

## S02E01: The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Doctrine of Christian Discovery an interview with Robert P. Jones

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:07](#)):

Hello and welcome to the Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery podcast. The producers of this podcast would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, the Indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands of Syracuse University now stands. And now, introducing your hosts, Phil Arnold and Sandy Bigtree.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:30](#)):

Welcome back to the Mapping of the Doctrine of Discovery podcast series. This is the first of season three. My name is Philip Arnold. I'm a faculty in the Religion Department at Syracuse University, Founding Director of the Skanonh Great Law Peace Center, and the President of Indigenous Values Initiative.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:51](#)):

And I'm Sandy Bigtree, a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, and I'm on the Academic Collaborative of the Skanonh Great Law of Peace Center, and on the Board of the Indigenous Values Initiative.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:06](#)):

Today we are very privileged to have Robert P. Jones as our guest. Robbie, as he likes to be called, is the President and Founder of Public Religion Research Institute or PRRI in Washington DC, a leading scholar and commenter on religion and politics. Jones writes regularly on politics, culture, and religion for the Atlantic, Time and the Religion News Service. He is frequently featured in major national media such as MSNBC, CNN, NPR, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and others. He holds a PhD in Religion from Emory University and an MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

([01:53](#)):

He is the author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, which won the 2021 American Book Award and *The End of White Christian America*, which won the 2019 Grawemeyer Award in Religion. He writes a regular Substack newsletter at [robertpjonessubstack.com](http://robertpjonessubstack.com). His new book, which will be the featured topic of the conversation today, is *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path Toward a Shared American Future*. Welcome, Robbie, and thanks for coming.

Robert P. Jones ([02:29](#)):

Oh, thanks. I'm glad to be here. Looking forward to the conversation.

Philip P. Arnold ([02:33](#)):

I'd like to start with that PhD in religion at Emory. We too, at Syracuse University train religion graduate students and PhDs in religion and it's an uphill climb. We have a very modest graduate program unlike Emory or Chicago or the other big places. But one of the things that I think we're known for is, well, less sort of the academicky elements in the study of religion and more of an engaged scholarship, or if not, an activist scholarship. And I think that has served us pretty well. You are a unique person in the world of religion. You're someone who is a public intellectual, an engaged scholar, and that's not the usual path of graduate students.

([03:39](#)):

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And I wonder if you could just talk briefly to give our graduate students some heart in this difficult time when religious studies is really not valued the same as some other areas of the university. And we're still fighting for the importance of this academic study of religion, not the training of ministers or whomever in religion, but the critical study of religion in the academy. And I think you're someone, more than others on this podcast, that can speak to that, and I wanted to give you some time for that.

Robert P. Jones ([04:22](#)):

Yeah, well, thanks. So, it is been an interesting journey, I think, for me. As you know, in most graduate programs, it sounds like the Syracuse one is not quite like, so most graduate programs teach you to be fairly detached from the scholarship. You write in third person, you don't write in first person. If you ever used the word I in a piece, it gets stricken from the record. And Emory wasn't so strict on that, but there was this sense of objectivity, detachment, and of course objectivity. And at least the idea of putting your preconceived things to the side and sort of letting them at least be in conversation with maybe new things that research reveals is important. Although, I'm not one that thinks true objectivity is possible.

([05:18](#)):

We all bring our things, our past, our prejudices, all of that to the scholarship that we acknowledge the scholarship that we do, but even to the subjects that we choose. That's always a challenge that we always have to think through. But I would say that my own work has evolved a bit to be more personal over time. And so, if you just look at the last three books, I'll not take a lot of time here, but I moved into writing trade books and out of the academic university press world into writing for trade presses because I wanted to write for a more general audience. And what I found over time is that to do that effectively, I needed to write in a more engaging way. And the best way to do that was to be honest about my placement in the story and what I had at stake and what brought me to the research. And I think I've gradually done more of that as I've written.

([06:18](#)):

So, the first trade book was a book called *The End of White Christian America*, and it was really about the changing demographics in the country, so a lot of demographic work there. And I told a little bit of my own story there. But then, the next book called *White Too Long, the Legacy of White Supremacy and American Christianity* was really about a third memoir. And that was the first time that I really thought, "Okay, I've got to be honest about why I care about this topic, what I think is at stake, both personally and for the country and write it that way." And so, I had a lot of my own family stories including my own family's connections to the whole American project of settler colonialism and how my European, mostly British Christian family fit into that narrative.

