

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colón ([00:10](#)):

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, Firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands, and now introducing your hosts, [00:00:30] Phil Arnold and Sandy Bigtree.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:35](#)):

Welcome back to Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery. My name is Phil Arnold. I'm faculty in religion here at Syracuse University and also core faculty in Native American Indigenous Studies.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:53](#)):

And I'm Sandy Bigtree, citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne and on the board of the Indigenous Values Initiative.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:00](#)):

[00:01:00] This podcast is being sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation, and we appreciate them for continuing to support this work. Today we have some special guests from Virginia, and first I'd like to introduce Joel Harrison to us all. Joel is Associate Professor of Religion at Northern Virginia Community College at Manassas, Virginia, where he teaches courses on the academic study of religion as well as college [00:01:30] composition. He holds an MA and PhD in religious studies from Northwestern University, Chicago, my kind of town. In 2019, he received a Henry Luce Foundation responsive Grant in theology with Christina Trina and Marlon Milner. Today we're speaking with Joel and some of his students who recently attended and presented at our conference the religious origins of White supremacy Johnson v. M'Intosh [00:02:00] and the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. Joel, welcome.

Joel Harrison ([02:03](#)):

Thank you.

Philip P. Arnold ([02:05](#)):

Is there anything else you'd like to say about yourself before you introduce your students?

Joel Harrison ([02:11](#)):

No, I mean, I think that pretty well covers a solid academic introduction there. I've been teaching at NOVA since 2019, focused mostly on the Religion 100 course, the [00:02:30] introduction to the Study of Religion course which is where these students of mine came from and where their papers for the conference came from, where the idea to submit a panel for this conference came from. So the students here with us today are Jason Armstrong, who's a dual enrollment student at NOVA, and Christian Oppenhagen, who's also, I think just finished. You're almost done [00:03:00] at NOVA? I can't quite remember, but they were both students of mine. Christian, two years ago, Jason last spring, yeah.

Philip P. Arnold ([03:10](#)):

Well, it's fantastic to have you here. I mean, as a teacher myself, been in this a long time. Really appreciate you bringing students. I mean, this is kind of new for us because we have Academic-y sort of folks and legal scholars and [00:03:30] activists and other kinds of folks, and then from a community

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

college, I think that's really, really outstanding. You must be doing a great job down there, and so I appreciate that.

Joel Harrison ([03:41](#)):

Thank you.

Philip P. Arnold ([03:42](#)):

But can you fill us in on the story, how you learned about the conference and how it resonated with your students?

Sandy Bigtree ([03:54](#)):

And also how it impacts how you teach the academic study of religion?

Joel Harrison ([03:59](#)):

Sure, yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([03:59](#)):

You must turn [00:04:00] it all on its head when we're talking about American religions, right?

Joel Harrison ([04:04](#)):

Right, yeah. So I think that probably the story starts actually way back in 2021 in December of 2021 when I found out about the Uncivil Religion project that was put together by the Religious Studies Department at the University of Alabama, Mike Altman, who is an associate professor there and the Smithsonian Museum. And that is a project [00:04:30] that sort of documents the religious aspects of the January 6th insurrection.

([04:35](#)):

And as I was looking through that resource, I thought it was such a fantastic resource. It's a free resource, and that's the perfect kind of thing to have as a sort of centerpiece text in a community college course, because the more free materials you can provide students, the better in a community college setting. So [00:05:00] I redesigned my Religion 100 course to use the January 6th insurrection as a case study for students to practice the academic study of religion to try to make it... I mean, it still is theoretical, right? I mean, we can't really think about an event like that without thinking theoretically about it. But I wanted them to sort of see how do religious study scholars think about [00:05:30] this kind of event and how do they write about this kind of event?

([05:36](#)):

It was a little bit of a risk. Admittedly, my colleague, in my very small department, there's only two of us, my other colleague was like, "Good luck with that." Not because she didn't think that I couldn't do it, but just because how volatile the political situation was, and just being in Northern Virginia and being so close to it, [00:06:00] there could have been a lot of room for controversy, but really it hasn't gone that way. It's been, I think, overall very well received by the students. It's not a typical 100 level course. I ask the students to do reading that is not at the 100 level, it's well beyond the 100 level. But the way that I assess them is sort of at the 100 [00:06:30] level.

