

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

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

... Arnold, I'm faculty person in religion at Syracuse University. Also core faculty in Native American indigenous studies and founding director of Skä·noñh Great Law Peace Center.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:00:12](#)):

And hi, I am Sandy Bigtree, a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, and I'm on the board of the Indigenous Values Initiative as well as on the academic collaborative for the Skä·noñh Great Law. Welcome.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:00:28](#)):

Yeah. And today we're coming to you from the heartland of the Haudenosaunee, Onondaga Nation territory, and we're being sponsored by Henry Luce Foundation. Today we're really happy to be able to bring you a conversation with Soulforce and we have three guests, three very important guests that have been doing remarkable work in various ways. And we just want to introduce you all to what they're doing and how they are changing and composting the White Christian supremacy. So we just had a conversation about that and maybe we'll elaborate, but we were brought together through the Henry Luce Foundation, Dean Emilie Townes and Dr. Teresa Smallwood, introduced us all. And we've been trying to coordinate and get this conversation together ever since. But please, maybe one at a time you could introduce yourselves and the work you are doing at Soulforce. We'll be starting with you, Alba.

Alba Onofrio ([00:01:52](#)):

Thank you so much for having us on the podcast. We're delighted to be here. We were so grateful to be in community on Haudenosaunee territory earlier, end of last year, so we are grateful to be here. I am Reverend Alba Onofrio. I'm the executive director of Soulforce and one of the co-founders Teología Sin Vergüenza which is a queer and feminist podcast about Christian theology at the margins. And we have been around for about 25 years. I'm currently on Cherokee land down here in Appalachia, which is where I grew up. And we are an organization that has been working to end the political and religious discrimination and oppression of LGBT people for 25 years. And we're excited to be with you [inaudible 00:02:47].

Philip P. Arnold ([00:02:46](#)):

Thank you.

Nadia Arellano Tapia ([00:02:53](#)):

I can go next.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:02:53](#)):

Yeah. Thank you.

Nadia Arellano Tapia ([00:03:04](#)):

Hi everyone. I'm a huge fan of the podcast, so I'm very excited to be here. My name is Nadia Arellano. I am from Mexico City, born and raised. I'm the associate director at Soulforce and I also do a lot of the Latin American programming work. I have been involved in... I've been studying theology, Christian theology, and in particular feminist and queer theologies for a while, and also social sciences and the study of [inaudible 00:03:36]. I love being able to use those as a tool to confront power and confront

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

injustice. The different languages it uses to oppress and how it recognizes things that are important for people, specifically spirituality and faith. So I am very excited to be here and yeah, thank you for having us.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:04:12](#)):

Thank you. And Karina?

Karina Vargas Espinoza ([00:04:21](#)):

Yeah, can you hear me there, yes?

Philip P. Arnold ([00:04:22](#)):

Yes.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:04:22](#)):

Oh, yes.

Karina Vargas Espinoza ([00:04:25](#)):

Okay, thank you. So my name is Karina Vargas. I am from Costa Rica and in Soulforce I coordinate the institute on spiritual violence, healing and social change. And I have formation in theology and psychology and sabotaging hegemonic religion. It's something I connect a lot with, and there are reasons why culturally it needs to be done in this way, but we can talk about that later. And I want to say that I enjoyed a lot the time we had in Syracuse last December, and I'm very excited to be part of this conversation this morning. Thank you very much.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:05:17](#)):

Thank you all for coming. Yeah, last December was something we're still sort of thinking about grappling with, wondering what the next steps are. I mean, it was an incredibly diverse group of people. We were really gratified so many people turned out to come and really participate in this conversation, which is so [inaudible 00:05:46]... What I appreciate about Soulforce is that... And also my discipline in general, history of religions is that religion is the problem. And religious studies has to be involved in anything that we do to solve the problem, and the conundrums of our current crises. You know name it, the current election cycle or whatever is always going to be framed around White Christian nationalism.

([00:06:27](#)):

So that's why I'm drawn to what you all are doing because we're all in religious studies in various ways or either in the academic study of religion or in some aspect of religion. And I'm wondering how you deal with issues of White Christian supremacy or Christian nationalism in your own day from your varieties of points of view. It's always at top of mind for us. I see it in the news cycle every single day, and yet I don't see many people talking about it at its fundamental route.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:07:13](#)):

And also maybe some of you could elaborate on how Soulforce came about. That would be very helpful for our listening audience. Maybe could start with Alba.

Alba Onofrio ([00:07:31](#)):

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

Yeah, I'd love to tell you a little bit about Soulforce. 25 years ago, Reverend Mel White and his husband Gary Nixon, basically came out from a religious right background into a public eye and sphere to say that one could be both queer and Christian at the same time. That was possible, that they were examples of living into the idea that all of us are made in the image of the divine and therefore all of us have a right to human dignity and to our religion or our spirituality. So 25 years ago there was an important book written called *Stranger at the Gate*, which was one of the first mainstream books that came out about being both gay and Christian in the US. And got a lot of press because our founder had been a ghost writer for Jerry Falwell and some of the other folks on the religious right and the moral majority at that time.