([07:12](#)):

And that was really a sea change, I think, from my writing, and really, I think opened up a whole different audience for the writing that I think sometimes academic writing doesn't reach. And I've kind of continued that in this book. I have a third of the book is about Mississippi, which is my home state where I try to unpack that history and try to also be honest about having grown up there, gone to public schools, had my college education at Mississippi College, thinking about what I was and wasn't taught in those settings and what that means that's relevant, especially what I was not taught about American history.

Sandy Bigtree ([08:00](#)):

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Well, it certainly brings it to life and you're such a gifted writer. I really enjoyed reading these horribly dark stories, if that makes any sense. But yeah, I can remember vividly third grade, first introduction to history books. I was just horrified because there was no place for me in any of that history. And if we can't relate to it, I think we're missing a vast percentage of our population being engaged in this process.

Philip P. Arnold ([08:30](#)):

Right. And of course, PRRI is known for your, well-known pollster in religion politics. But anyone who reads these books, *White Too Long* or *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*, they're going to also learn that you're a master storyteller and your own narrative is there, but it doesn't interfere with the larger history that you're wanting to tell and examine critically. So, I really do appreciate that. But how do those things develop in you, those two different strands, the mathematician and the storyteller?

Robert P. Jones ([09:16](#)):

Well, as you know, but your listeners probably don't. Nobody's looked at my bio that carefully, but my undergrad degree is in Computer Science and Math. And so, I came at the work, I think through this kind of very left-brain linear thinking kind of thing. But I was also a Math major that went to seminary. And religion, I mean, at its heart it's narrative, it's stories, it's narrative. I mean, you take the Christian tradition, I mean the first thing of the Jewish tradition on which it's based, either the first book of the Christian Bible, the first book of the Torah is a story, it's a genesis story, it's a creation myth. So, it begins there.

Philip P. Arnold ([10:12](#)):

At least one story, maybe two, maybe three.

Robert P. Jones ([10:14](#)):

Maybe two, that's right. Yeah, yeah. And that's important too, right? Because it preserves the plurality of stories and it builds out of what was originally a narrative tradition that gets written down much, much later. And you get all of the ambiguity that you get with oral tradition things than they get put into text and kind of frozen in the Christian tradition. So, I think I've always been attracted to the stories and history, and it's just taken me a while, I think, in my professional life to pull them together and to figure out how to write in a way that not only draws on the data that PRRI produces. But I also even think about that even in a paragraph that has percent signs sprinkled through it. It's telling a story and you're using numbers, but you really are still trying to tell a story to make it really concrete.

([11:16](#)):

When we get data back from a big national survey and most of our surveys will survey 5,000 people, they may have 100 different questions in them. So that means that when we get back is actually a grid, a database that has 5,000 rows, one row for each respondent in the survey by 100 columns for every answer every 5,000 person gave. What your job as a social scientist is to look at that grid of numbers and to tell a story, to look for the patterns, to look at what you see as recurrent patterns and what makes sense. And it is absolutely a storytelling endeavor.

([12:01](#)):

As much as the hardcore quant folks may want to pretend, "No, we're just kind of putting the data from the thing on the page." But you're always selecting which lens do you bring to it, which groups are you

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looking at? What rises to the fore? And the data guides what you can't just tell any story from that data, but there's certainly multiple stories you could tell.

Philip P. Arnold ([12:21](#)):

Wow, that's fantastic. I really appreciated that one graph. I think it's at the very end of the book pretty much of what people think about, they might not know the term doctrine of discovery, but they do know what you're talking about, right? I can't remember exactly what the polling question is, but it's like that America was destined to be a white Christian nation, something like that. That to me, is a story. I mean, that graph right there that sort of reveals so much.

Robert P. Jones ([12:59](#)):

I want you to know, it was great restraint on my part to only have two charts in this book, and they're both at the end, but that's right. So, we crafted that question as a way of trying to explicitly knowing the history of the Doctrine of Discovery. We crafted that question trying to say, "Well, look, is it a stretch to say that these 15th century documents still hold any sway in American consciousness?" And so, one way to find out is to ask about the core idea. And that core idea was whether America was designated by God to be a kind of promised land for European Christians where they could set an example for the rest of the world. That's the vision. That's the core vision of the Doctrine of Discovery.