([06:35](#)):

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

After a general introduction to the history of the academic study of religion, we were looking at that event from three different perspectives, from American religious history, from the concept of civil religion and secularism, and then from the history of the interaction or entanglement of race and religion through [00:07:00] the colonial period. What I wanted them to see is that all of these elements are bubbling under the surface of this one event, to analyze the religious aspects of an event like January 6th, is not just to look for the outward signs of people singing or invoking the name of Jesus on a sign with Donald Trump or something, but to ask the question of where does this idea of chosenness come from? [00:07:30] Where does this idea of entitlement come from? And to think from a deeper historical perspective about those things.

[\(07:40\):](#)

And so when I saw the call for papers, and I think I just saw it on Twitter, to be honest, just following a religious studies conference account, I saw the title of the conference and I thought, "Oh, this is really interesting." And a lot [00:08:00] of my students have asked me in the past, they want to know what are the next steps because for some of them really writing... All I ask them to do in this class, they have some weekly assignments, short kind of reflection, writing assignments. But the main assignment is just to produce a short paper, four and a half to I think the maximum is 10 pages which only a few students actually take me up [00:08:30] on, Jason included in that group.

[\(08:34\):](#)

But for so many of them, it feels like a very important paper for them to write. And I have students telling me that, "I really want to do a good job on this paper. This feels very significant for me personally to write this paper, to try to make sense of this for myself." And that has really struck me because I've never had [00:09:00] students tell me that before about an assignment. I mean, they may like an assignment, they may have fun doing an assignment, but I've never had a student say, "This paper is really important to me. This means something to me." Especially in a 100 level course.

[\(09:15\):](#)

And so I think when I saw the call for papers for the conference, I thought, "Well, here's an opportunity for some of those students to maybe engage [00:09:30] in a wider conversation about the origins of White supremacy." They already started thinking about it. They've sort of dipped their toe into that and if they have the opportunity to go to a conference like this, they can see this ongoing wider conversation taking place and see how their work is fitting into that. So that was kind of the thinking behind it. And I will say it was [00:10:00] a first for NOVA too. I don't think that, I mean, to my knowledge, no one had tried. I tried to take students to an academic conference like this before, and so trying to find financial sources and do that work, it was a lot of bunch of us, including administration, which I really am so thankful for the administration at the college [00:10:30] for really taking this seriously and not simply saying, "Well, I don't know if this sounds like a thing community college students would do or should be doing." Nobody said that. Everyone was like, "Yes, this is a great opportunity. Let's find the money. Let's make this happen." And they did it, and it was amazing.

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

Wow.

Joel Harrison [\(10:51\):](#)

Yeah.

Philip P. Arnold [\(10:52\):](#)

That's so inspiring for me because I've always thought, even since I was a graduate student, which [00:11:00] is a long time ago now, that the academic study of religion really needs to speak to the moment to what's going on in society right now. And I try to train graduate students that way too, even though a lot of them are infatuated with philosophy or other kind of more abstract ideas. Of course, that's what we do too, that's our bread and butter. But I think kind of having engaged [00:11:30] scholarship is what I'm going for here. And frankly, not many of our students, they'll just say this, not many of our grad students get jobs at community colleges. I mean, it's not like a thing. It's more kind of a larger research oriented universities that have these tenure track jobs.

(11:54):

So there are a lot of things about this whole story that I find inspiring is someone training... [00:12:00] We don't train many grad students, we have a few every year, but it's like where do they go? And particularly when in this moment when the humanity seems to be dying or becoming more and more irrelevant for many people, I'll put that in scare quotes. But I think that the academic study really needs to step up. We need to do this work on us to make it relevant. [00:12:30] And so I see this, your story here, Joel, is very inspiring. I appreciate it. Yeah, we've been at this for, I don't know, over 15 years now in the area of Doctrine of Discovery work. And as I said, the Luce Foundation is now funding us, which is something that probably wouldn't have happened 15 years ago or even probably five years ago. So I think that there are foundations, there is interest [00:13:00] in these topics and moving into these topics that I have seen in a longer arc and maybe could really help us moving into the future.