[\(00:08:26\):](#)

So that's how we started. Then we had a section about a decade where groups of young people would be coming together and their allies, but mostly LGBT youth would come together and ride buses all around the country for three months at a time, living together and visiting Christian college campuses. And showing up into spaces physically and saying, "Here we are. We exist. We are part of this faith, we are part of this tradition and we belong." And would often get arrested because they were on private property and campuses would entirely shut down. It would cause a huge thing. And yet all these years later we're still hearing. In fact, just yesterday I was speaking with someone who was telling me about how Soulforce came to her undergraduate and that was the beginning of her process of coming to terms with her own orientation. So that was a very beautiful time.

[\(00:09:23\):](#)

We also had a period where we did a lot of public actions at Christian denominations and Catholic denominations at the Vatican, at the Southern Baptist Convention at the Superdome in New Orleans. And we would go and make this kind of public... Shouldn't be a protest, but turned into a protest of just saying, "We are also Christian." So Catholics getting [inaudible 00:09:48] denied, communion at the Vatican at the US Conference of Bishops, because of being gay. Folks at the Southern Baptist Convention getting arrested because those folks were LGBT and trying to just name spiritual violence as it had happened to them personally. And being able to do that with really important figures at the time like Billy Porter, like Gandhi's granddaughter, like Martin Luther King Jr's daughter, folks like that. We have some really great legends who stood alongside of us back in those days. And now we're working on the ideologies, exactly what you were talking about, about the roots of what is this Christianity that has made legitimate and seemingly okayed so many horrors across time.

[\(00:10:36\):](#)

So now we're trying to get at those deeper foundational issues of why is it that we have folks who are complicit with systems of domination, why do we have folks who cannot conceive of reparations or returning indigenous land. What is the moral ideology behind that? That somehow told us that this is okay when all of us know at a human right, at a human level, that no one has the right to take someone else's body or land or culture or language for their own gain and for their own profit. We know that just as human beings to not be correct. So what is the contorted and twisted language of religion, in this case Christianity, that allowed folks to believe that at one point. And continue to become complicit with it as we move forward into the future. So that's what sabotaging White Christian supremacy about. It's about religion that has been co-opted and stolen and put on the sheep's clothing of Christianity in order to benefit White supremacy, systems of power and domination, imperialism, capitalism, those kind of things.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:11:42](#)):

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

Well, I expect that you had not been... The Doctrine of Discovery had not been part of this original discourse. So how has that knowledge affected your movement?

Alba Onofrio ([00:11:58](#)):

Yeah, it's kind of at the root of colonization so many generations ago, and I would love for maybe Nadia, Karina to talk a little bit about that. Because it was in the last few years, the last three years in fact, that we have really focused more on Latin America, having so much of our team coming from Latin America. I'm first generation in the United States. So I think that that discourse around colonization and really honing in... We had touched on it before when talking about chattel slavery actually and the papal bulls that came before the authorized chattel slavery, that then made their way into the Doctrine of Discovery around land. But it really has been a centerpiece of our work in the last few years as we have spent more and more time working with folks in Latin America. Nadia, what do you think?

Nadia Arellano Tapia ([00:12:51](#)):

Yeah, thank you Alba. And thank you for the question. I do believe that it's super interesting to go back to Soulforce history and see how, as all social movements feel, the more that we started... The more that people started confronting... Social movements evolved and our ideas, our understanding of the roots of the problem are more clear. And I do believe that at the beginning there was more, not just in Soulforce, in general, progressive religious-ish or faith oriented efforts. We're very interested in this approach of, "We can be Christians and gay." Like a lot of focus on the clobber passages of the Bible, a lot of trying to legitimize themselves and their existence, which makes a lot of sense because they were being targeted. So there was a lot of confronting those arguments and saying, "No, we are worthy, we are important, we have something to say."

([00:14:16](#)):

And the more the movement grew, I think the analysis became more like, "But who are you to say, who's worthy? Or why am I supposed to explain myself for this?" And then I think the element of power analysis became more evident and the weaponization of religion, the centuries of parasitic relationship between religion and power became the root that we had to approach if we wanted to talk about Queer people and faith. But also all the other marginalized communities that have been left behind and that have been killed for their otherness because they do not feel the sacred idea of what God is, that sacred idea that is co-opted by power. So I think right now our work in Soulforce is way more invested in understanding those systems of power and not trying to make ourselves more respectable for those powers.

([00:15:41](#)):

And I think as Alba was saying, talking about that in Latin America... Talking about faith in Latin America needs to be accompanied by a very big analysis of imperialism and colonization. So when we started doing a lot of work with queer and feminist theologians in Latin America and the Caribbean, it was very clear that spiritual violence as a form is a colonial force. It's an imperialistic force. And once we approach that theme, I think there is a lot of work to be done. And that's why we love your work so much because the things that you are highlighting with your project are super connected to what we want to say about the weaponization of religion. And how it has always been in the center of how people are marginalized in the global [inaudible 00:16:57]. Yeah.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:17:01](#)):

That's great.

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

Sandy Bigtree ([00:17:01](#)):

Well, I give you a lot of credit, all of you, for working within this binary structure of Christianity that came, and created a war between these two divided forces, right? Indigenous people did not live that way. They did not have that understanding of living in the world because it's interactionary with many, many kinds of beings. So to stay within the structure of the church when it was very much defined in a binary of good and evil, I give you a lot of credit. I mean, that's incredible, but wow, it's part of the process and you're doing the very hard work. Thank you.