([13:56](#)):

And so, when we asked about it, yeah, I kind of knew that it did just from watching American politics, but you could see the data. It's about three in 10 Americans that agree with that vision of America, and it's a majority of white evangelical Protestants. The group that I grew up being a member of, and it's a majority of Republicans, self-identified Republicans that agree with that statement. So, it tells you something about why it's still not just a dusty old historical fact, but something that's quite live in determining the future of the country.

Philip P. Arnold ([14:38](#)):

Yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([14:39](#)):

And that there's a strong presence right now in trying to protect these origin stories of instance in this country. And as you had talked about the so-called Indian problem and the Negro "problem" are if people dig deeper, they will come to understand, both are connected to the white Christian problem, which goes back to the Doctrines of Discovery. And your whole book kind of revolves around that theme and addressing all of that.

Philip P. Arnold ([15:12](#)):

And so, for so long, those two problems have been separate. Those two constituencies really haven't been talking with one another, African-American people and Indigenous or Native American people really haven't brought their what, their sources of oppression together in some way that is revealing of the history of the United States. So, that's what I think is very important about this.

Sandy Bigtree ([15:45](#)):

You've been able to do that. You began this conversation in connecting these two issues.

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Philip P. Arnold ([15:51](#)):

Yeah. Can you talk more about that? You very gently deal with 1619 project and those kinds of folks that are doing some really important work, but who we have not really been engaged with, just put it that way, personal terms, and then move it into the Doctrine of Discovery, which zooms out, I think a little bit on the whole issue.

Robert P. Jones ([16:24](#)):

Yeah, well, that's the way I think about it too. I mean, I think about this as just widening the aperture. If you're thinking like a photography metaphor or painting on a bigger canvas, we're thinking of an art. I used to collect postage stamps and I remember when I think of 1776, I think of a particular postage stamp, and I think it's good because it's small. So, this little postage stamp, and it's all the white guys in Philadelphia and their colonial finery with their white knee socks and their quill pens, awkwardly posed around a table signing the Declaration of Independence.

([17:01](#)):

And I think the gift that the 1619 project did was at a kind of broader cultural level, it zoomed out as you said, and kind of said, "No, no, no, we got to come back bigger." And they also gave us a different image. I think that's important because again, we do think in images and stories and the bigger image, if you remember the New York Times, the original thing that it published was not the white guys at that table in Philadelphia, but it was a vast ocean was the image, and it was this monochromatic, ominous looking dark ocean, gray sky. And then, the other image they gave us was a single ship, and it wasn't the Mayflower. It was a single ship bringing kidnapped Africans who were destined for enslavement in the British colonies in 1619. So, that's a very different vision.

([17:59](#)):

And I think if I'm learning anything and trying to do something different in the book, it's actually taking it even one step further because the thing that came crashing on my own consciousness, and largely from reading Indigenous scholars was the realization that, well, man, by the time 1619 rolls around, there's more than a century of European Indigenous contact that's unaccounted for in that picture. So, you do have to kind of take it back even further, and really take it back to, I argue that a good time to take it back to is 1493 in the book, which is the year Columbus goes back after his first encounter here, and it's also the year that papal bull intricate era is issued that further gives the church blessing on the whole settler colonialism project with the full blessing of the church. I think that is a more fateful year.

([19:03](#)):

We've been talking about stories, but I think the power then is that whatever we have in the frame in the beginning, whatever follows that phrase, the rest of the story has to account for, right?

Philip P. Arnold ([19:17](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Robert P. Jones ([19:17](#)):

You can't tell the rest of the story without accounting for whatever's in that initial frame. And I think that's why we're fighting over it today in American culture.

Sandy Bigtree ([19:25](#)):

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Right.

Philip P. Arnold ([19:25](#)):

Right.

Robert P. Jones ([19:26](#)):

Because if the only thing that's in that frame are those white guys in that postage stamp, well that's a pretty simple story to tell about European's place in America. But if it's the 1619 project, that ocean, or if it's back to the Columbus appeal to the Vatican for a moral mandate for colonization, that's also a really different story that we have to tell about ourselves.

Sandy Bigtree ([19:58](#)):

We'll add into this mix is the Haudenosaunee origin story of first contact with the Dutch, and that was 1613 to wampum, and wampum is still very prevalent. And the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee raises chiefs. It's a method of condoling people so they can attain the right state of mind to speak and lead and listen and be aware of the surrounding world. But this Two Row Wampum was the coming together of extremely different cultures, and it spoke of the parallel paths along the river of life that the Dutch would stay in their boat and the Haudenosaunee would stay in theirs, not interfering with each other, but they'd be riding in this river of life together in respect and mutual understanding and good faith.