(13:16):

But let's step back a little bit. I want to hear from you, Chris and Jason, I want to hear from you about your experience around this topic of your [00:13:30] experience of how the conference impacted you or what you saw, so we can get some feedback from a student perspective.

Jason Armstrong (13:45):

So yeah, so coming in...

Philip P. Arnold (13:48):

And can you identify yourself? Sorry, I'm just so [inaudible 00:13:52].

Jason Armstrong (13:53):

I'm Jason. I'm Jason. Coming into this conference, I didn't have a lot of experience and I hadn't [00:14:00] heard much about the Doctrine of Discovery apart from the religion class with Dr. Joel. But being there at the conference, it gave me a deeper understanding of the topic, and it is really, well, it was saddened to see all this. But yeah, I was just appreciative of now I know of [00:14:30] this stuff. You're not taught this stuff in schools. You're not taught the Doctrine of Discovery. But it was really eye-opening, that's what it was. The conference is very eye-opening for me.

Philip P. Arnold (14:44):

That's awesome.

Sandy Bigtree (14:45):

Has it changed the way you perceive the world in general or in being an American or your identity and what you thought was the history?

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

Jason Armstrong ([14:54](#)):

Yeah, so definitely the history, right? But [00:15:00] I think I have a greater appreciation for different cultures. I think that's what it gave me, because when you're taught just one thing, you don't see the other side. And so yeah, the conference is eye-opening and allowed me to appreciate the other sides.

Philip P. Arnold ([15:28](#)):

Yeah, I mean, you mentioned Jason, that [00:15:30] it's very sad. It is a traumatic history and that we're dealing a lot with a lot of trauma here, but then also it's a unifying issue. It's a way that we can kind of work collaboratively, and that's one of the themes that we hope to bring out. I hope, did you see that in the conference at all?

Jason Armstrong ([15:53](#)):

Yeah, yeah. It was cool to see so many different people... [00:16:00] The conference was collaborative, right? It was everyone working towards one goal or talking about the Doctrine of Discovery which is really cool to see so many different perspectives and people from different backgrounds coming together.

Sandy Bigtree ([16:18](#)):

The bottom line is all your ancestors in the past were indigenous at one point. So there has to be some element that was an awakening in your own [00:16:30] being, an understanding of your own lineage. Maybe this is why you have more understanding and interest now in other cultures because your ancient cultures were also wiped out with this kind of authoritarian rule.

Philip P. Arnold ([16:46](#)):

We hear that a lot from Shawnee leaders or [inaudible 00:16:51] as they're called, that it's just that the age of discovery [00:17:00] has hit them most recently, where the history of Europe is sort of littered with these stories of indigenous peoples being overrun at various moments. And so they always are encouraging members of our board, in fact, encouraging of us all to really investigate our own genealogies. I mean, it is a thing now that people are interested in their backgrounds, their [00:17:30] genealogical backgrounds, and I'm one of those. But there's a reason for that too. I mean, I think people are looking for something, some orientation.

Sandy Bigtree ([17:41](#)):

Well, the land identifies who you are in indigenous cultures, it's hard to identify when that relationship with the natural world has been stripped from your ancestors. So there is this longing of detachment because that's in effect where [00:18:00] we receive life and it's regenerative and it's exciting and ever-changing, right.

Joel Harrison ([18:08](#)):

Yeah. I will say, Sandy, I so appreciated your words about the connection to land and the indigenous connection to land. I think it was on the opening night of the conference, because one of the most impactful for me days of [00:18:30] the class is when we talk about the way that the Spanish sort of theologically justified their conquest of indigenous peoples based on their accusing essentially the indigenous peoples of having the incorrect relationship to the land or misunderstanding which opened them up to demonic possession and so forth.

[\(18:51\)](#):

And that we read an essay by Willie James Jennings, who talks about Jose de Acosta, the [00:19:00] priest who was surveying the land and the people for the Spanish crown. And it's a difficult essay for students to read. We spend a bit of time unpacking it. But the idea that even the white students in the class have at some point in their history, some indigenous ancestors who had land, that's a really, I think, useful [00:19:30] way of framing that conversation because I do have, I regularly have white students who will say to me in confidence as a White professor, "I don't know how I'm supposed to identify with this or think about this." And I think that that's a really helpful way of framing it for them. Yeah, that's really...