Alba Onofrio ([00:17:46](#)):

And I think some of us come at this from inside the church. I'm a Christian minister, but Soulforce as an organization, isn't an organization connected to any particular faith denomination. And why that is, is because we identify in different ways religiously or spiritually. But what holds us all together is we don't want to be beholden to any hierarchical structure about a connection that we have with whatever we call the divine. Whether that's something connected with the natural world, whether that's part of an organized religion or multiple kinds of religious practices or spiritual practices. We are eclectic in the ways that we connect, and especially because we recognized that religion was forced on us in a particular way at the end of a state, at the end of a sword. And that means that we have a lot of power to reclaim the parts of Christianity that were forced upon us, but for a lot of our people were sources of freedom and liberation.

([00:18:44](#)):

It was a lot of biblical arguments that got used in multiple struggles for liberation, for women, for enslaved folks, for people reclaiming their independence as territories of land across the Global South. So we recognize that it's part of a legacy for many of us, of something that is liberating, but we also recognize with the same rigor that there is so much that has been poisoned. That we actually do have the freedom to reach back to what our ancestors practiced, to reach into the natural world, to rebuild those relationships, and that that's going to look messy and not cleanly in one thing or another. So I'm a Christian minister, I'm deeply Christian, but I also feel like this is the consequence of the colonizers forcing their religion on my people. It's me, this queer person who is also Christian, who is also practicing earth-based healing practices on the land here in Appalachia, who is also moving through the Global South.

([00:19:41](#)):

So that's me and every one of us has our own version of that kind of story. But what we have in common is recognizing that Christianity has been used for great harm and used as a weapon, and that is not acceptable. And we have to come together around that to uncover it, to demystify it, to decode it. So that we can work in resistance to it and against it. So that we can be on our own healing journeys rather than attributing to creator, all of that stuff that has been causing us pain and harm, exclusion, marginalization, and taking us away from our families, our communities, and our land.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:20:16](#)):

That's deep stuff. We were just in London talking to many of these Christian groups. I mean, we were asked to speak at St. James in Piccadilly, which is high church, Anglican, but they're also really invested in what they call ecospirituality. And we were asked to speak about that in indigenous perspectives and they connected us with... Adam can help me here with Iona Community in Northern Scotland. There are a lot of these groups trying to reconnect with a Celtic sort of indigenous spirituality, but are also active Christian organizations or contemplative communities that are reconnecting with the land. So I think

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

we're at an interesting moment right now, we're at a crisis moment. Of course it's a hundred degrees outside for most of us, which is totally weird for us here in Northern New York state. So I think people are trying to, I would say it this way, and this is echoing what Nadia was saying earlier, it's like we're at a moment where activism is meeting the academy.

(00:21:47):

So we're trying to have a kind of engaged scholarship that is not just enamored with archives for the sake of archives. But trying to illuminate how these systems of domination were formed and created in the first place. So that we can then reflect on how that has impacted our world today and continues to. So I see you as... I feel Soulforce is somehow already... Maybe way before these other movements, who knows? But there are these... Going back to the '70s with Findhorn and other groups in Scotland and the UK that are trying to connect or reconnect with this sense of being part of the world or part of the land.

Sandy Bigtree (00:22:53):

And make sense of these systems of domination and how do you work through it, how do you see your way through this.

Philip P. Arnold (00:22:57):

[inaudible 00:22:57]-

Sandy Bigtree (00:22:57):

Is there a way to see through it?

Philip P. Arnold (00:22:58):

Yeah.

Sandy Bigtree (00:23:02):

These are serious questions.

Philip P. Arnold (00:23:07):

So I'll invite Karina to say something you're aching to get in here. Yeah.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon (00:23:26):

Phil, her audio is having-

Philip P. Arnold (00:23:30):

How do I do that?

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon (00:23:31):

...an issue? Let me unmute it. Karina, I think you should be able to talk now. No.

Philip P. Arnold (00:23:42):

That's just a hand raise.

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:23:44](#)):

Yeah. Okay. So Karina, I see it's saying that your headphones are plugged in. Maybe try plugging and unplugging your headphones or something.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:24:02](#)):

Play with the volume.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:24:04](#)):

Yeah, because it's showing an input there.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:24:12](#)):

Say something. No.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:24:24](#)):

No. Okay. All right. Karina, in the top right corner, you'll see where it says call settings. Click on that and try changing audio input and see if that works.

Karina Vargas Espinoza ([00:24:42](#)):

Did it work?

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:24:43](#)):

Yes.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:24:43](#)):

Yes.

Karina Vargas Espinoza ([00:24:43](#)):

Okay. Thank you very much for the help. What I wanted to say is that thinking our relationship north-south, being there in December, listening more about the Doctrine of Discover. It's amazing how the same thing happened to our people in all places and how this weaponized Christianity, it's at the bottom of the conquering colonizing system strategy. And something I enjoyed about the work we do in Soulforce is that we can be in a conference with you in all these very complex analysis of the subject. But then we are with people in our events, many of them are people who struggle with understanding what religion did to them, and also struggling with... Yeah, just questioning if they can practice a spirituality that will not damage them again, that will not be violent with them. And from there also a challenge for us as social scientist is how do we keep this conversation that is so complex. In a level that it's understandable, that it's full of empathy for the terms that people bring to the conversation.

