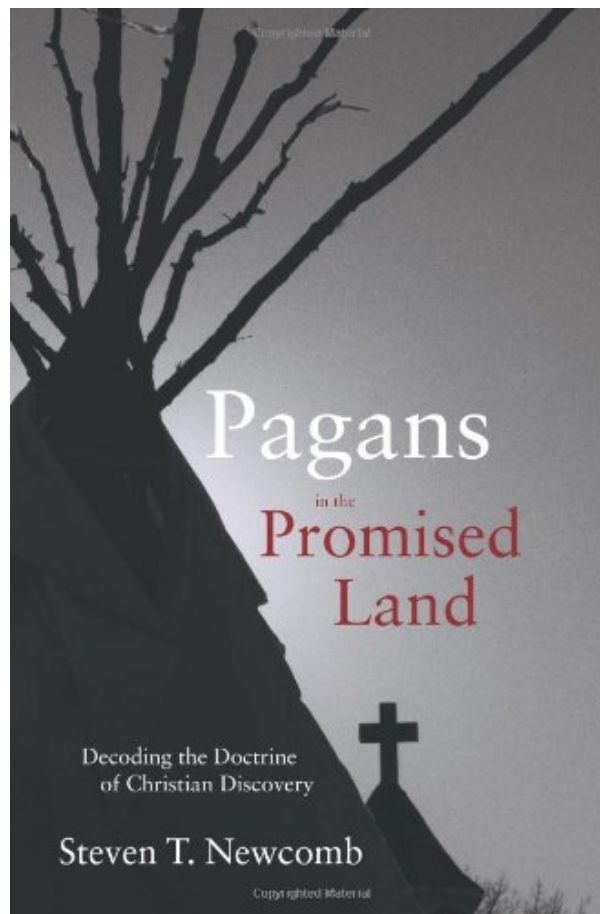
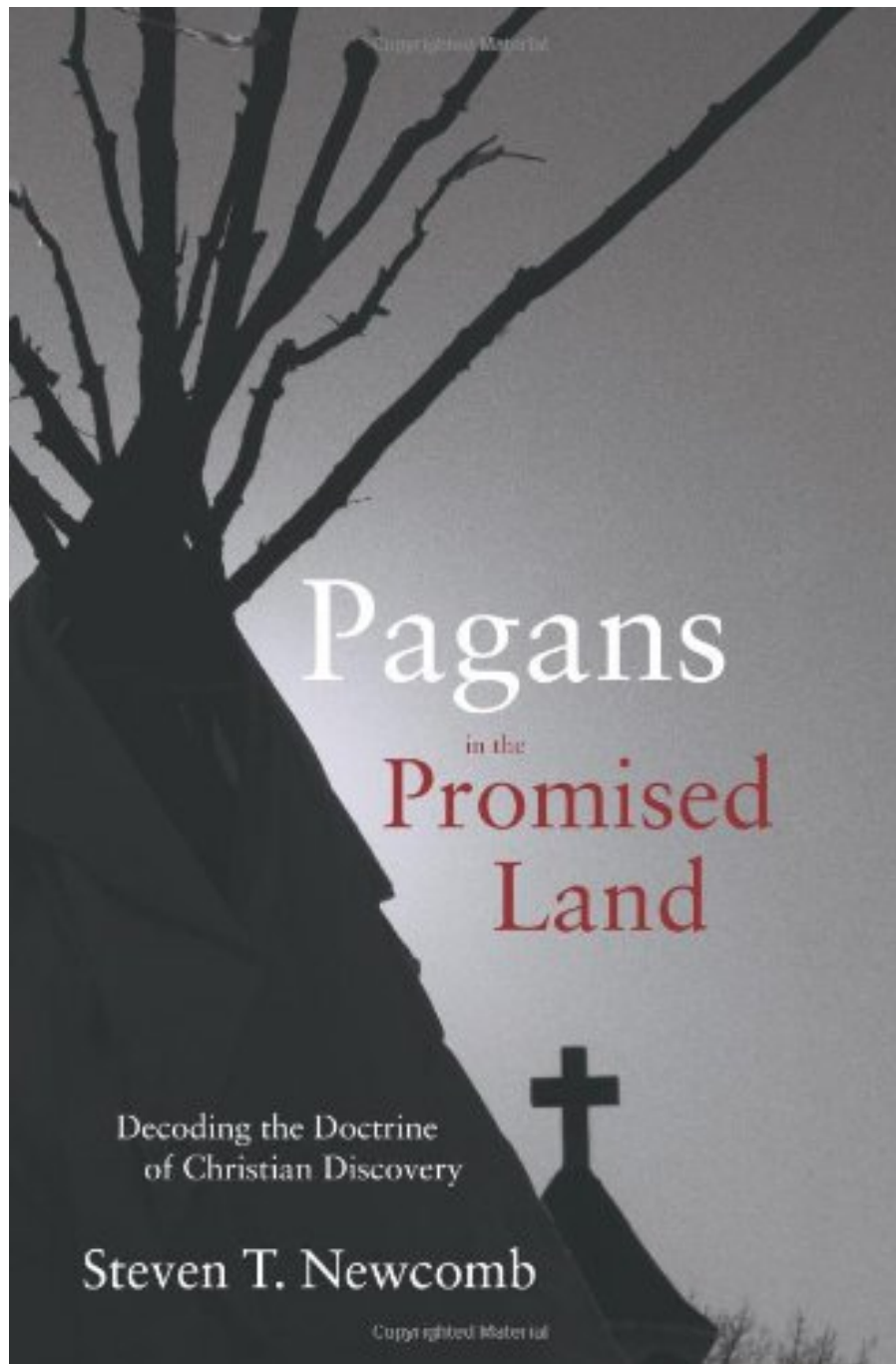