Philip P. Arnold [\(19:55\)](#):

Yeah, I think that's important, Joel, because I think this [00:20:00] investigation always drives us back to primary sources.

Joel Harrison [\(20:03\)](#):

Yes.

Philip P. Arnold [\(20:04\)](#):

Primary sources, which is a real experience for students as well. I mean, I read some of those, the Columbus Diaries or some of these papal bulls and things like that. You go through them in class and it's like revelatory. So it's not biblical exegesis, but it is a sort of interpretation [00:20:30] of texts that are primary in a different kind of way. But Chris, I wanted to give you a chance to jump in here to talk about your experience at the conference and also how it might have impacted you going forward.

Christian Oppenhagen [\(20:49\)](#):

Yes. Well, I actually had some experience with some of this. Previously before [00:21:00] the degree I was working on that brought me into Professor Harrison's class, I was working on an anthropology degree. And so I've been exposed to some of the ways that anthropology had been used as a tool of oppression. Because anthropology, they're very open, at least most of the disciplines within anthropology are very open about, this was our past [00:21:30] being used to oppress the minorities, but now we're trying to look at things through their lens while also looking from the outside. So while I never interacted directly with the Doctrine of Discovery itself, I've been around and through my experiences, I've seen the history of what's [00:22:00] happened and what the Doctrine of Discovery did. So for me, a lot of the conference was actually putting into light of... It was a bit like working on a puzzle of all the pieces.

[\(22:16\)](#):

But then I went to the conference and somebody finally showed me what the picture was supposed to look like. "Here's the top of the box." Okay, now I see how all these pieces come together. [00:22:30] Whereas before, it was more like, "Oh, yeah, I know about the oppression of Native Americans. I know how they were treated and how indigenous cultures were treated by most of the conquering groups." But now it was, "Oh, this was the justification given beyond just here, let's pour a bunch of sand into this skull and see how much that skull can hold, and we're going to completely hide the fact [00:23:00] that the skull with the more amount actually came from a minority. This is the White skull, this is the Black skull because of how much sand.

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

Philip P. Arnold ([23:10](#)):

That can't be right, right?

Christian Oppenhagen ([23:12](#)):

Yeah, exactly. So for me, the conference was very much so putting everything into light and kind of giving me a little bit more perspective on things, which I really appreciated as a student of culture, as a student [00:23:30] of history, being able to see where things fit on the other side of the lens of the historical texts.

Philip P. Arnold ([23:45](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I think the university, I don't know about down in Virginia at your place, but we divide up academic study of religion and the humanities and anthropology and social science, [00:24:00] even natural sciences. So here we have an indictment really across all knowledge systems in a way, because for me, I think religion gets more at the root of this issue because it supplies the worldview and as you said, risk of justification for these conquerors who after all they leave home and then [00:24:30] set up shops somewhere else and do these atrocious things to people, and what's driving all that, what could make a person do that? It just seems absurd in today's world, but in a way, it's still operative. So I think there are different ways of coming at this from different points of view. For me, religion seems to get a little deeper, get us deeper [00:25:00] into the quagmire. So I appreciate you mixing it up.

Sandy Bigtree ([25:06](#)):

And at the same time of discovery, there are these great thinkers who are envisioning a new world. So when we're creating the United States, there's two forces here going kind of head-to-head against one another, the explorers, the land speculators, and then you have the great thinkers of the Enlightenment era. And if you dig into [00:25:30] that, what ignited that school of thought, and many writers today are saying it was this involvement over hundreds of years of interactions with the indigenous people from the Americas because they lived in these true democracies that were not hierarchical.

([25:51](#)):

So you have these idealized visions of creating this new world, and then you have these greedy [00:26:00] land speculators who just want to take the land as a resource. And it goes back to just the founding right when the British were still in power. And during that switch over to the Americanists, they were using the wisdom of the Haudenosaunee talking about the great law peace where people lived in equity and freedom and peace. And these were not concepts readily discussed in Europe. So [00:26:30] this issue for the new possibility of living with one another in this world, but we had that iconography, by the way, was incorporated into presidential seal. If you delve into that history, you'll find references to that living in peace. And the message about the Haudenosaunee. It was only a few years later that the fascia of the Mussolini, well, this is before Mussolini, but of Rome, because he took that emblem from [00:27:00] Rome, the Roman Empire, an empire building authoritarianism. That iconography started being introduced after they were using this other bundle of arrows that the Haudenosaunee talked about representing peace. So much was in conflict in those early years. And then of course, 1823, the Doctrine of Discovery encoded this American Property Law. So people need to know what was going on then, and you have choices [00:27:30] to make and are we going to continue?

