



Caste Study Guide created by the Rev. Sarah L. Weedon

Caste Discussion Group – Session One – Part 1 and Part 2

Class Structure: Day of the week? Time?

Group Guidelines Reviewed

- Confidentiality: Do not repeat any of the conversations outside of the group. You may, of course, talk about your own experience and what you related to others.
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Introductions and What do you hope to get out of this discussion group?

What have you discovered this week? What did you learn that was new to you? What challenged you the most? What affirmed something you believed? What do you have to think about for a while? What was the most important part of the reading for today for you – what was your big take-away?

Session One: Part 1 (pp.3-35) and Part 2 (pp.39-96)

p. 4: “...it was common to hear in certain circles the disbelieving cries, “This is not America,” or “I don’t recognize my country,” or “This is not who we are.” Except that this was and is our country and this was and is who we are, whether we have known or recognized it or not.”

Question: Have you heard these or made similar statements of disbelief? Has anything changed how you see and/or feel about these statements?

p.17: “Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining in our case, a four-hundred-year-old social order.... A caste system is ...a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant cast whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.”

Question: What is the American Caste system, beyond Black/White? Why are some rankings easier to recognize and name than others?

p.18: What people look like, or rather the race that they have been assigned or perceived to belong to, is the visible cue to their caste. It is the historic flash card to the public of how they are to be treated, where they are expected to live, what kinds of positions they are expected to hold, whether they belong in this section of town or that seat in a boardroom, whether they should be expected to speak with authority on this or that subject, whether they will be administered pain relief in a hospital, whether their neighborhood is likely to adjoin a toxic waste site or to have contaminated water flowing from their taps, whether they are more or less likely to survive childbirth in the most advanced nation in the world, whether they may be shot by authorities with impunity.

Question: Have you experienced any of the above? Have you heard others’ stories about any of these experiences? What do you think being in a situation like one of these does to one’s outlook? To one’s soul?

p. 23: "Just as the studs and joists and beams that form the infrastructure of a building are not visible to those who live in it, so it is with caste. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity."

Question: How does invisibility give caste its power and longevity? How do we make the invisible visible, particularly when we are part of the system?

p.41: At first, religion, not race as we now know it, defined the status of people in the colonies. Christianity, as a proxy for Europeans, generally exempted European workers from lifetime enslavement.

Question: What role does Christianity play in establishing and deconstructing Caste hierarchy?

P. 43: "Slavery is commonly dismissed as a "sad, dark chapter" in the country's history.... [T]he county cannot become whole until it confronts what was not a chapter in its history, but the basis of its economic and social order." P.44: "[Slavery] was an American innovation, an American institution created by and for the benefit of the elites of the dominant caste and enforced by poorer members of the dominant caste who tied their lot to the caste system rather than to their consciences. It made lords of everyone in the dominant caste, as law and custom stated that 'submission is required of the Slave, not to the will of the Master only, but to the will of all other White Persons.'"

Question: What is our responsibility in addressing the above?

p.66: "We accept the illogic of race because these are the things we have been told. We see a person with skin that is whiter than that of most 'white' people, and we accept that they are not 'white' (and thus of a different category) because of the minutest difference in the folds of their eyelids and because perhaps their great-grandparents were born in Japan. We see a person whose skin is espresso, darker than most 'black' people in America, and accept that he is, in fact, not 'black' absolutely not 'black' (and is thus in a completely separate category), because his hair has a looser curl and perhaps he was born in Madagascar. We have to be taught this illogic."

Question: What were you taught re: differences in how people look?

p.69: "...the word *racism* may not stand as the only term or the most useful term to describe the phenomena and tensions we experience in our era. Rather than deploying *racism* as an either/or accusation against an individual, it may be more constructive to focus on derogatory actions that harm a less powerful group rather than on what is commonly seen as an easily deniable, impossible-to-measure attribute."

Question: What do you think of this approach? Would it work?

Caste Discussion Group – Session Two – Part 3

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What have you discovered this week? What did you learn that was new to you? What challenged you the most? What affirmed something you believed? What do you have to think about for a while? What was the most important part of the reading for today for you – what was your big take-away?