([00:26:35](#)):

Because they will use colonized language of religion. They will talk to you in the categories they know, which are, talking about sin, talking about guilt, talking about the need of confessing their fears. And for some people this might look like, "Oh, come on, you're so behind in understanding..." Or, "How you are so into these religious things if you're a rational person." But being grown in Latin America inside of these churches, you can understand how hard it's to move from these places. Not only rationally but emotionally because the scars are new, the fear is new. And this fear, even though I read something

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

from 200 or 300 years ago on the strategies they use with other people, I can feel it in me in 2024. How the same strategies just change its forms, but it's a very successful strategy in terms of dominating and in terms of continue in a colonization of ideology.

[\(00:27:56\)](#):

So what we try to do, it's a work that is very complex, which is work in ideology at the level of people, at the level of this conversation. That may be with... One day with very conservative people of churches who are interested in maybe growing in their critical thinking about religion. But other day it's a conversation with lawyers and psychologists who are trying to help survivors of violence, but they don't know how to listen to them because they don't speak the religious language. They don't know how to talk about this fear. And sometimes this is something where we professionally in social sciences need to come. And I think because of our professions and disciplines and all these time we invest in trying to understand this, it's our part to walk to those places. And when I say walk, I'm talking about how do we design strategies.

[\(00:29:02\)](#):

And that's something I love about Soulforce, that we are all the time thinking, "How will this, that it's so complex and intense can enter a conversation, that is a language that can be understood by a lot of people in different contexts?" And I find that as a huge challenge for me as a person in social sciences. Sometimes it's easier to write a paper, than try to think of strategies to connect with people. Not only in a rational way, but to develop this empathy for what colonization and violence has done in us. And that this is happening here in the south or in the north because you also have a lot of damage there, a lot of colonization there. And then at the same time, a lot of the colony comes from [inaudible 00:29:59] to the south. So we are in this huge matrix of violence, but I think this healing we try to do, might help understand each other and try to develop the strategies that can dismantle this huge lie that is covered by these holy sacred jurisdiction.

[\(00:30:21\)](#):

It's so hard to judge, because they are not even systems that are ready to enter [inaudible 00:30:28], with the name that it has, that it's violence. It cannot be named like that.

Sandy Bigtree [\(00:30:36\)](#):

No. We have a whole history of well, bad relationships. Some people take a whole life to recover from a bad relationship with one person. And we're talking about an institution that made us all obedient where there's no real relationship there. And then they laden us with guilt because of the diseases that were planted in all our territories, North and South America, and that we were dying because of our faulty creator. So we're out of fear. Fear was established in a very profound way, at the very beginning using religion and disease to pull us into the belief that their god was superior. And it's a horrible relationship. Talk about generational trauma. The whole mindset is rooted in fear and guilt. Yeah, it's almost an impossible task. Sometimes you cannot recover from that and you need to divorce from that situation, but you, I guess can work through it. But it's a rocky road, whichever way you look at it.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:31:55\)](#):

Before Nadia jumps in, I wanted to say too, that one of the liberating factors of doing Doctrine of Discovery work, we've been doing it about 20 years now and having these conferences. And what I find is that all of our students, all of the indigenous peoples we encounter. And we were just at an international conference of indigenous peoples in Norway, and they're all dealing with trauma at various, various levels. I mean, it's personal. I mean, the thing about trauma is it's very easily

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

personalized in a way that it's somehow a personal deficiency or something wrong with me or something like that. And when we talk about the Doctrine of Discovery, there's something liberating about the fact that [inaudible 00:32:50] it's not your fault that you have these struggles in your life. That these are not things... This is not a worldview that you created or is somehow you create your own personal hell.

[\(00:33:12\)](#):

But rather it's something that has been indoctrinated into all of us in various ways. I mean, what's striking to me is that in our department, in our religion department, many of our grad students are trying to recover from their religious upbringing. And somehow thinking about religion and putting it in a kind of historical context, of this violent way of thinking, helps them grapple with their own trauma. So anyway, we find that people can come together around the Doctrine of Discovery. It's appropriate for settler colonial people to be talking about as well as indigenous people. So there's a meeting of the minds around these issues of the Doctrine of Discovery. And it's just becoming more and more prevalent as we continue these podcasts. But Nadia, you wanted to jump in?

Nadia Arellano Tapia [\(00:34:24\)](#):

Yeah, thank you. Well, first thank you for what you're saying. And I like this image that you were saying, Sandy, about the relationship. We have a relationship with this... Well, we think we have a relationship with this institution, but it's a very conditional, it's a very violent relationship. There's a very big distance between who we are and how those institutions can embrace it. And there is a very violent relationship with the institutions. But at the same time, we have deep, deep relationships with the people that are a part of those institutions. And when we talk to survivors of spiritual violence, the people that hurt them are not an institution, are their families, are pastors that were like family to them. It's this very complex understanding of how we always talk about spiritual violence and how this is so systemic and structural. And it's a system that it's everywhere and it's centuries old and it's also intimate.