([20:53](#)):

But with that, you have to have some idea of your relationship with the natural world. So, Indigenous people always understood that important relationship with the natural world, but the colonists came over and never were able to comprehend the depth of that understanding of partnership and living together.

Philip P. Arnold ([21:14](#)):

And that's the fundamental feature of the Doctrine of Discovery is really this extractive economy...

Sandy Bigtree ([21:19](#)):

Exactly.

Philip P. Arnold ([21:19](#)):

Whether it's extracting slaves from Africa or later on involved in the extraction of different cut gold and silver out of Latin America. So, with that, it comes a different sort of relationship to the world that I think right now we're seeing come to a real crisis point.

Sandy Bigtree ([21:44](#)):

And that has to be factored into these origin stories, the first content.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([21:49](#)):

Do you need help catching up on today's topic or do you want to learn more about the resources mentioned? If so, please check our website at [podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org](http://podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org) for more information.

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And if you like this episode, review it on Apple, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And now, back to the conversation,

Robert P. Jones ([22:10](#)):

The word that has stayed with me, I actually went back and read Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America...

Sandy Bigtree ([22:17](#)):

That is so good.

Robert P. Jones ([22:18](#)):

When I was doing research for this book because it had never quite occurred to me until I was doing, again, these kinds of things that just stay in silos in your brain. I mean, I read that book 30 years ago, I think for the first time, and I don't think it was assigned that at the end of volume one, here's a whole chapter on thinking about African-Americans and Native Americans in America and what the future is between Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous people in the country wrestling with that. And he has a word that I ended up using in the book that I think describes what you're talking about, that extractive posture, and I should say feel like you do this so well in your new book on the importance of Indigenous values.

([23:19](#)):

But the word that De Tocqueville used and I ended up using the book was rapacious. It's not a word that I had used, I mean, it was in my vocabulary. I knew what it meant, but I don't think I'd ever written it before and ever used it. But I found that that word has really stayed with me. It essentially means aggressively greedy is what it essentially means, and just insatiable, insatiably greedy, that's the piece of it. And that is probably the best adjective that I think just describes the just devouring mentality of Europeans over land, resources, labor. It was just this kind of insatiable, rapacious energy that has not relented.

Sandy Bigtree ([24:14](#)):

You mentioned the delta and destroying all the land down there to prepare it for crops and cotton. And the early explorers, and farmers from Europe really had no clue on how to sustain those crops, where in the Americas, people were practicing regenerative forms of agriculture, whereby, you grow multiple crops and produce topsoil as you're growing these crops to feed everybody. And that had to be eye-opening.

Robert P. Jones ([24:45](#)):

Yeah. Well, some of the energy of moving into places like Mississippi was precisely because the tobacco had exhausted the soils in Virginia and the Carolinas and Georgia. And so, the European plantation owners were looking for new land because they had essentially destroyed the topsoil and the lands that they had.

Philip P. Arnold ([25:12](#)):

And would continue to mine that topsoil as it washes down the Mississippi River, right?



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Sandy Bigtree ([25:17](#)):

Right. It directly goes back to the Doctrine of Discovery to think you have the right to destroy water systems and till the soil and determine what crops are going to grow in these new kinds of landscapes.

Philip P. Arnold ([25:33](#)):

Yeah. I mean, one of the things, and I'll present it as an irony, but one of the things that we're trying to present at the Ska nonh Great Law Peace Center is that among others, but primarily the Haudenosaunee sat in council with those founding fathers on your stamp in that frame and taught them about Western Democracy. And this kind of hidden history for me, and I think for Sandy and all of us here in the heartland of the Haudenosaunee presents a kind of hope that there are these relationships that were established back in 1987, a joint resolution of Congress, acknowledge, the Iroquois contribution to Western Democracy and a coin was minted in 2010 commemorating that, and yet, no one knows about that.

([26:34](#)):

So, these hidden historical features of our history and our legacy of Western Democracies, not just those white guys in the room, there's the peacemaker thousands of years ago here at Onondaga Lake. There was Canassatego who was an Onondaga [foreign language 00:26:53] or chief in common parlance, was presenting to Benjamin Franklin and others at the Independence Hall that this was the message of the peacemaker. And really the French, for example, didn't know anything about equity, fraternity, and liberty until they encountered native people in the Americas. So, that's another sort of irony here that we're grappling with.