Session Two: Part 3 (pp. 99-164)

Pillar 1-Divine Will and the Law of Nature

p. 103: “‘The curse of Ham is now being executed upon his descendants,’ Thomas R.R. Cobb, a leading Confederate and defender of slavery, wrote, 240 years onto the era of human bondage in America. ‘The great Architect had framed them both physically and mentally to fill the sphere in which they were thrown. His wisdom and mercy combined in constituting them thus suited to the degraded position they were destined to occupy.’”

“In both countries [USA and India] the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past.”

Question: What other bible stories/quotes have been used to perpetuate the position of People of Color (POC) in the caste system?

Pillar 2-Heritability

p.105-6: “...the Assembly decreed in 1662... that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother. With this decree, the colonists were breaking from English legal precedent, the only precepts they had ever known, the ancient order that gave children the status of the father. This new law allowed enslavers to claim the children of black women, the vast majority of whom were enslaved, as their property for life and for ensuing generations. It invited them to impregnate the women themselves is so inclined, the richer it would make them.”

“Through the years, wealth and class may have insulated some people born to the subordinate caste in America but not protected them from humiliating attempts to put them in their place or to remind them of their caste position.”

Question: How have issues of heritability contributed to the position of POC in the caste system?

Pillar 3-Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating

p.108: “Endogamy enforces caste boundaries by forbidding marriage outside of one’s group and going so far as to prohibit sexual relations, or even the appearance of romantic interest, across cast lines. It builds a firewall between castes and becomes the primary means of keeping resources and affinity within each tier of the caste system... It makes it less likely that someone in the dominant caste will have a personal stake in the happiness, fulfillment, or well-being of anyone deemed beneath them or personally identify with them or their plight.”

Question: How does forbidding marriage or relationships outside of one’s group contribute to the estrangement of different groups of people?

Pillar 4-Purity versus Pollution

p. 119: “A white woman in Marion, Indiana seemed to be speaking for many in the dominant caste across America when she said that white people wouldn’t swim with colored people because they ‘didn’t want to be polluted by their blackness.’”

“While all the countries in the New World created hierarchies with Europeans on top, the United States alone created a system based on racial absolutism, the idea that a single drop of African blood, or varying percentages of Asian or Native American blood could taint the purity of someone who might otherwise be presumed to be European, a stain that would thus disqualify the person from admittance to the dominant caste.”

p. 129: “Their exclusion was used to justify their exclusion. Their degraded station justified their degradation. They were consigned to the lowliest, dirtiest jobs and thus were seen as lowly and dirty, and everyone in the caste system absorbed the message of their degradation. “

Question: How does genetics contribute to or mitigate the idea of purity of race? How do social mores contribute to or mitigate the idea of purity of race?

Pillar 5-Occupational Hierarchy: the Jatis and the Mudsill

p.131: “‘In all social systems, there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life,’ Sen. James Henry Hammond of South Carolina told his fellow senators. ‘That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have...’”

p. 135: “The historic association between menial labor and blackness served to further entrap black people in a circle of subservience in the American mind. They were punished for being in the condition that they were forced to endure. And the image of servitude shadowed them into freedom.”

p. 138: “The caste system took comfort in black caricature as it upheld the mythology of a simple, court jester race whose jolly natures shielded them from any true suffering. The images soothed the conscience and justified atrocities.”

Question: Where do you see this mindset still play out in today’s world?

Pillar 6-Dehumanization and Stigma

p.141: “Dehumanization is a standard component in the manufacture of an out-group against which to pit an in-group, and it is a monumental task. It is a war against truth, against what the eye can see and what the heart could feel if allowed to do so on its own.”

p.144: “Whatever was considered a natural human reaction was disallowed for the subordinate caste.... They were punished for the very responses a human being would be expected to have in the circumstances forced upon them. Whatever humanity shone through them was an affront to what the dominant caste kept telling itself. They were punished for being the humans that they couldn't help but be.”

p.149: “Dehumanization is a joint creation of biology, culture and the architecture of the human mind... The human story is filled with pain and tragedy, but among the horrors that we have perpetrated on one another, the persecution and attempted extermination of the Jewish people, the brutal enslavement of Africans, and the destruction of Native American civilizations in many respects are unparalleled.”

Question: What will it take to break out of the on-going dehumanization of the ‘out-groups’?