[\(00:36:03\)](#):

It's the most intimate thing. It is both. It is the structure, the system that's bigger than our countries, and it's bigger than the institutions. And it's also in our own bodies. It inhabits the most intimate thoughts in one's own identity. So how do we navigate those complexities? And the other thing that I was going to say, so that we can hop on to the topic of our recent programming in Quito, Ecuador, in North Carolina, and also we were working in Bogota, Colombia. We had been working in Bogota, Colombia and a lot of places in Latin America. When we were in Quito, we did workshops with pastors, we did workshops with sex workers and we did workshops with midwives from Cotacachi, a union of 41 communities in Ecuador, indigenous communities. And specifically the sex workers and the midwives, indigenous midwives, they were Catholic. They were very, very devout Catholics.

[\(00:37:29\)](#):

And for us that are in Latin America, that's no surprise if you've ever talked to an indigenous person in Latin America. Catholic faith, it's so, so, so important for their community life, for their own sense of selves. And those people were the ones that were like, "Don't mess with God. But also what you're saying makes a lot of sense because I have this story of this church that did this to me, and I would like to talk more about those experiences." But in any of the workshops that we do, the same thing happens. We've been doing a lot of work with Latinx people in the US South specifically. We recently did work with El Centro Hispano in North Carolina, which is an organization that has a lot of history of working with Latin American people in the United States, that recently migrated to the US.

[\(00:38:38\)](#):

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

And in those places, people have deep-rooted faith, LGBTQ people that have been told God doesn't love them, they will tell you how hard they love God and how they don't like us being all weird about the Bible because it feels wrong. And when we start talking about spiritual violence in this perspective, when we give it a language, when we understand that we cannot... There is no Christianity in this continent that is not infused by blood and power. Those are facts that people understand as facts, and that is a good way to start. And once we start framing that as a first step to talk about these things, understanding that the complexity and contradictions are there. People are super receptive and they start bringing deep hurt and stories that they never thought they could talk out loud. They never thought they could question even. So yeah, all of this to say is super complex. We are still battling that contradiction every day in our work and in our own lives.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:40:03](#)):

That's very helpful. Yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:40:05](#)):

Well, at Onondaga, of course, no indigenous community could practice their ceremonies, right? And you talk about we're taught that church and state is divided, but indeed it's not. You cannot talk about colonialism without talking about Christianity. And Christianity came in first and changed the whole dynamic, did not allow indigenous people to meet privately. They're communal people. At Onondaga, they have a rigorous ceremonial schedule. Every single month they gather for funerals, for weddings, for celebratory... Anything down there. And it's not in a church.

([00:40:52](#)):

But when the church was prevalent down there, they were not permitted to meet at all. They could only meet in the church. They had to be obedient to the pastor of the church. They were fed the most food at church. So of course, everyone would gather to the church and they survive the onslaught of colonization and the church by being together, of course, their heart is in that. The heart is with each other. And it's really hard to say, it's not the church that brought you together, you're indigenous. It's these long ancient traditions that existed thousands and thousands of years, before the church came and reoriented you to something outside of this earth.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:41:41](#)):

I really appreciate that, Nadia, because the US Catholic bishops, and I don't know if you're aware of this or this might be fair to bring this up. But just last week, the US Catholic bishops who we didn't think were paying attention to indigenous issues at all, came out with an apology for their role in Native American boarding schools. And there's a long document, it's about 50 pages long. I'm working through it. But essentially it is a document that addresses indigenous Catholic people. Now, when we were in the Vatican, we were trying to get them... And the harms that the church had caused to indigenous, Native American... I'm talking about within the United States. Indigenous or Native American people who converted to Catholicism and then were subjected to boarding schools. So it's kind of a particular group that they're speaking to. When we were in the Vatican last year, we were advocating for the Vatican to speak to non-Christian indigenous peoples as well.

([00:43:11](#)):

But I appreciate what you're saying, and I'm wondering the applicability of this statement that came out last week to Latin America, because they are speaking to their own community in some way. The bishops are trying to regather or... Are they trying to reform the church? I mean, what is going on here, I

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

guess is my question? Are they trying to make amends for the past violence to their own people? Are they trying to reform the church? Is it risk management to basically [inaudible 00:43:57]... Because the church is bleeding out money in sexual abuse cases, in all kinds of ways, right? So I mean, I am aware this just came out and it's probably not something you've looked at yet. But I mean the general issue of the church trying to... The Catholic Church, trying to address these past wrongs seems to be fashionable in the way over the last year or so. I don't know if anyone wants to address that.

Karina Vargas Espinoza ([00:44:37](#)):

I'm sorry. I would like to give credit to that, to the people. I mean, put impression on the church because normally what I see with this huge institutions is that you see the fights of people for years and years trying to make them acknowledge what they did. This pressure comes in a huge way, and it's good to see this possibility of questioning religion in... For example, when we work with Christianized indigenous people, first thing they feel free to do in our gatherings is to speak up about what has happened with religious leaderships in their places. And normally we have a lot of stories of abuse, sexual abuse, and a lot of hidden stories that cannot be named.