Philip P. Arnold ([27:33](#)):

I don't know how close you are to Washington DC but it is a fascinating look at just the iconography in the nation's capital. I mean, you look at the kind of figures, the authoritative figures. Columbus, of

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

course is there all through the Capitol building. But then on [00:28:00] the flip side, then you go down to the Supreme Court chambers that are underneath the Senate, the original Supreme Court chambers, and there are corn cob columns that are supporting, they've been just recently restored in the last 30 years. And this is a hearkening back to when the capitol was first constructed in the early 1800s before Johnson. [00:28:30] And it's a nod to the Haudenosaunee influence. And then tobacco leach lentils, of course, that support, they're in the basement of the Capitol supporting that dome. So actually, we're integrating a lot of those images into the Skä•noñh Center.

Sandy Bigtree ([28:53](#)):

Right now.

Philip P. Arnold ([28:56](#)):

I don't know if you got to see the Skä•noñh Center. That was one of my questions. Were you here early enough to [00:29:00] be able to go to the Skä•noñh Center?

Joel Harrison ([29:03](#)):

I think Jason, did you take that tour on the front?

Jason Armstrong ([29:09](#)):

Yeah, I did. It was really cool.

Philip P. Arnold ([29:11](#)):

Yeah. What did you like about it? I mean, we were instrumental in creating that space 10 years ago, more than 10 years ago now. But I'd appreciate your comments about that.

Jason Armstrong ([29:28](#)):

Yeah, so I mean, [00:29:30] again, just going to that, I got a deeper understanding of the story of oppression, and I didn't realize how the magnitude of the oppression were. And I really loved how as you could walk through, well, I didn't like it, but as you walk through the story continued and how it was a path. It was [00:30:00] very powerful, very powerful.

Philip P. Arnold ([30:03](#)):

And then the fact that Haudenosaunee are still here. I mean, you're eating their food and you're interacting with them. I mean, I think that's kind of what were going through.

Sandy Bigtree ([30:17](#)):

There's still possibilities in the world. They're still here. We're still here.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colón ([30:27](#)):

Do you need help catching up on today's topic, or do you want [00:30:30] to learn more about the resources mentioned? If so, please check our website at [podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org](http://podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org) for more information. And if you like this episode, review it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. And now back to the conversation.

Philip P. Arnold ([30:48](#)):



## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

Your classes, Joel, will the conference change your ideas about your curriculum for your class?  
[00:31:00] I mean, you said you started with some of these earlier texts, but one of the things we are hoping to accomplish, we've created this website, actually, Adam has created the website, and we're sort of loading it up with other materials that might be of help. I'm wondering if that's of interest to you.

Joel Harrison ([31:23](#)):

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I am always trying to point my students to as many free [00:31:30] resources as possible. I think that for a lot of undergraduates, their kind of go-to is just to start with Google and go from there. And so I'll get papers that have a lot of... We'll cite a lot of journalism or something like that, but I really try to encourage them to use the sources. I mean, I try to set up the class so that they don't have to do any outside research if they don't want [00:32:00] to. They can use all the reading from my class. But I am wanting to incorporate this semester more about the Doctrine of Discovery, specifically as we talk about the doom diversus, papal bull and [inaudible 00:32:22] laws in Spain, and some of these earlier iterations of justifications for [00:32:30] persecution of non-White, non-Christian, non-European peoples. And I think that the Doctrine of Discovery is certainly one kind of bridging point between what's going on in colonial Europe to January 6th.

([32:53](#)):

I think that that's a good... So that's one way that the conference certainly changed [00:33:00] the syllabus is to add in more of that specific discussion of what the Doctrine of Discovery did in the US because I mean, like you were mentioning even with things is sort of fine-grained and minute as the symbolism of the country and how all these little details come from these other places. It can be overwhelming, [00:33:30] I think, for students to try to wrap their heads around all of this. But yeah, I think that the conference gave me some good tools for thinking about how to guide them even more toward and bridge that gap between the colonial entanglement of race and religion, and then what's happening on January 6th.