Pillar 7-Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control

p.151: “The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined.”

p.155: “After slavery ended, the former Confederates took power again, but now without the least material investment in the lives of the people they once had owned. They pressed down even harder to keep the lowest caste in its place. African-Americans were mutilated and handed from poplars and sycamores and burned at the courthouse square, a lynching every three or four days in the first four decades of the twentieth century.”

Question: How is terror and cruelty still being used as a way to keep others ‘in their place’?

Pillar 8-Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority

p. 160: “During the height of the caste systems... the lowest caste was not permitted to bear the symbols of success and status reserved for the upper caste. They were not to be dressed better than the upper caste, not to drive better cars than the upper caste, not to have homes more extravagant than the upper caste should they manage to secure them.”

Question: Why is this quote referring to the height of the caste systems being in the past? What signs of it still exist now?

Caste Discussion Group – Session Three – Parts 4 and 5

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Create space for all to speak. Be mindful of leaving space and time for others to speak up. (pp. 263-308)

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What have you discovered this week? What did you learn that was new to you? What challenged you the most? What affirmed something you believed? What do you have to think about for a while? What was the most important part of the reading for today for you – what was your big take-away?

Session Three: Part 4 (pp.167-260) and **Part 5** (pp. 263-308)

pp.182-183: “Some people from the groups that were said to be inherently inferior managed to make it into the mainstream, a few rising to the level of people in the dominant caste, one of them, in 2008, rising to the highest station in the land. This left some white working-class Americans in particular, those with the least education and the material security that it can confer, to face the question of whether the commodity that they could take for granted – their skin and ascribed race – might be losing value.”

“Those in the dominant caste who found themselves lagging behind those seen as inherently inferior potentially faced an epic existential crisis. To stand on the same rung as those perceived to be of a lower caste is seen as lowering one’s status. In the zero-sum stakes of a caste system upheld by perceived scarcity, if a lower-caste person goes up a rung, an upper-caste person comes down. The elevation of others amounts to a demotion of oneself, thus equality feels like a demotion.”

Question: What does Paul’s letter to the Galatians 3:28 (There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus) tell us?

pp.185-186: “The very machinery upon which many white Americans had the chance to build their lives and assets was forbidden to African Americans...burdens so heavy and borne for so long that if they were to rise, they would have to work and save that much harder than their fellow Americans. ...political discourse has usually reinforced prevailing stereotypes of a lazy, inferior group getting undeserved handouts, a scapegoating that makes the formal barriers all the more unjust and the resentments of white working-class citizens all the more tragic.”

p.189: “Exclusion costs lives up and down the hierarchy. ...Jonathan M Metzl... has measured the life-and-death consequences of state decisions to withhold benefits seen as helping presumably undeserving minority groups. In the state of Tennessee, for example, he found that restrictive health policies may have cost the lives of as many as 4,599 African-Americans between 2011 and 2015, but also cost the lives of as many as 12,013 white Tennesseans, more than double the loss sustained by black residents.”

Question: What is the reward to Whites for stereotypes and exclusion when it comes to Government benefits?

p.191: "In a caste system, the lowest caste performed the unwitting role of diverting society's attention from its structural ills and taking the blame for collective misfortune. It was seen, in fact, as misfortune itself. ... Thus the scapegoat unwittingly helps unify the favored castes to be seen as free of blemish, as long as there is a visible disfavored group to absorb their sins."

p.192: "As scapegoats, they are seen as the reason for societal ills. The scapegoats are blamed for a crime rate that they alone do not cause and for drugs that they are no more likely to use than the dominant caste, but for which they are incarcerated at six times the rate as whites accused of similar offenses."

Question: Where else do you see scapegoating as a way of separating caste?

p.197-199 [Story of Texas bombings] "Why had the police paid little heed when the first bombs killed or harmed people of color? Why had they disregarded the potential threat? Why did the authorities wait ten days to warn the public? Why did they let precious time pass, blaming the first victim for his own death?"

