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Book Review: *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* By Steven T. Newcomb

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Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. By Steven T. Newcomb. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008. xviii + 186 pp. Notes, references, index. \$19.95 paper.

In 1793, the Indians of the Northwest Territory declared themselves “free to make any bargain or cession of lands, whenever & to whomsoever we please.” Three decades later, however, the United States Supreme Court held in *Johnson v. M’Intosh* that the original inhabitants of America “are to be considered merely as occupants, to be protected, indeed, while in peace, in the possession of their lands, but to be deemed incapable of transferring the absolute title to others.” Chief Justice John Marshall concluded that the rights of Indians “to complete sovereignty, as independent nations, were necessarily diminished . . . by the original fundamental principle, that discovery gave exclusive title to those who made it.” This “doctrine of discovery” has never been repudiated by the United States and remains a basic principle of federal Indian law.

In *Pagans in the Promised Land*, Steven Newcomb endeavors “to decode the hidden biblical, or, more specifically, Old Testament, background of the *Johnson* ruling.” He argues that Indian law scholars fail to appreciate the religious dimensions of Marshall’s decision, and contends that “it is accurate to refer to the main conception that runs through the *Johnson* ruling as Christian discovery rather than simply discovery or European discovery.” Newcomb, who is Shawnee/Lenape, also breaks new ground by making use of “the tools and methods of cognitive theory” in order to expose—and challenge—the “negative, oppressive, and dominating concepts that have been mentally and, from an indigenous perspective, illegitimately imposed on our existence.”

The book begins with a primer on cognitive theory, a “new way of thinking about thinking” that emphasizes the use of conceptual metaphors, image-schemas, radial categories, and idealized cognitive models (ICMs). Although the terminology of cognitive science is somewhat daunting, Newcomb explains how the Christian nations of Europe idealized (and rationalized) the colonization of the New World. Separate chapters explain the “mental process of negation” and describe the “conqueror” and “chosen people–promised land” cognitive models. While other scholars have explored the religious underpinnings of the doctrine of discovery, Newcomb offers new insights by consciously connecting “the biblical basis of the claimed right of Christian discovery and dominion” with the “*mentality* of empire and domination.”

Newcomb asserts that *Johnson v. M’Intosh* is “quite diabolical” because the decision uses “Christian religion and Christian nationalism, combined with the cognitive powers of imagination and assumption, to construct a subjugating reality for American Indians.” One can argue, however, that the characterization of Marshall’s opinion as “diabolical” is not only ironic (given the word’s association with the devil) but unfair. Given the assumptions that underlie the “conqueror” and “chosen people” models, the book does not explain why Marshall held that discovery “diminished”—rather than eliminated—the Native rights of property and self-government.

By its use of cognitive theory, *Pagans in the Promised Land* presents a new perspective on the doctrine of discovery. Newcomb forcefully argues that an essential part of the decolonizing process “must occur in the mind.” His book sets forth a fresh way to think about, and decode, federal Indian law. **Blake A. Watson**, *School of Law, University of Dayton*.