Philip P. Arnold ([33:58](#)):

I mean, that's what I was interested in. How do we connect those dots? [00:34:00] How do you connect like 500-year olds racist theology essentially with what's going on now in terms of White Christian nationalism? I mean, I see it, I see it everywhere, but how do you do that? I'm just curious.

Joel Harrison ([34:21](#)):

Right. Well, so I mean, one of the things that I do is we focus a lot on the language of demons [00:34:30] in this class.

Philip P. Arnold ([34:31](#)):

Or evil, evil, I suppose.

Joel Harrison ([34:33](#)):

Yeah, I mean, well, so the ways that in American religious history, the others, those who are part of other worldly or the non-Christian, the unregenerate are cast as demonic at some level or agents of the Satanic or something like that. How the culture wars [00:35:00] throughout the 20th century get couched in those terms. And then when you go back in time to the colonial period, you see similar language about the demonic, how the indigenous people's physical bodies are porous and sort of susceptible to demonic possession whereas the conquistadors, because of Christ, they can't be

possessed by the devil. And so we [00:35:30] talk about the kind of analogously, how that language is similar, and the idea that, I mean, if you truly believe that your opponent is an agent of the devil is possessed by demons or is a demon, a literal demon themselves, then that gives you some more insight into the violence, I think, of why people are willing to take up the cause of January 6th, at least from that one [00:36:00] perspective. So that's one of the ways that we connect that.

Philip P. Arnold ([36:05](#)):

Wow, that's fascinating. And that language is picked up by the January 6th people that is that or some of the groups, some of the religious orientations of those groups?

Joel Harrison ([36:16](#)):

Right. Well, you have, for example, the QAnon conspiracy theory which beliefs literally that the members of the Democratic Party are Satan worshipping pedophiles. [00:36:30] And there's various iterations of that where in some cases, the opponents of Donald Trump just in general are demonic forces or demons themselves or something like that. I mean, it gets very convoluted very quickly, but you do see that language. You also see the language of Chosenness. I mean, there's some fantastic video resources from that [00:37:00] day on the uncivil religion site that will show choirs of Trump supporters singing were the Chosen of the Lord, a chosen generation, that kind of thing.

([37:14](#)):

So this idea also of chosenness that you'll be protected from the demonic forces because God has chosen your side for victory, which is also similar to the language that Jose de Acosta uses in his theological [00:37:30] justification of the conquest, "God has commissioned the Christians to go to the [inaudible 00:37:38]." That's the word that he uses to describe the new world, that nobody would go to the "new world" if God had not put these resources there as a kind of reward for. And so there's also this idea that God has commissioned the Spanish to go there [00:38:00] and write the relationship to the land, and you use these untapped resources that are there that God has commissioned them to use. So there's some similar language there too, with this language of chosenness.

Philip P. Arnold ([38:15](#)):

Wow. Yeah, it's reminiscent...

Sandy Bigtree ([38:18](#)):

[inaudible 00:38:20].

Philip P. Arnold ([38:23](#)):

Oh yeah, you want me to tell him?

Sandy Bigtree ([38:26](#)):

Yeah.

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

Oh, okay. So [00:38:30] I have actually five ancestors that crossed on the [inaudible 00:38:34]. Now three of them didn't last through the first winter. So two survive. So part of accounting for our history here in the Americas, 500 or 400 year old history is looking at these sites. One of [00:39:00] the sites that we visited as a family, and remember Sandy's Haudenosaunee, our kids are Haudenosaunee. So one

of the sites we visited in Cape Cod was called Horn Hill, which is a giant X [inaudible 00:39:14] in the middle of a parking lot. Where the pilgrims landed, they were literally starving in November of 1620. And these are my ancestors, right? They sit upon this little cache of corn that [00:39:30] is buried there, and in the plaque that's nearby, they thank God for without finding that corn, they would surely have perished something like that.

Sandy Bigtree ([39:47](#)):

And the insects stole the corn.

