the cultural superiority of Christianity and the Anglo European structures that were implemented into the country. And if that is superior than everything else is inferior, then and which very much then informs how we're going to implement public education. We haven't those battles, but public education there too. Yeah. Right. And which then affect the next generations imagination of where they are and where they can be. So it that is really a project of nominations, that over that overlap, very significantly, with the kinds of things that happen in the US legislation, based on particularly conservatively Christian dispositions, that, that wants to take the rights of minorities that do not fit a very narrow view of morality, and then wants to put educational structures that support our very limited imagination that then reproduces the kind of bias and, and, and constraints that they defend, that is happening there. Also, it because in terms of Brazil, particularly, the ratio imagination is significantly different than in the US. It is, you often see broader ethno-racial representation defending those visions than you might see here. But the narrative is pretty similar. And I think that speaks to the continuous long term connections between conservative networks between these two countries that have never really not been a reality sinks. Since Brazil began in especially in the 1940s, when the United States really invest in making Brazil a pro US culture, right in what historian Antonio Tata called the seduction of Brazil, which was funded to a great extent by Rockefeller money by Baptists money. Right. So I mean, there are many connections there that that could be teased out, but there is a an intentionally maintained transnational project, to the extent that somebody like Ben Colin, historian at the University of California, calls the you know, the Moral Majority in his book, The Moral Majority is across the Americas, the co creation of the religious right between Brazil in the US that those countries co create, what we call the religious rights today, rather than the US just creates that impose, it's that Brazil is a is a very important part of the story, serving as one of the places that need to be understood so that we can understand what's happening here, too. Right. So we cannot, we cannot understand the development there without understanding what's happening here. But to a similar extent, is difficult to understand what's happening in the US without paying attention to the role that Brazil has in this Pan American connection that is long lasting?

Tanner Randall 28:50

No, I think it's important to realize all of the countries within the Americas originate from strikingly similar situations, most of the populations were colonized, most of them were subjected to a rule they didn't consent to. And then that rule was subject to extremism and caused violence, I think it is important to understand that all of these environments grew up and coexistence and influenced each other's behavior. And then once one had more money than the other, then they started flooding money to you know, keep those systems in place. And so I think that it's interesting that, you know, all these kind of colonized entities grew up to be or have bias tendencies within their populations. But one of the subtle aspects that you mentioned earlier that I thought was extremely interesting that I had never heard of before was to Confederate exiles to South America and the impact of that, and so I think that we should always be critical of kind of who is in an environment that can catalyze a lot of poor ideals. And so I think that's important to realize. But during the 20th century, we saw a lot of different fascist

regimes, the most pertinent one would be the Nazi regime in Germany. And once that war ended, it almost seemed like we were going to champion a new environment of inclusiveness and try to create just governments but then we start to see more of an appetite for oppressive strongman countries to go in and force their own policies onto smaller entities. So could you speak to why you think that there are, if there is a larger appetite for fascism? And why would that be? If there is? Yeah,

João Chaves 30:52

well, that's a good question. I again, I cannot help to, to put my historians hat and first mentioned that the democracy is a very early experiment. Right? It, it has not been the historical rule long term. So and so I think that that's, that's one thing to keep in mind. Another thing to keep in mind is that the upheavals in the 60s are already a response to the aspirations that came after the war that remain unrealized, right? So we have the United Nations in the World Council of Churches come together in about the same time, in some ways, demonstrating the aspirations of a more united world, but that united world remained not united against segregation in the US against hunger, in Latin America, against sexism everywhere, against homophobia everywhere, right? So they kind of aspirations that post World War Two, even articulated aspirations, in the declaration of universal human rights, for example, you see those aspirations, but those are not new aspirations that the American Constitution has unrealized aspiration, like you can eat the French Revolution had there, the unrealized aspirations that talked about every person, everyone, you know, and that is, in some cases, it speaks to the, the drafters of those documents, limited sense of who counts as human in in other ways. It those are documents with aspirations that are hard to be implemented. But so the disappointment with the ask that articulated aspirations for new world is something that has different iterations. Right. So it I think, in the 60s, when we have some uncertainties, when you get level of different levels of, you know, a little more equality for a few minoritized groups, we'll see that they didn't go as far as wanting to go right. So and then as, but as a result of that, as some of these spaces continue to diversify. I think that white supremacy, in some ways, reacts as a group becomes threatened by their diminishing role in Coltrane society. I think, in some ways, it's, it seems to me that, that society does not societies do not move forward linearly. But the this appointment with broad aspirations for a better world are something that you see happening over and over again. And it seems to me that despite our defense of democratic institutions, he did not enough of some people's hopes for capitalism and some people's hope for different kinds of different kinds of, of broadly, disseminated structures in our societies. Those structures did not deliver did not deliver their aspirations. And as we continue to think about different versions of what the world's could be, that is a let's go back to the word great again, when were we great, man. Let's go in Brazil. I mean, so some of that happened. Bolsonaro again, to mention him again. Cuba praises dictators in the we've had ordered than right to have good public education then. All right, so And then it was great for some people, maybe. But, but not others, and even then that is an illusion that, that those times were great, I mean poor white struggle throughout our even when eluding themselves, thinking that they're superior than other non white groups that happened here and happened in Brazil in different places. So perhaps my pessimism is, is showing, but it seems to me that these kinds of have of social political struggles are a part of our reality, and they might change in accent, and they might change in particular goals. But despite the hope of having a world in which they won't exist, I don't think we'll get that it's

