

# SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION EIGHT STUDY GUIDE



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### SESSION 8: DIVISIONS IN PRESENT-DAY WHITE AMERICA

To watch beforehand or in the session

- *America Inside Out with Katie Couric*, Episode: “White Anxiety” (48 min.)

To read beforehand

- Article: “What So Many People Don’t Get About the U.S. Working Class” by Joan Williams
- Selections from book: *Beyond the Messy Truth* by Van Jones (13 assorted pages from the hardback edition)
- Core book: *Jesus and the Disinherited* – Chapter 3
- Core book: *Waking Up White* – first 3 pages of Chapter 35

Session themes and overview from the author

As the title indicates, this session is designed to put attention directly on some of the divisions currently plaguing white America – specifically, economic issues and political divides. Hopefully, you have some of that diversity in your circle, but even if not, the film and readings will bring in a range of voices and views. The hope is for your discussions to zero in on how different political/policy opinions on racially charged issues (like immigration and programs that are perceived as “black entitlement programs”) are related to one’s economic status and life circumstances.

If we have a hard time talking about race and racism in this country, we seem to have an even harder time talking about class. Many of the films and readings thus far in the series have brought attention to the harmful impact (often unintended, or willfully oblivious) of the everyday economic self-interest of non-elites, as well as the harm caused by more extreme greed. Perhaps your dialogue group has already been talking explicitly about class/economic issues; in any case, this session is designed to tackle it very directly. You will be aided in that process by Katie Couric’s special on white anxiety and by Joan Williams’ essay, which became the basis for her book, which I highly recommend: *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*.

How might people’s socioeconomic status be impacting their views on race and racism? Williams drives home the fundamental reality that, the more economically secure one is, the more one has the luxury to care about the challenges faced by marginalized groups, such as low-income communities of color. If you are white and economically insecure, the more likely you are to feel threatened by what are perceived as and sometimes are competing groups, such as immigrants, or to get hooked by the stereotype of the “undeserving low-income black person using government programs and thus your hard-earned tax dollars.” Or the idea of “makers” versus “takers” – a very loaded idea that is worth unpacking. There’s a lot of charge

around all of this, of course. I, for one, think of all the “taking” that European Americans have done. But given my status in what Williams calls the “professional managerial elite,” I’m clear that I have no lived understanding of the competition for resources between the working class/lower middle class and the poor. How might we increase sensitivity and compassion in all directions, and then create economic solutions that work for the good of all? And this “all” includes the many immigrant families who are seeking a better life and a shot at the American dream, as highlighted in the “White Anxiety” episode.

Please reflect on your own class history (how you were raised, what you are now, what your extended family is now). Note Joan Williams’ thought-provoking classifications: that there are the poor (30 percent of population); the middle class, which is largely comprised of the working class (50 percent of the population); and the professional managerial elite (the upper 20 percent, with higher median incomes and college degrees). Many in the elite want to claim middle class status, but what new perspectives and understandings open up via the framing that Williams proposes? Please consider the resentments of the working/middle class toward elites and toward the poor.

Then we can add regional or geographical tensions: coastal/non-coastal divides (the insulting concept of “flyover country”), rural/urban divides, Northern/Southern divides, and even more specifically the 11 nations/cultures that Colin Woodard proposes we notice (Session 2). When you layer on top of that the red state/blue state dynamics, and when terms like “deplorables” get uttered, the next thing you know, the mutual disregard keeps ratcheting up. You might consider talking here about the dynamics around white male backlash – many white men resent feeling like they’re always put in the “bad guy” role and are uneasy about shifting expectations, on top of which some are facing diminishing economic opportunity. Having a compassionate conversation on this topic can be a triggering conversation for some people of color; hence the possible value of white/white dialogue.

So much of this arguably comes back to tribalism, to that sense of “my people” and “those people.” We let aesthetic markers, even unconsciously, tell us who is “one of us” and who is “one of them.” I remember when Barack Obama was running the first time for president and an article talked about how so much comes down to cultures/tribes: “Are you an arugula person or a jet ski person?” Arugula: you vote for Obama, jet ski: you vote for McCain.

The readings from Van Jones are from the book chapters “An Open Letter to Liberals” and “An Open Letter to Conservatives.” He bravely calls on all of us to be more open to the values the other brings to the table, to seek the good and not always assign malevolence to those on the other side of the aisle. This is part of his vision of “bipartisanship from below,” given his skepticism that we will see “bipartisanship from above” – because, as we know, politicians and the media are expert at exploiting these tensions, conflicts, and divides. How might we, as citizens, take responsibility to ratchet down? Please spend some time in your dialogue circle looking at how you contribute to all of these dynamics because, in truth, it’s easy to point the finger at others, to cast the first stone. What does the way of love call forth in you?