[\(00:45:43\)](#):

So I think something we at Soulforce can do is to open these spaces where it is okay that you question the authority of religion. It is okay to say, "This is not okay, this is not [inaudible 00:45:58]," or "Okay, well, you say the Bible says that. We are theologians. Show me where in the Bible you can support this because we're not playing games here. We care about the Bible. And this is why we studied the Bible in a serious way. So if you come here and just tell me this, show me where in the Bible you're saying this is support."

[\(00:46:21\)](#):

And I think this possibility of giving people a chance to question something that has been sacred for so many centuries, shifts something in people and that can lead you to question other things, other authorities. And this is the place where we understand spirituality is the right of people. People can practice whatever they want and explore their traditions. The problem we have is that the colonization established one way to do it, one institution [inaudible 00:46:58], or certain form of leadership that is the only one authorized to be the religious authority in the world. So I think we are dangerous, and somehow our strategy is sabotaging because we are inviting people to question that. And besides that, to whisper in their ears, "What if the most sacred spirit in the world wishes this for you? That you question all this violence that came in the form of a sacred being that is basically manipulating you for so many years."

[\(00:47:38\)](#):

And I think that's freaking threatening for any institution, any [inaudible 00:47:44] institution. Because then you're making people believe or you're giving them a chance to imagine the possibility of a spirituality that will not punish them for critically think. For reading, for looking for other sources, for practicing other traditions that are not Christianity for example, or to practice a Christianity like the one we are promoting in our events, which is a church called Queerly Beloved. How about if you are a queer person and if you are a drag and you are the main presentation during the religious service we have, that totally makes the minds of people blown. Like how is possible that we have a church where we have drag queens as part of the holy presentation and the way we celebrate our bodies and our diversity. So that's something I think is very powerful. And at the same time, something that some people or some huge institutions might fear about us.

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

Philip P. Arnold ([00:48:55](#)):

Wow. Yeah. [inaudible 00:48:59] then.

Alba Onofrio ([00:49:01](#)):

And I think there's something really important about just naming. I want to just re-emphasize what both Karina and Nadia said. What our main strategy is in the world and all the things that we do, whether it's in Eastern Africa, Latin America, the US South. With indigenous folks, with sex workers, with groups of pastors, is we give a name to the violence that happens not only to our bodies, because many of us know the history of colonization. Many of us know that that was a violent moment, but we leave it in the past as that part of the past thing that happened. But when we talk about spiritual violence and what happens in the wounds that we may not be able to see 500 years later, or the wounds that we may not... Like maybe our families didn't actually physically hit us, but calling us abomination or telling us that we're outside the will of God. Or for folks who practice other forms of spirituality, [inaudible 00:50:00] witchcraft, "We were doing witchcraft," in a negative way. Because some people will use that in a positive way now as a reclamation.

([00:50:06](#)):

So like those things are also painful. The idea that words never hurt me is a lie. We know that words are very important, especially when they have the full force of the state and the military behind them to enforce those kinds of laws, those kinds of rules. So it's not just that the church didn't allow people to gather, or that the church didn't allow folks to speak their indigenous languages or do their practices. It was that they had the full power of the military behind those rules and threats.

([00:50:39](#)):

So it's not just that the preacher said, it's that we know that behind that is an entire system of power and violence. So when we talk about the harms, that is actually violence, that happens to our spirits where we can't see, what Nadia was talking about, our most intimate thoughts, where we think it's this punishment from God because [inaudible 00:51:00]. That is a violence that is equal and often even more pervasive and long-lasting than a physical bruise or cut or even gunshot wound because we start telling ourselves those same narratives. We repeat the colonizer's messages.

([00:51:17](#)):

So that's how I still see colonization showing up now generations later, even if we fix everything, which is not really possible, we still have the full weight of generations who have been told these things about our peoples. And about our practices and about our ways and about our knowings and about our bodies that we have to carry and work on burying and composting and recreating what this version post colonization looks like. Because we can't go back to before those times. I think that's part of our strategy is just naming, "This is what spiritual violence is." When the inherent human dignity that you have, as immutable as part of [inaudible 00:52:00] as a human being, and our indigenous colleagues and friends and community members would say, for the entire natural world. That the innate given immutable rights to self-determination, to dignity, to peace, to love, to protection, to just life, period. Whenever that is attacked in the name of God or in the name of creator or the name of what the Bible says, that is spiritual violence.

([00:52:29](#)):

And it happens at every level of society. From the biggest institutions, from the biggest government, to what your family member said about your spiritual practices, your gender, your sexuality, your marriage choices, your children, whatever those things are, that is a violence that enters our bodies. And because

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

it has the full weight of the hegemonic religion and the full weight of entire nations and transnational powers, then that is a violence that reaches us to our core that we have to work on. And we have to hear.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:53:16](#)):

Excuse me, all hell break loose. Give it a sec.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:53:21](#)):

[Inaudible 00:53:22].

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:53:33](#)):

Hey, Phil, your coughing muted the mic, and Nadia wants to jump in.

Nadia Arellano Tapia ([00:53:43](#)):

You're on mute, Phil and Sandy. I don't know [inaudible 00:53:46]-

Alba Onofrio ([00:53:46](#)):

I think Nadia can just jump in.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:53:47](#)):

Yeah, go for it, Nadia.