Question: Do you see any hope for the U.S. policing system?

p.206: "The great tragedy among humans is that people have often been assigned to or seen as qualified for alpha positions...not necessarily on the basis of innate leadership traits but, historically, on the basis of having been born to the dominant cast or the dominant gender or to the right family within the dominant caste, the assumption being that only those from a certain caste or gender or religion or national origin have the innate capacity or deservedness to be leaders. ...It is a tragedy for humankind, which is deprived of the benefit of natural alphas who might lead the world with the compassion and courage that are the hallmarks of a born leader, male or female, of whatever religion or background or caste, the actual intended alphas of the species."

Question: Looking at leadership roles, can relating leadership to spiritual gifts bring any resolution to caste/alpha mismatching?

p.216: "If there is anything that distinguishes caste, however, it is, first, the policing of roles expected of people based on what they look like and, second, the monitoring of boundaries – the disregard for the boundaries of subordinate castes or the passionate construction of them by those in the dominant caste, to keep the hierarchy in place."

p.224: "Achievement by marginalized people who step outside the roles expected of them puts things out of order and triggers primeval and often violent backlash."

p.226: "These actions were in keeping with societal norms that people in the lowest caste were not to be commended even in death, lest the living begin to think themselves equal, get uppity, out of their place, and threaten the myths that the upper caste kept telling itself and the world."

Question: Would there have been a Trump presidency without an Obama presidency? What is the worst "Karen" episode you have seen?

p.233: "From Reconstruction to the civil rights era, southern school boards spent as little as one-tenth the money on black schools as for white schools, openly starving them of resources that might afford them a chance to compete on level ground. ... "When two Negro teachers applied to a school, to 'take the less competent.'"

p.239: "The caste system thrives on dissension and inequality, envy and false rivalries, that build up in a world of perceived scarcity. As people elbow for position, the greatest tensions arise between those adjacent to one another, up and down the ladder."

Question: How does the difference between perceived scarcity and perceived abundance affect worldviews? What is a world based on scarcity like? What is a world based on abundance like?

pp.266-267: "Every last one of us would now say to ourselves, I would never have attended such an event, I would never have attended a lynching. I would never have stood by, much less cheered, as a fellow human was dismembered and then set on fire in America. And yet tens of thousands of everyday people did just that in the lifetime of the oldest among us in Germany, in India, in the American South. This lever of cold-hearted disconnection did not happen overnight. It built up over generations of insecurities and resentments."

Question: Have you heard first-hand stories of brutality perpetrated on Black people? What is the culpability of the witnesses?

p. 268: "Society builds a trapdoor of self-reference that, without any effort on the part of the people in the dominant caste, unwittingly forces on them a narcissistic isolation from those assigned to lower categories."

p.270: "History has shown that nations and groups will conquer, colonize, enslave, and kill to maintain the illusion of their primacy. Their investment in this illusion gives them as much of a stake in the inferiority of those deemed beneath them as in their own presumed superiority. 'The survival of the group... depends to some extent on the fact that its members consider its importance as great or greater than that of their own lives, and furthermore that they believe in the righteousness, or even superiority of their group as compared to others.'"

p.272: "The dominant caste tends to resist comparison to lower-caste people... A comparison forces the contemplation of that person's humanity, a source of internal conflict when confronted with injustice that society deems appropriate if the target is not seen as fully human as themselves."

Question: What experiences have you had that have made you aware of the "trapdoor of self-reference"? Did they help break down your illusions?

pp.288-289: "Black people forgive because we need to survive," Gay wrote. "We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, microaggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue to trespass against us." ... "What white people are really asking for when they demand forgiveness from a traumatized community is absolution."

Question: How does the process of sin, repentance, forgiveness, absolution make change possible?

Caste Discussion Group – Session 4 – Parts 6 and 7/Epilogue

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Session 4: Part 6 (pp.311-357) and Part 7/Epilogue (pp. 361-388)

p.319: “A 2012 study found that anti-black attitudes and racial stereotyping rose, rather than fell, as some might have hoped, in Obama’s first term. ...The study found that higher percentages of white respondents now saw African-Americans as violent, irresponsible, and, most especially, lazy, after his victory despite, or perhaps because of, the studiously wholesome black family in the White House headed by two Ivy League-educated parents.

...By the second term of the administration, in 2015, police were killing unarmed African-Americans at five times the rate of white Americans. It was a trend that would make police killings a leading cause of death for young African-American men and boys, these deaths occurring at a rate of 1 in 1,000 young black men and boys.”