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DECODING THE DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN  
DISCOVERY BY STEVEN NEWCOMB**



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Thought Provoking

By Sterling West

A commentary by a United Methodist Pastor on the book "Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery" by Steven T. Newcomb (2008; Fulcrum Press. ISBN 978-1-55591-642-8).

A little background for those of you who are unfamiliar with "decolonization". Anthropologically speaking, decolonization refers to the effort to systematically remove all forms of the invasive and pernicious effects of colonization upon indigenous peoples. Further, decolonization includes developing ones ability to understand and discuss non-European cultures from an unbiased and non-Western perspective. In other words, decolonization finally offers "voice" to the First Nations of the Americas. Native American nations have experienced 500 years of the destructive affects of Euro-American colonization upon their bodies, minds, spirits, souls and psyches. Decolonization thinking attempts to un-do or at least seriously address this destruction. There is a growing body of research and writings which contribute to such decolonization thinking, including "Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery".

For those unfamiliar with it, decolonization literature can seem frightening or "radical" because it tells history's tales and approaches the truth of existence from completely different perspectives than those with which the mainstream is familiar. In the case of the North American continent, the tales are told (and assumes that the world works) from an indigenous worldview, NOT a Euro-American one. Euro-American critics of decolonization bandy about terms like "revisionist history". The truth is: when anyone is confronted by a body of knowledge radically different than what they've always heard/been taught/accepted "fright-flight" pretty much takes over. Humans fear and condemn what we do not know and recognize. Each of us have deep-seated views and ideas about how the world works, what our place is in it. We hearse and rehearse our stories and know them by heart. When something or someone comes along that attempts to change or add too our story, our experience, what works for us, we (naturally) become uncomfortable (in the old vernacular: it can "pull the rug out from beneath us"). The process of decolonization can have that affect. Books like "Pagans in the Promised Land" are meant to shake up the readers' status quo and shove readers outside their comfort zone.

What makes this book unique however, is it's specific focus on the realm of "law": United States law as applied to the indigenous peoples of North America. It takes the reader back to the origins (the "whys") of the US governments' approach to "Indian law". Particularly, it brings to light the U.S. American "Christian" assumption/belief/philosophical construct which asserts that USAmerican Christians are the successor/inheritors of the "chosen people" status bestowed upon the Hebrew people by Yahweh as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament, and that because the indigenous nations inhabiting the Americas were not Christian but "heathen" the "Christian's" had divine right to the land.

The author asserts that the central premise of United States Indian law and policy - that the United States has plenary (virtually absolute) authority over Indian nations on the basis of discovery of the North American continent by Christian people. Also called the "right of Christian discovery", this praxis is derived from the Old Testament theology in which Jehovah declares the favored and chosen status of the Hebrew people and by virtue of this chosen status delivers to them a promised land whose inhabitants they are to completely obliterate and whose fruits they are to take as their own. Euro-American Christians coming to North America during the so-called "Age of Discovery" see themselves (as they have throughout their history) as the new "chosen people" with a divine mandate to take over this new "promised land", exploiting its resources (per the Genesis command to subdue the earth) while disposing of the heathens dwelling therein.