Sandy Bigtree ([27:26](#)):

And the great orders laid out to them when they were taken to Europe, they were saying, "You imagine to be equal, but you're only equal under the authority of your monarchs and your Pope." And I want to take you back again to the Two Row Wampum concept. The Haudenosaunee envisioned a shared American future with Europeans coming in here, and that was abiding by the tenets of the Two Row Wampum.

Philip P. Arnold ([27:51](#)):

And so, yeah, I mean, it makes it maybe even more tragic the stories you're telling because as Oren Lyons often says, "We have to craft the mythology or the myth history of our origins in the United States where the native people are the bad guys, the Indigenous people are the bad guys because you can't take land or rob the good guys." What would it mean if we were to shift the myth narrative?" And I mean, I think I see you as being involved in that. I'll push it a little bit further because I know you're involved with this too, is what's the shift from Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day all about? I mean, I think it indicates some kind of change, cultural shift that's going on here.

([28:54](#)):

If there's a face of the Doctrine of Discovery, it's got to be Columbus, and it's right there in the Capitol Building, and you've published these images as well. It's right there in the rotunda, really right there. So, what is that about? I mean, it's a complicated conversation, but then the shift in the last, we'll just say five less than 10 years to Indigenous People's Day. How do you feel about that?

Robert P. Jones ([29:22](#)):



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Well, I've been writing about that, and I think it is far past time for us to let Columbus go from that pantheon. So, if you think about it, out of our federal holidays, only three are related to people. One is George Washington's birthday, the other is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, and the other is Columbus. And if you think about that as kind of a trinity of people, it is hard to see Columbus fitting. He never sets foot on any soil that's in the current boundaries of the country, and it really is just stunning. Really, I think the heart of it is that Columbus gets centered in American history essentially because the fledgling nation wanted to seem older and more inevitable than it was. So, they bring Columbus forward and claim that legacy as a way of giving an infant nation a 300-year instant history.

[\(30:36\)](#):

So, it's kind of a rhetorical strategic move to begin with, to kind of center Columbus in general there. But the thing is, it does represent, it just represents this kind of Doctrine of Discovery, settler colonialism. It's a straightforward straight line. You can't draw the line much straighter than that. And so, the question for us today is when a country, it's worth noting today that the country, I mean, that was never, I think it's an anti-democratic claim, I'll just say that straightforwardly, right? You can't both be a promised land for European Christians and a pluralistic democracy. Those two things are completely incompatible.

[\(31:23\)](#):

And so, Columbus Day is celebrating the former and undermining the latter. I mean, I think we just have to be really clear about that. It's also the case that just from a pragmatic point of view, the country's no longer a majority white and Christian. So, even if we were to take that from a demographic, today, the country's only 42% white and Christian. So, it doesn't even represent, if you were thinking about that as a very pragmatic ways, it doesn't even represent the majority of Americans today.

[\(31:53\)](#):

So, Biden became the first sitting president to make a proclamation for Indigenous People's Day in his first term. He was roundly criticized by Trump for doing so, and he's done that. I don't know, but I assume that he'll do that this year, but he did last year as well. But he's done both. He's made a proclamation for Columbus Day and a proclamation for Indigenous People's Day. So, I think we are in this moment of transition. I hope that we'll be clear-eyed about it and see our way. If we're thinking about, I guess, the other function the holidays do is they orient us toward values, right?

Philip P. Arnold [\(32:38\)](#):

Right.

Robert P. Jones [\(32:39\)](#):

And so, if you think about that function of national days off times of reflection celebrations, what would serve us better going forward if we're trying to live into the promise of a pluralistic democracy? I think Indigenous People's Day does a lot more for us on that front. And Columbus Day, in fact, directly undermines it.

Philip P. Arnold [\(33:02\)](#):

Well, not only that. I think, probably it bodes well for our eventual survival as well.

Robert P. Jones [\(33:08\)](#):

Totally, yeah.

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Philip P. Arnold ([33:08](#)):

I mean, given that in a total meltdown here with environmental crisis, by revisiting those relationships from the 18th century with Indigenous peoples, 17th and 18th century and maybe inculcating some of those values, Indigenous values, this is what my point is, that maybe we have a chance because, and I think that might be what some of the pressure might be coming from. We know that really the Columbus legacy is no longer viable, frankly, and that we need to look for some other system of values or make our capitalist society behave in certain ways that honors the earth rather than just using it up.