Tanner Randall 35:58

difficult for me because I look at these large issues, and I get so frustrated by the human lifespan, because you can't do or fix all these issues within one generation, it's so frustrating, because results would be really nice. So during my time, in college, the attitude amongst my peers was a thirst for reconciling some of the mistakes of our past. But I think one of the valuable insights you may be able to provide teaching at a large institution and seeing a diverse amount of students coming from different backgrounds. I was wondering if you could speak towards the hope or possible initiative that young kids may be taking to fix some of these issues? Or do you see more of that nostalgia factor that you said, You've mentioned of taking our societal concepts back a step to reflect that of our generations prior?

João Chaves 37:07

Yeah, well, thank you for the question. I'll mention a couple of things, then I'll see if I address it. I mean, I liked that, that American polar poet Wendell Berry, he says in the, in the, in one of his poems, met farmers liberation from anything like that. He says, Be joyful, though, you've considered all the facts. Or reminds me of Cornel West, who says that he's not an optimist, but he's. So let me tell you a story that just happened. And then I'll try to give a more conceptual answer, I will stick to my last. So I'm teaching 120 undergrads this semester, two classes of 60, roughly. And one of those sessions when we finally went into the break, and he's a diverse, you know, group of students not as diverse as, as I would like them to be in the part of my particular setting, but nevertheless, and I, I told them, so for those of you who celebrate Thanksgiving, I hope you have a good season. But if you are Native American, and then as I was about to say something a student yelled, no, I said if you're a Native American, I wish you have and then it was going to speak somebody out free dorm. And I was like positively surprised by that. That, that there is a sense that there is something deeply wrong with the way in which we live our life and the way in which we normalized right in that in that same class, I had talked to them about water, we talked there was a question the Christian heritage. And, and I, I talked about Walter Rauschenberg, who says that the social gospel movement in he says that a good system make, make no bad system make good people do bad things. But a good system make bad people do good things. Right. And I talked to the students, all of them think they're good, but they're all supporting sweatshops somewhere. Right? So the kind of systems that that we live in this is a kind of unpack with them the kinds of systems in which we live, that make even folks like you or me who might think of ourselves as being good. Performing bad acts just to live our daily lives because it's so deep, that is so deeply ingrained at some of the evils of our system and so globally connected and interdependent that, that is difficult to, you know, to not be bad with it, either consciously or not. And there are different kinds of there's a spectrum there. Right, but, but I think the point was well taken, and we've had many discussions with the students about the little that can be done. So I am hopeful in the sense that there seems to be in the generation that I'm in conversation with anyway, a sense that there is something deeply wrong with the world, a will to change it, and a curiosity about the mechanisms that could be productive in executing change. What I am not sure exists, is the kind of sustained commitment and awareness that that the journey is long. And it is not an easy one. And also what I am, what I what remains to be seen for me, is in the going from the awareness of the issues in the wheel to change, what kind of action it's take, can be taken and will be taken. I that that question is a complicated one, I think because we are often entangled in in ways that that are difficult to shake off, and without organization without sustained commitment, without good leadership, without ability to form strong coalition's without the willingness to speak to both sides of the issue, which in a world that is

increasingly polarized, we have less of I think that the changing of the things that we can change becomes become less likely so but I am hopeful. I'm just not optimistic.

Tanner Randall 42:21

Thanks for listening to this episode of the doctrine of Christian discovery recorded at the 2023 Religious Origins of White Supremacy Conference at Syracuse University in New York. This podcast is produced in collaboration between Good Faith Media, Syracuse University and the Indigenous Values Initiative. I'm Tanner Randall for Good Faith Media. Our executive producers are Mitch Randall of Good Faith Media Philip P. Arnold and Sandy Bigtree of the Indigenous values initiative and Adam DJ Brett Syracuse University and the American Indian law Alliance. Our producer is Cliff Vaughn, and our editor is David Pang. Our music comes from Pond5. Production assistance provided by the American Indian Law Alliance. To learn more, go to doctrineofdiscovery.org.