Using cognitive theory (particularly "idealized cognitive models" or ICMs) as a tool for decolonization thinking, the author takes readers through a detailed examination of the 1823 Supreme Court ruling "Johnson [& Graham's Lessee] v. M'Intosh" - which the author asserts is "the cornerstone" of the use of "the dominating mentality of Christendom against Indian nations and peoples in U.S. law". Successive chapters aptly titled and smoothly progressing from one premise to the next (The Conqueror Model, Colonizing the Promised Land, the Chosen People-Promised Land Model, the Dominating Mentality of Christendom, Converting Christian Discovery into Heathen Conquest, the Mental Process of Negation, and Christian Nations Theory: Hidden in Plain Sight) slowly build the authors compelling case.

Now that you know what "Pagans in the Promised Land" is about (it's core idea, if you will) let me tell you what it ISN'T about. First, it isn't about your comfort level as a reader; you will be challenged about some basic assumptions - that is, if you LET yourself be challenged. Second, this book isn't a chronological history of the "age of discovery". It's a "there is no spoon" journey of revelation, and a "turn-history-upside-down-and-shake-and-see-what-falls-out-of-its-pockets" primer. Third, "Pagans in the Promised Land" isn't a history book or an anthropological treatise. It's really more of a psychology/sociology study. Although it's application is in the field of law, you do not need a legal degree to understand the text. And fourth, regardless of what you may think by its title, this book also isn't a primer for Christians on the most effective means of evangelizing indigenous populations. It's a wake-up call - an indictment of a "Christianity" whose rigid legalisms and centrism not only allow for but even appear to leave room for the enjoyment of the oppression of certain groups of human beings. This is the kind of "Christianity" the author of "Pagans in the Promised Land" is referring to throughout the book - the kind of Christianity with which the vast majority of First Nations people have been exposed to, inundated by, and destroyed by in the 500 years since first contact with "Christian" European nations. Perhaps if the "Christians" who came to a "new world" had been more devoted to following the teachings and moral example of Christ than in establishing themselves as the new "chosen people" in a new "promised land" by subjugating the "heathens" they found there, history would be very very different.

And now for a few parting thoughts about this book, on a personal level. I read "Pagans in the Promised Land" because I wanted to know more about the whole "doctrine of discovery"/"manifest destiny" thing - especially as it plays out in the field of law. I'm no slouch when it comes to historical study (it would be difficult to "pull the wool over my eyes"). But this book left me shaking my head and blinking to get the wool out as I realized that somewhere along the line an awful lot of "Christians" have been lulled into an alarming sense of "rightness by divine right"...and it plays out on every stage of life: social, mental, theological, etc. This in turn has given me as a United Methodist pastor, a profound distaste for ever using the argument "God told me to \_\_\_\_", and a newfound respect for the deep humility that MUST be central to a pastor's life.

I found the core arguments of "Pagans in the Promised Land" extremely compelling. This is not a lengthy book (approximately 150 pages of text and 40 pages of footnotes and bibliographies - a solid thesis), but I



found it necessary to put it down periodically in order to reflect on what I'd read.

Who should read this book? Students of history, culture and race relations; folks concerned with social justice issues; those with an interest in legal theory. And ultimately, if it were up to me, I'd like every "Christian" to read it - really read it and engage with it and with others over it. It would provoke some excellent discussion in seminaries and churches, I think. If after considering these comments you decide to read this book, please do so with an open mind. Thank you.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

If you are into the truth...

By George Campana

I'd recommend this book to Native and Non Native alike. Met Steve about a year and a half ago, heard him speak about the contents of the book. The man is brilliant and the book is a reflection of many years of research and dedication. Definitely a must read. If you want to catch a glimpse of him, you can find Steve Newcombe on Youtube, in a 27-28 minute video about this topic. Enjoy!

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Pagans in the Promised Land is an eye-opener

By Mary Gilbert

Reading Pagans in the Promised Land has re-interpreted for me our history in North America. I am not Native American, but have become involved in their wisdom and truth after spending time with Indigenous Peoples, including Native Americans, at the UN. Around the world the Indigenous Peoples are communicating with each other and standing up to speak with one voice about their common beliefs and interests. Great things are going on.

Right now there is an important convergence of interests among Indigenous Nations and others who love the living Earth and want to work toward restoring the planet's health. Pagans in the Promised Land has provided me with the context I need to sustain my activism. I love the lawyer-ly attention to detail and to getting things straight. There is truth to the analysis of metaphor in our shared history. I am grateful for this book and will share what I have learned as well as recommending it to others.

Mary Gilbert

Quaker Earthcare Ministry

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