Robert P. Jones ([34:04](#)):

And on that point, I'll just make one other quick point on this. I was speaking at Notre Dame University last year, and they have these historic frescoes in the administration building glorifying Columbus, and they are from the 19th century, and they've got Columbus looking in all his regal refinery and native people, sort of smaller and diminutive in the paintings, and they've covered them up at Notre Dame. And it was a student movement at Notre Dame that said exactly that this is no longer a viable way to tell our story, and we don't want to tell our story this way.

([34:50](#)):

And so, what they've done is they've covered them up, they've contextualized them, they've done a whole, now if you go in the administration building, there's a whole little kind of placards that tell the story of why they covered them up, what they mean, how they've been reflecting on them. And now, they uncover them once a year for a few weeks, and students are actually now studying them, but studying them about being more critically reflective of that legacy. And so, I think that's a good example of the tide or the ship is turning, I think on this question.

Philip P. Arnold ([35:24](#)):

No, I think here in Syracuse, we have a Columbus statue has a very bad legacy. It's just really egregious, it has been for the last 100 years.

Sandy Bigtree ([35:33](#)):

He stands on four severed Indian heads looking for directions. His back is to the court system. So, he's backed by the city courts and he looks West through the main Catholic Church in Syracuse. So, just the way it's placed is so egregious.

Philip P. Arnold ([35:50](#)):

And we have a very strong old Italian group that wants to maintain...

Sandy Bigtree ([35:58](#)):

Businessmen.

Philip P. Arnold ([35:59](#)):

Yeah, businessman politicians that want to maintain the statue, of course. It was put up in 1933 really during the rise of fascism and...

Sandy Bigtree ([36:11](#)):

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Mussolini helped pay for its shipment back to Syracuse from from Florence.

Philip P. Arnold ([36:15](#)):

You can't make up history. And there are continual demonstrations down there. But this is the point I want to make, and again, it ties together African and American Indigenous movements is it was really the Black Lives Matter's protests in Syracuse. I mean, they were everywhere, but in Syracuse that called into question that statue. And I'm proud to say that one of our former grad students who's a trans African-American student, put up a change.org petition and got like 25,000 signatures and it's something that politicians in Syracuse just couldn't ignore, right mean. So, you can draw the line then between Black Lives Matter and this desire to change that myth history and take down the Columbus statue. And I think that's happening all over the place with confederate statues, other things in California and otherwise, but yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([37:29](#)):

I mean, meanwhile, those murals stand at the US Capitol Building, right?

Robert P. Jones ([37:34](#)):

Yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([37:35](#)):

And then, a few decades ago, they chipped away at the original columns leading into the old original Supreme Court Chamber because the original columns were made of corn husks to reflect the Indigenous roots to American democracy that came through the Haudenosaunee. So, why were those covered? But now, you can see them.

Philip P. Arnold ([37:57](#)):

Right. Now, you can see them in the old Supreme Court.

Sandy Bigtree ([37:59](#)):

So, they're uncovering and covering these images that are in conflict with one another. It's interesting.

Philip P. Arnold ([38:06](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Let me pause here for a sec.

Robert P. Jones ([38:16](#)):

Sure.

Philip P. Arnold ([38:26](#)):

So, why don't you share for our listeners what you see as the possibility examining these hidden roots of white supremacy, what you see as the path toward a shared American future. I mean, solving our past is way too much to talk about. But how addressing our past, because this is something my students often ask, "Well, what's the solution?" Right?

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Robert P. Jones ([38:58](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Philip P. Arnold ([39:00](#)):

I don't think there's a solution exactly, but I think there is a way forward that you indicate. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit.

Robert P. Jones ([39:09](#)):

Yeah. Well, I don't have a sterling 10-point plan at the end of the book that we can all just follow and solve the problems, and everyone should be suspicious if I did have such a thing at the end of the book. But I did learn some things from watching people on the ground, like in local communities. And I think that that is where I see some hope and I do think it starts with truth telling. And I should just say we are only at the very beginning of the process of telling the truth in this country.

Philip P. Arnold ([39:48](#)):

Right.