Nadia Arellano Tapia ([00:53:50](#)):

I just wanted to say that I think what you brought up Phil, about the apologies and how the institutions are reacting to our organizing and people's questioning is super important. And we always have to be aware of how they're presenting it, the language they're using. And as you said, who are they trying to convince? Who are they targeting? Who are they talking to? I do believe that one of the most important characteristics of White Christian supremacy and why it has existed for so much, in so many different parts of the structures of society is because of its ability to adapt and mutate and change and transform.

([00:55:04](#)):

And because of that, marginalized communities everywhere have learned to be experts in suspicion and experts in this act of questioning. Like, "You are saying the right things, but you're saying it to these people in this specific time, and I don't believe you," right? Or "You're doing this other thing while you are apologizing, so I don't believe you." So I think that is on itself a spiritual act of reclamation and survival and resilience. And it is also what has kept us alive, queer people, people of color, indigenous communities. It's also a problem for us as social sciences or people that do research on religion to see how much that [inaudible 00:56:02]. For example, in Latin America, a lot of the liberatory... A lot of organizations that are doing what many would consider decolonizing work, have roots in Christianity, Catholic institutions that have been shifting.

([00:56:24](#)):

And there are also dynamics on Catholic and then evangelical things that come from the United States. I'm talking about Latin American in particular and how that shifts the power dynamics, and which powers are talking to the people and how people interact with those approaches, faith approaches. And it's ever-changing, it is something that those of us who study religion need to grapple with. But as Alba

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

was saying, we will keep naming the things, we will keep creating alliances with researchers and survivors and organizations and activists and confront it. We will keep being suspicious. We will keep creating our own faith spiritual practices that feel safe and that feel liberatory. Yeah, I think.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:57:36](#)):

So maybe you could spend a few minutes on what you're doing now, what you've done recently, and then what you're planning to do in the future that is Soulforce or individually or whatever. Just so our listeners know where Soulforce is and where you're headed?

Alba Onofrio ([00:57:56](#)):

Maybe I'll start just by talking a little bit about our spiritual resource library, if that's okay. We have a free downloadable on our website, soulforce.org. We have an entire theological resource library that really tackle particularly gender and sexuality issues from within a Christian context. So we have resources that show up in up to seven languages because we work in Eastern Africa and Southern Africa as well. And our partners there have asked to translate and have translated with their local translators, these resources that tackle some of the most ongoing questions. Like what is the truth about Sodom and Gomorrah? Is there gender diversity in the Bible?

([00:58:47](#)):

The truth or what you need to know about the Bible in the Spanish language. The title sounds like, "What they still haven't told you about the Bible," which just basically gives some more context for understanding. That some of the things that have been lifted up as untouchable or sacred also have an entire history of where powerful men were sitting in rooms, making decisions about which books get put where. What translators' decisions are around how they gender things like the Holy Spirit or how they interpret different words from across many languages across many generations.

([00:59:22](#)):

So I would highly recommend for folks who are interested in that kind of work of understanding, especially if you're a Christian, to understand where our faith comes from. So that you recognize what pieces of that are ours and what pieces of that have been imposed in some of the most intense, deep and most spiritually maturing work that we can do with people of faith. And for those folks who are fighting White Christian supremacy, because of the struggles for human rights and for human dignity across many different sectors. We find that the resource library is useful to understand what you're having conversations about with your Christian colleagues or your Christian opponents as often as the case unfortunately. Karina and I and another theologian from Colombia wrote a very important book for us, 150 page book, which is also available for free download on the internet, which touches a little bit on the Doctrine of Discovery.

([01:00:18](#)):

Actually, it's currently only in Spanish, but it introduces five concepts. And those five concepts are Christian supremacy, spiritual violence, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism and spiritual trauma. And for each one of those, we go through a little bit about what the definition is, some history around it, a real life true story of somebody who has experienced that as an example to see how the concepts work. And then we have a section where we talk about how that moves in our body. And our third person, Dr [inaudible 01:00:59] she worked on body exercises of how we move that through our bodies as we're processing [inaudible 01:01:06] memories and these concepts and these stories as they come up. So that is part of that book with sections about what are the paths to healing, how do we start that. And Karina has sections in each chapter about what are some of the first steps to move from that kind of

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

colonized religion and harmful experiences and how it began the process of healing, which is lifelong processes, as you said, Sandy.

[\(01:01:31\)](#):

And right now we're working on that same book in English and adapting it for a US audience because of course the colonizers were a little bit different. The religion and its expression was a little bit different. And we're kind of moving that through. Will still be from a Latin American perspective, but we really want our English audiences, and particularly all of us who come from Latin America and have migrated north. To be able to find more peace and find ourselves in this kind of clash of different kinds of cultures, understand a little bit more about where we come from, and what colonization and religion looks like [inaudible 01:02:07] from that perspective.

[\(01:02:08\)](#):

So that should be forthcoming, also sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation. So we were excited about that. And then we have a very big gathering happening in October in Mexico City, where we're bringing together Latin American feminist and queer theologians. Both from Latin America and from the diaspora here in the United States. To have conversations about weaponized religion, spiritual violence, particularly as it applies to LGBT folks and women and other marginalized communities. And we're excited about what's going to happen coming out of that.