Question: How do we address the backlash to successful African-Americans?

p.330: “People identifying as white evangelicals, regardless of their personal religiosity, ‘rallied around Trump to defend a white Protestant nation...They have proven to be loyal foot soldiers in the battle against undocumented immigrants and Muslims. The triumph of gay rights, the persistence of legal abortion, and the election of Barack Obama signaled to them a need to fight for the America they once knew.”

Question: What passages from scripture go against the above attitudes? How has White Protestant history ignored our sacred lessons?

pp.335-336: “Even though the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 ended slavery, it left a loophole that let the dominant caste enslave people convicted of a crime. This gave the dominant cast incentive to lock-up lowest-caste people for subjective offenses like loitering or vagrancy at a time when free labor was needed in a penal system that the dominant caste alone controlled.

Question: 1865-present day: name the ways that this loophole is still being used. What can be done to undo them?

p. 339: “[Robert E Lee’s] reputation only grew after his death in 1870. As the country embraced segregation, north and south, with relining and restrictive covenants keeping black people out of white neighborhoods and the races separate, he became not just a southern hero but a national one.”

p.342: “These monuments celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy... ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, ignoring the terror that it actually stood for. ...They were created as political weapons...part of an effort to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side not just of history, but of humanity.”

Question: The argument for keeping the confederate monuments and names is that we are erasing history. Why is or why isn't this true?

p.352: “People show a greater sense of joint responsibility to one another when they see their fellow citizens as like themselves, as in the nations of western Europe or in Australia, a diverse country with a looser hierarchy. Societies can be more magnanimous when people perceive themselves as having an equal stake in the lives of their fellow citizens. “

Question: In what ways can Christianity overcome racism?

pp.354-355: “The writer Jonathan Chait noted America’s singular indifference, unique among developed nations, toward helping all of its citizens. He connected this hardheartedness to the hierarchy that arose from slavery. He found that even conservatives in other wealthy nations are more compassionate than many Americans.

...A caste system builds rivalry and distrust and lack of empathy toward one’s fellows. The result is that the United States, for all its wealth and innovation, lags in major indications of quality of life among the leading countries in the world.”

Question: In what ways does America have a singular indifference toward helping all of its citizens?

p.357: “But it was the caste-like occupations at the bottom of the hierarchy--grocery clerks, bus drivers, package deliverers, sanitation workers, low-paying jobs with high levels of public contact—that put them at greater risk of contracting the virus in the first place. These are among the mudsill jobs in a pandemic, the jobs less likely to guarantee health coverage of sick days but that sustain the rest of society, allowing others to shelter in place.”

Question: What changes, if any, have you seen in “mudsill” jobs since the pandemic began?

pp.382-383: “Will the United States adhere to its belief in majority rule if the majority does not look as it has throughout history? ...Many of the advancements that Americans enjoy and that are under assault in our current day—birthright citizenship, equal protection under the law, the right to vote, laws against discrimination on the basis of gender, race, national origin—are all the byproducts of the subordinate caste’s fight for justice in this country and ended up helping others as much as if not more than themselves.”

Question: As the ‘lower caste’ share of the population grows and the fight for justice increases, how successful will they be in achieving justice?

p.385: “Our era calls for a public accounting of what caste has cost us. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, so that every American can know the full history of our country, wrenching though it may be. The persistence of caste and race hostility and the defensiveness about anti-black sentiment in particular, make it literally unspeakable to many in the dominant caste. You cannot solve anything that you do not admit exists, which could be why some people may not want to talk about it: it might get solved.”

Question: Do you think a Truth and Reconciliation Commission would work in America? Why or why not?

*p. 388: “In a world without caste, being male or female, light or dark, immigrant or native-born, would have no bearing on what anyone was perceived as being capable of. In a world without caste, we would all be invested in the well-being of others in our species if only for our own survival, and recognize that we are in need of one another more than we have been led to believe. We would join forces with indigenous people around the world raising the alarm as fire rages and glaciers melt. We would see that, when others suffer, the collective human body is set back from the progression of our species. **A world without caste would set everyone free.**”*

Further Reflection:

What have you discovered through this book study?

What did you learn that was new to you?

What challenged you the most?

What affirmed something you believed?

What do you have to think about for a while?

What is your big take-away?