Robert P. Jones ([39:49](#)):

We've had this kind of, I think, rush of energy in the last few years around the Black Lives Matter movement that has been, I think, nothing I've seen in my lifetime. I was born in 1968, certainly not in my adult lifetime have I seen that kind of energy around something. But I think still, it's a beginning point of telling the truth. So, in the book, I spent some time in Mississippi, I spent some time in Oklahoma, and I spent some time in Minnesota, I went in three different states. But there's some commonalities that I saw in all places, and they all involved really a story like you mentioned. You mentioned a graduate student that just said, "I'm going to do something," and started an online petition.

([40:36](#)):

In Mississippi, there was a guy named Jerome Little who was the first African-American elected county commissioner in Tallahatchie County in early '80s, I think. And first of all, it's worth asking, "Why was he the first African American in a half Black county?" Because until after the Voting Rights Act, there were no Black people registered to vote in Tallahatchie County. So, they finally get enough people registered to vote, elect their first African-American County commissioner, and he had grown up in that county and did not know the story of Emmett Till, and that's where he was killed, where his trial was. And he was in Europe in the Marines when he learned the story of Emmett Till.

([41:23](#)):

He's like, "Wait, that's the county I'm from." And then, went back and said, "We are going to tell the truth about what happened here." And it built some momentum and it ended up being a group of everyday people in this county, Black and white, to tell the story. And these were descendants of enslaved people and sharecroppers and descendants of enslavers that really got together to tell the story. And so, in each of the places, it really does come down to people deciding in their local context, whether it's a statue or the absence of a story that should be told there.

Philip P. Arnold ([42:00](#)):

Right.

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Robert P. Jones ([42:01](#)):

That's often what happens as well, trying to tell these stories across the board. And I think that another reason I find hope is that these are not easy places, Mississippi, Oklahoma, these are not easy places for these stories to succeed. And yet, I think, they are making some headway despite some of the prevailing political wins that are trying to just say, "Cover up these stories. Keep these stories from emerging." But I don't think that that's ultimately going to win the day. I mean, I do think that the new stories coming out and continuing to come out are going to help us shape our next steps. And I think it's only by getting those stories out there and us telling them that we're going to be in a place to even know where to go. But I think those stories are going to provide the foundation for it.

([42:55](#)):

So, I'm kind hopeful that that's really where the work has to be is these efforts at truth telling. Because back to that vision of the shared space, and I am trying to think about that. How do we think about what a pluralistic democracy is, right? Sharing space, sharing resources on an equitable basis. Those don't happen if we don't have the right stories of how we actually got to where we are.

Philip P. Arnold ([43:24](#)):

Right.

Sandy Bigtree ([43:26](#)):

And you need this cross-cultural conversation because you mentioned in your book James Baldwin talking about as groups of people are being oppressed, they're studying the oppressors and trying to understand what motivates these people. Well, the oppressor is not giving one bit of thought to the people they are oppressing, so it means there's [inaudible 00:43:49] understand more about white people.

Robert P. Jones ([43:51](#)):

Yeah, I'll say this as a white Christian guy, again, mostly British ethnicity from both sides of my family. But the thing that has moved me, you mentioned Baldwin. So, with the last book, I think it was Baldwin haunting my thoughts, what does a white Christian guy from the South have to say to the indictment brought by Baldwin? And then, besides as Baldwin, of course, I mean it's King, Frederick Douglass. And then, the other thing that became so clear to me is these other voices that I frankly didn't know before I really started doing the research. So, Vine Deloria, Jr., right?

Philip P. Arnold ([44:34](#)):

Yeah.

Robert P. Jones ([44:34](#)):

And I mean, Custer Died for Your Sins is, what, 1969, right? It's not new. And he writes this open letter to the Christian churches of North America in late 1972, I think.

Philip P. Arnold ([44:51](#)):

God is Red.

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Robert P. Jones ([44:52](#)):

God is Red. Yeah. I mean, there are these resources that have been out there for half a century calling people like me to account. And I think partially what's happening is there's an opening now, I think, for that conversation to happen that just didn't happen 50 years ago. It didn't. But the faithful work of those people, I think has laid the groundwork for conversations that are just now happening today, and others who have obviously followed in their footsteps as well, that I've learned from as well. So, I'm hopeful that cross, you said that kind of cross-cultural conversation, both from voices that are no longer with us, but that rang that bell really clearly when they were, and the ones who are with us now, yeah.