Philip P. Arnold [\(01:02:46\)](#):

So sidebar, if you have a kind of shortish version of the book that's coming out, we'd like to... We'll announce it on our list certainly. And then also, if you have an announcement for the conference in Mexico City, we'll certainly spread that around as well. I mean, I've got... A few students of mine would be very interested in that.

Alba Onofrio [\(01:03:12\)](#):

It's a really special experience and we are encouraging students to come join. Some of the biggest names in feminist theological work in Latin America will be joining us. [inaudible 01:03:27], who does Afro Colombian biblical study in Colombia will be there with us, several people from Mexico and more that we haven't confirmed yet. So it's a very unique opportunity for students in particular where we're mostly keeping it for folks who are part of that community already and students. So we have done almost 70 episodes of Teología Sin Vergüenza, this podcast in Spanish on queer and feminist theology.

[\(01:03:56\)](#):

So those are the folks that will be the primary people coming to the event. But we're also opening space for students because we think it's really, really important for them to kind of see. Because of the Latin language and colonizer language, a lot of us who are Latinx in the US, we never get to see what is happening in the theological sphere, both indigenous theology, Afro-descendant theology, and queer and feminist theology in Latin America. Because those things are published in Spanish and we often don't have access to that language anymore. Even if it's a colonized language, we still don't have access to that because we've assimilated into US culture where English was the language our families took up for survival purposes.

[\(01:04:42\)](#):

So we will be very excited to host students who are willing to come and it will be in Spanish. So folks will need to have some access to Spanish. But it feels like a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. And I've

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

been doing this for 10 years, and I am just beside myself with pleasure because as far as we know, this hasn't happened before.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:05:01](#)):

Wow.

Sandy Bigtree ([01:05:03](#)):

I guess I'd like to mention you were talking about energies, these negative energies through your body and some of this work you've been doing. And it just brought to mind that we're talking about spirit and the very food... We understand we're comprised of the earth, and spirituality is a material reality, and the food that you ingest does a lot of the work of removing this negative energy through your body. And it's this re-engagement that is not so much going back to preexistence, but it's re-engaging with the natural world as well and connecting to the regeneration that creates our life and all life on the planet. So just something to think about.

([01:06:00](#)):

That's why we have ceremonies and dances for certain vegetables or animals or plants, right?

Philip P. Arnold ([01:06:07](#)):

Strawberries.

Sandy Bigtree ([01:06:08](#)):

Because it's a very real thing. I mean, it's all medicine, all the foods that we ingest and the air [inaudible 01:06:15]. That's all I wanted to add.

Nadia Arellano Tapia ([01:06:19](#)):

Just a quick fun fact, Angel Mendez, which is a queer Mexican theologian. He does a lot of work around queer theology, body, pleasure, and his other big area of study is food and desire, of course. And he's a dancer, he's a theologian and a dancer. So I was just highlighting how it is so connected and queer theology... Queer feminist theologies have a big history of understanding approaching the body in its material and spiritual realities and understanding pleasure. There's sort of [inaudible 01:07:10] said about how these White Christian supremacy, weaponization of religion have targeted pleasure and bodies and how we look, how we act, how we move. And yeah, just a quick thing about how the food we eat, the land we walk on, all of those things are connected through our bodies and have been domesticated by power.

([01:07:43](#)):

So it is connected. Fruits... [foreign language 01:07:46] our Latin American theology... Queer and feminist theology program. Our logo are fruits, [inaudible 01:07:58]... Fruits from Latin America specifically from different parts. So it is connected just a little [inaudible 01:08:11].

Sandy Bigtree ([01:08:11](#)):

I think the colonizer understood a lot of that too, because they ruined our fields, our indigenous crops, and replaced the basic corn with their white flour. Because they knew it would change our ceremonies and our way of connecting with the earth that was impacted all over South America and North America. And they already knew how this effectively made people sick and disrupted culture at its core.

S05E03: Reclaiming Faith: Dismantling White Christian Supremacy and Healing Through Indigenous Spirituality with Soulforce

Alba Onofrio ([01:08:43](#)):

Which is part of why some of the work that we do that gives people... Feels like it gives people permission, which of course, we don't need permission to reach back into our own ways. But because we come from colonized mindsets that have told us that there are dire consequences from moving outside of the rigid confines that tells us historically that we are in danger if we step outside of what we've been told we're allowed to do.

([01:09:09](#)):

Even things like amaranth, having and eating amaranth and recognizing that this was a sacred plant that our people ate. That is a super food, and it is a choice between whether or not we want to choose to eat amaranths as opposed to other grains. So making some of those choices that for some of us feels unfamiliar is part of the ways that we sabotage Christian supremacy. Because sometimes people feel like you have to do this whole re-envisioning of yourself and your world. But there are these small acts of disobedience and these small acts of [foreign language 01:09:47] or rebellion that we do in our daily lives that help reorient ourselves to what it feels like to be in our full bodies. And to try to heal and calm some of those ancient narratives that tell us that we are in danger if we don't obey.

Sandy Bigtree ([01:10:07](#)):

Thank you for that.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:10:09](#)):

Yeah, thank you. I think that's a good place to [inaudible 01:10:11]. We could go on for a very long time, but we're trying the patience of our listeners, so thank you, Karina, Nadia, and Alba for an excellent conversation.