



“We are in the middle of an immense metamorphosis here, a metamorphosis which will, it is devoutly to be hoped, rob us of our myths and give us our history, which will destroy our attitudes and give us back our personalities. The mass culture, in the meantime, can only reflect our chaos: and perhaps we had better remember that this chaos contains life – and a great transforming energy.”

– James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*

STUDY GUIDE GEEZ 62: DISMANTLING WHITE THEOLOGY

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ABOUT GEEZ

Geez magazine is a quarterly, nonprofit, ad-free, print magazine about social justice, art, and activism for people at the fringes of faith in Canada and the U.S.

Geez is committed to naming and raging against oppression while also offering the hope, beauty, and power alive in local communities doing their work.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

We are living witnesses to the violent weaving of Christianity, white supremacy, nationalism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

History reveals that theology is more than an abstract, personal experience or study of God. Theology – our understandings of divinity, our ideas of what holds value, the ways we relate to land and community and the Great Mystery around us – becomes what we do. And when oppressive theologies become institutionalized, as they have, they wreak violence on real communities, real land, and real bodies.

Today, white supremacist theology is baked into the structures and systems of this world, and therefore into each of our lives. Whoever we are, however we are coming to these pages, we each hold different relationships to whiteness, to Christianity, and to the institutional church. While all of us hold a different posture, none of us escape the devastating realities of these entwined powers.

The damage of white supremacist theology lives in our lands, our churches, our ancestral memories, and our bodies. So, our work now must entwine social analysis, story, bodies, reparations, spirit, and grace.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

These study guides are created for use in community – in the classroom, in book groups, with your faith circle – or for quiet reflection on your own. As reflected in this study guide, every issue and theme summons us to work with our mind, heart, and body.

PART I NAMING THE DEVASTATION

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 10 – Tell Me by Liz Miller

Page 11 – The Hand of God on My Brown Skin by Kayla Harr

Page 19 – A Road Paved by the Doctrine of Discovery by Sarah Augustine

Page 41 – The Roots of the Religious Right by Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove

DEFINITIONS

Doctrine of Discovery: A philosophical and legal framework from the 15th century that gave Christian governments moral and legal rights to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous Peoples (as defined by *Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery, a Mennonite working group*).

Religious pluralism: The coexistence of multiple religious beliefs/practices which are all regarded as equally valuable and true.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions did each of these pieces bring up for you? What memories? As we name devastation, where are you/your family located in the ongoing legacy of white supremacist theology?
2. Liz Miller writes, “Our silence keeps the peace in the pews, but it leaves us spiritually fractured. We don’t have the language to build new rituals. We don’t have practices of hard truth-telling without dwelling in shame.” If you have been part of a church community, particularly a white one, have you experienced this kind of spiritually-fractured silence? Where does the silence live? Has your church partaken in hard truth-telling practices? If so, what did they lead to?

ACTIVITY

1. Journal: Were you raised with a concept of God? What did God look like? What did that vision of the sacred feel like upon your body?
2. Sit with a piece of art. Is there a religious piece that has made you uncomfortable or angry? What have been the intended/unintended consequences of the piece? How could it be transformed into something life-giving? On pages 18, 31, 36, and 48, artists explore this idea. With paint brush, collaging, crayon, pen and paper, can you begin to transform this piece?

PART 2 STRUGGLING TOWARDS DISMANTLING

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 22 – Healing the Sickness of Mendacity by *Elaine Enns*

Page 38 – Our Churches by *Greg Jarrell*

Page 35 – Let it Burn by *Vivia Kieswetter*

Page 45 – A Liturgy for Removing the Flag from Your Sanctuary

DEFINITIONS

Mendacity: Dishonesty; here, lies told by and to settlers to uphold colonization and white supremacy.

Urban Renewal: An economic and social process that supposedly “develops” poor areas into those with higher wealth. (The question is, renewal for whom?)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it possible to dismantle white supremacist theology without dismantling Christianity altogether? Do you still consider yourself rooted in the tradition – why or why not? How do we discern when to do the work of reconstruction or when to burn it all down?
2. Read through the ten strategies of “settler moves to innocence” explored by Elaine Enns. Is there one that you’ve been aware of in yourself or others around you? Are there any that you don’t feel like you’ve (consciously) encountered? Are there other strategies that you’d add?

ACTIVITY

1. Is there a national flag hanging in your sanctuary? How would it feel to ask to remove it? Would offering the liturgy be a useful tool? Take a step towards that conversation.
2. Do some research on the land you are from or currently living on. Who were the original stewards? How has the population shifted since colonization? Who built the buildings you live or work in? Plug into local organizations doing history-telling or reparations work.

PART 3 GROWING TOWARDS LIBERATION

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 14 – We Need the Funk by *Lynice Pinkard and Nichola Torbett*

Page 51 – Reading the Torah Towards Liberation by *Kendra Watkins*

Page 49 – She Answers by *Kadeisha Bonsu*

Page 52 – Bodies, Rest on This by *Fran Westwood*

DEFINITIONS

Christendom: Christianity distorted to serve imperialism and colonialism (as *Nichola Torbett* and *Lynice Pinkard* write in “We Need the Funk”).

Pikuach nefesh: A Jewish concept which suggests that saving a life is more important than following any other law.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We need the funk! Nichola Torbett and Lynice Pinkard invite us to “enter fully and unabashedly into the messiness of relationship, which is to say the messiness of life.” What spaces do you feel that you can enter fully into this joyful messiness? What spaces feel stifling or performative? How can you tell? Are there ways to bring the funk into your work of resistance or dismantling?
2. Who do you call out to when you need comfort in this work? Where can your body rest? Have your answers to those questions changed over the years? How?

ACTIVITY

1. Gather a circle. Who can you read scripture with and feel safe and known? When does reading scripture become a step towards liberation? Make space for this and consider a regular practice.
2. Art is crucial to the struggle for liberation. Grab materials and spend quiet time imagining a world in which white supremacist theology has been dismantled. What new is able to emerge, what old falls away?