Philip P. Arnold ([45:45](#)):

Yeah. Well, there's a little section in my book at the beginning I think that I address why the white guy? Why should we be invested in these stories? I mean, there is the tendency, well, and I think it's a needed lack in the academy, that native voices, African-American voices, other voices that are not white need to be speaking loudly and clearly. But I don't think that means that white guys like us shouldn't be involved in those conversations. I mean, I think it's both ends. Because as my teacher, Charles H. Long, who has recently passed away, but one of the founders of the discipline of the history of religions, African-American scholar, really wrote on Black religion, African religions, as he often said, "Everybody needs to be involved and invested in undoing colonialism. It can't be just up to enslaved Africans. It can't be just up to Native Americans because we, as white people, have benefited from that legacy as well."

([47:10](#)):

So, we need to be invested in these conversations as well. So, I really appreciate that too, about your writing and your commitment to these ongoing conversations. And I do think the way forward is through sort of on the ground engaged education, trying to approach people where they live. I will just say we're really looking forward to your coming to Syracuse for our conference in December, The Religious Origins of White Supremacy, the Doctrine of Discovery and Johnson v. McIntosh, which is something we didn't really talk about here today.

([47:59](#)):

But Johnson v. McIntosh is really what creates a doctrinal emphasis on civilizing native people through the acquisition of lands. So, Marshall's the one that brings into American law through the Supreme Court ruling, the Doctrine of Discovery is fundamental to property title. That's a tough one. That's going to be a tough one. We're going to need a lot of people talking about that and how to address that. Lawyers, activists of various kinds.

Sandy Bigtree ([48:43](#)):

You mentioned how that decision opened the floodgates for federal anti-Indian law to be established. And that's what all native people are dealing with now are these puppet regimes of the United States silencing the Indigenous traditional people in all those territories. And that's why we're in a unique place because Onondaga and the Haudenosaunee still meet according to their pre-colonial matrilineal clan system, and they don't have Christian voices dictating their politics.

Philip P. Arnold ([49:19](#)):

Yeah. The federal government is not involved at Onondaga at all through the BIA. So, they're unique in the country that way too. So, it's a unique place here, going back to the Federal Anti-Indian Law, that's the title of a book by Peter d'Errico just recently came out. He's going to be here.

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Sandy Bigtree ([49:40](#)):

Finally. It's been articulated.

Philip P. Arnold ([49:42](#)):

An emeritus law professor at Amherst. And I mean, you think about it beginning with Marshall's trilogy of rulings, that really is the beginning of Federal Indian law, but it really is not for Indians, right? It's not for native people, right?

Robert P. Jones ([50:09](#)):

Yeah.

Philip P. Arnold ([50:10](#)):

It's really antagonistic to their very existence.

Sandy Bigtree ([50:15](#)):

And puppet regimes.

Robert P. Jones ([50:16](#)):

Yeah. And I'll just say one comment there. I mean, the things that stay with me from that ruling is this reference to the superior genius of Europe, and that's the moral justification. That's in a nutshell what it appeals to. The previous people, they've been convinced by the superior moral genius of Europe that all of this was justified. And then, it goes on to say, and if the country's been founded on that principle, we can't question it, but that's not exactly a robust moral or legal argument.

Sandy Bigtree ([50:55](#)):

No, it's not.

Philip P. Arnold ([50:57](#)):

Yeah. Civilization stands in for Christianization or something. I mean, it's too obvious.

Sandy Bigtree ([51:05](#)):

But everybody, I suggest you read, your book, it's so well written.

Philip P. Arnold ([51:10](#)):

Go out.

Sandy Bigtree ([51:10](#)):

It just draws you right in, full of so much information and you have an art of storytelling, so they're wonderfully written.

Robert P. Jones ([51:19](#)):

Oh, thank you.



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Sandy Bigtree ([51:20](#)):

The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and The Path to a Shared American future, Robert P. Jones.

Philip P. Arnold ([51:26](#)):

Robert P. Jones, just on the New York Times Bestseller list. So, congratulations on that as well.

Robert P. Jones ([51:32](#)):

Thank you.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([51:35](#)):

The producers of this podcast were Adam DJ Brett and Jordan Loewen-Colon. Our intro and outro is social dancing music by Orris Edwards and Regis Cook. This podcast is funded in collaboration with the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University and Hendricks Chapel, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. If you like this episode, please check out our website and make sure to subscribe.