Philip P. Arnold ([39:51](#)):

I call it this kind of like the first theft, not because they took the corn, but because they didn't thank the right people [00:40:00] or they didn't think the people actually gave them the corn. They weren't appreciative. It was more like this rather thanking this divine intervention for something that really had very little to do with it in a way. So it's like, yeah, there are these other stories, personal stories that Sandy and I are working on right now that that can help fill in some of those details. But yeah, [00:40:30] I hear some of the resonance of Pizzagate, for example, or other kind of thing going on. But Chris, I wonder if you have some sense of how those dots are connected, those 500 year old dots are connected after taking Joel's course between this kind of 500 year old crazy religion talk, which is still with [00:41:00] us, by the way, and how it has changed and also remained the same.

Christian Oppenhagen ([41:10](#)):

Yes. I actually have the unfortunate honor, suppose dishonor maybe. The profession that I've been in for most of my adult life is actually rather, at least down here in the south, [00:41:30] it's rather infested with Christian nationalist groups. So I've gotten to see kind of from the inside. Luckily, I was raised without Christian nationalism, and so I'd always erred on the side away from it, shied away from it. But I got into a profession where it was very prevalent and I've gotten to see a lot of the shifting. It's no longer necessarily always [00:42:00] calling out things like demonic nature. I mean, obviously there's still that major dot when you have QAnon and Pizzagate and all of that, but there's also redirecting towards what can be considered more common enemies and more secular enemies, such as pedophilia, which is a major cry from these Christian nationalists to try and discredit [00:42:30] the LGBTQ+. They try and discredit immigrants. Anyone they don't disagree with can potentially become either demonic for the hardcore sects or pedophilic in the sects that want to be almost more secular.

Philip P. Arnold ([42:56](#)):

And so you see it as a kind of range of [00:43:00] positions of groups, orientations that run from explicitly religious to more secular, is that what you're saying?

Christian Oppenhagen ([43:10](#)):

I don't necessarily see it being more secular, but I do see a range where they're trying to demonize in a more secular way because I mean, the Satanic panic of the '70s and '80s going [00:43:30] after things like Dungeons and Dragons and rock music didn't work for them. So instead of calling out Satan and demons in the modern era, there's still that hardcore sect that thinks that will shake people out of their revelry for these groups. But then there's the sects that realize and try to use a more [00:44:00] secular enemy, whereas the hardcore religious groups are using their religious enemy of Satan of the devil of demons. These almost more tactical groups that are still religious and still potentially in their hearts feel

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

that way, are instead using terminology of society demons of the pedophile, of [00:44:30] the rapist, of the robber.

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

Yeah.

Christian Oppenhagen ([44:35](#)):

And they're using that to frame their enemies in a negative light as well. And it just shows a little bit more of the, not necessarily like we can't fight them, so we might join them, but we still want to fight these groups, so we can't fight that nobody believes in demons and that demons aren't going to freak everybody in the country out anymore. [00:45:00] So we'll join that and call them something that everyone can still agree is bad.

Philip P. Arnold ([45:06](#)):

Right, right.

Joel Harrison ([45:07](#)):

I think that there's also a common thread, regardless of whether a group is using the kind of a blanket term like pedophile or demonic, in that they're sort of viewing this group, one group of people as a complete existential threat. So it's not simply that these people are immoral, but it's that they [00:45:30] threaten the very fabric of existence. It's still a cosmic battle, I think for them on some level which makes it still part of, I think, the culture war logic throughout especially 20th century American religious history. And again, when you see your opponent as [00:46:00] this pure existential threat that makes this kind of reactionary politics all the more dangerous, because then disagreements are not simply political disagreements or social disagreements or something like that, but they are truly viewed as threats. What matters of life and death, I think to a lot of people, and it can be scary, I think.

Sandy Bigtree ([46:29](#)):

Well, don't [00:46:30] we know it. We were referred to the Savage Indians. We repurposed a peace center where they had beforehand talked about the Jesuits coming in the 17th century, and the local historical association built a fort that was 200 years off the mark so they could promote the cowboy and Indian theme built a 19th century fort. They finally took it down in the '70s, but from 1933 onward, everybody [00:47:00] thought the savage Indian was right here among the Haudenosaunee. Very much alive in the world.

Philip P. Arnold ([47:08](#)):

And I appreciate also what you're saying, Christian, because in many ways that in all of us, that legacy of Christian nationalism, I mean, I think it's kind of in the water by mouth because so [00:47:30] many of our students, grad students, in fact, in the academic study religion in various ways are kind of recovering from their traumatic upbringings in fundamentalist Christian groups. To some degree, that was my experience. I mean, it wasn't as intense as some of my students. I'm thinking actually of Adam, who's [00:48:00] a producer here, who's got his PhD from our department and also had to work very hard to deal with his own demons, if I could say that from his upbringing.

[\(48:14\)](#):

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

Another transgender student in our department, Jess, she's grappling with this traumatic legacy having grown up in the South as well. It's very [00:48:30] personal in a way, but I think this work in the Doctrine of Discovery can help us all sort of organize and maybe even heal. We're talking to another podcaster actually runs a podcast called Divorcing Religion out of BC Vancouver, and she and her husband actually came to the conference and their therapists that are working in [00:49:00] this space. So I do appreciate that the personal dynamics of how this work might be helpful as well.

Sandy Bigtree ([49:14](#)):

Jason, has this impacted the way that you just talked with your friends or family, if you brought this knowledge into any of those sorts of conversations?

Jason Armstrong ([49:25](#)):

Definitely with my family. I've discussed this topic and [00:49:30] tried to share what I learned at the conference with them, and I think I've been successful with that.

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

Initially though, they're in shock, right?

Jason Armstrong ([49:42](#)):

Yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([49:42](#)):

And that's what I have found that can't even believe it [inaudible 00:49:47] real.

Philip P. Arnold ([49:50](#)):

Yeah. My dad's 95 and he still has trouble with what I do. I mean, I [00:50:00] love you, dad, but wow.

Sandy Bigtree ([50:05](#)):

That's what he's done.

Philip P. Arnold ([50:06](#)):

I hope he doesn't listen to this. He won't. He won't. I'm absolutely convinced him not. One of the questions that you actually brought up for me, Joel, and one of the questions we constantly are turning over in this work is when does the Doctrine of Discovery start? I mean, is it mid 15th century? [00:50:30] Well, yes, that's kind of it. Is it the crusade? Because so much of the spirit and you see that today, it's still operative. Is it the 11th century? I mean, and then you can make an argument, I think is the foundation of the Roman Church in the 4th century. I mean, I think we should be open to that kind of [00:51:00] investigation of thinking about...

([51:04](#)):

So now we're talking about what, 1500 years or more that were kind of grappling with these questions. I mean, James Carroll wrote this book, Constantine Sword, which really places the origins of antisemitism, something that I listened to about on the radio just today, and the origins of that are in the [00:51:30] 4th century Roman Church and fashioning the Bible in certain kinds of ways. It can get too expansive. But then on the other hand, it does seem relevant. Not to say you should bring this into your class, but

## S04E02 - Exploring the American Religious Tapestry

because you kind of want to keep it focused on the American issue. But there are these other facets of the problem [00:52:00] that I see could easily motivate further graduate work, things like that.

Sandy Bigtree ([52:10](#)):

There are indigenous cities here that rivaled any city in Europe, but yet there were no police forces or prisons. They lived freely and with equity with one another and with the natural world, so for 10,000 years. So what was so different here? Why was it so different here than in Europe? [00:52:30] We should evaluate this and talk about it.

Philip P. Arnold ([52:33](#)):

Right.

Joel Harrison ([52:34](#)):

Yeah.

Philip P. Arnold ([52:37](#)):

Well, I think this has been a great conversation. I really appreciate all of you. It's our hope that we can continue this relationship with your spot, with Virginia, with your students, and even we have plans on [00:53:00] trying to make some of your papers, those of you who want to make your papers sort of public through our website or through other sorts of means. So I really appreciate all of you for coming on today, and I hope we can continue this conversation.

Sandy Bigtree ([53:21](#)):

Thank you. Hope we meet again.

Joel Harrison ([53:22](#)):

Thank you.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colón ([53:23](#)):

The producers of this podcast [00:53:30] were Adam DJ Brett and Jordan Loewen-Colón. Our intro and outro is Social Dancing Music by Aris Edwards and Regis Cook. This podcast is funded in collaboration with the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University at Hendricks Chapel, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. If you like this episode, please check out our website and make sure to subscribe.