

can lead to—has led to—acts of emotional and physical abuse within the church and within Christian families.

I sincerely wish that Otto *had* written a book that would transform “the conflict over gay relationships,” but he has not. What he has done is present a range of theological, biblical, and philosophical arguments from various perspectives in the discussion about gay relationships. He has also given helpful study questions for each chapter and provided good resources on the book’s website. While not transformative, this book could be a relatively safe jumping-off point for those new to conversations about sexuality and the church.

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Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014. 258 pp. \$65.00. ISBN: 9780231163064.

I’ve spent the last couple of months reading *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*. This text has accompanied me on the bus, in hotel rooms, and squeezed into many cracks and spaces in my life. It’s an informative read but not an easy one. My prior knowledge of India is likely over-informed by Bollywood movies or by books like *Eat, Pray, Love*. It’s been eye-opening to consider the politics of power and exclusion in India, and the learning has encouraged me to reflect on my Canadian context.

The book is written by Rupa Viswanath, professor of Indian religions at the University of Göttingen in Germany. It is a well-researched academic text that zeroes in on overlooked political realities about the Dalit people, also known historically as *untouchable* or *Pariah*. The aim in this book is to “search for the authentic Pariah” (10), to tell a more accurate story. “Caste” is the name for the historical social hierarchy in India, and Pariah persons are outside of caste—excluded entirely from the social order (8). The term “Pariah” is seen as the cruelest, ugliest reference to Dalit peoples—making for a very provocative book title. Viswanath doesn’t intend to offend; she intends to paint an accurate picture.

Caste elite and government have succeeded in presenting an image of Dalit history that is prettier than reality, so the book reads like an academic and political exposé. The various regional names for Pariah are also, not coincidentally, the name for “slave” (3), which is what Pariah communities were historically: landless laborers, unfree peoples, resources more than persons (24, 29, 33, 34). Pariah communities were “entrenched [in] servitude” (25). The text examines how caste hierarchy and government policy maintained reliance on slavery long after much of the world was

changing these practices (4, 6, 38, 39, 63, 80). This text is an attempt to humanize Dalit communities and reframe their historic experience in not only accurate but also just ways.

Viswanath emphasizes human rights, which seems to be a helpful way forward in healing the wounds of oppressive policies (and decolonizing Indigenous experience) worldwide.⁴ She also takes a social-constructionist approach to examining the history of caste and out-of-caste (“outcast”) in Indian history. Her research and writing sharpened my awareness of the ways in which we are routinely indignant about injustice from afar while being blind or accustomed to similar stories in our own backyards.

While reading, I recalled a Winnipeg visit I had a few years back with pastors from Soweto, near Johannesburg. This visit was facilitated in part by Canadian Mennonite University’s Outtatown program. The Soweto pastors recalled being in their hometown and having many conversations with justice-minded Canadian young people who were learning close-up about South African Apartheid. In response to the aghast, indignant responses among the Canadian young people, these wise pastors encouraged them to go back home and “re-see your place...re-see Canada’s First Peoples. Notice how many are treated; hear their stories, pay attention to their history. Pay attention at home.” Their message: don’t persist with local blindness while decrying global injustice. Reading Viswanath has not only helped me understand India a wee bit better, it has also given me tools to see my own backyard more clearly.

The text comments frequently how communities like the Dalit were scripted into perpetual powerlessness by those with influence (37–39, 43, 54–55, 61, 64, 79–80). Dominant discourses were contradictory, saying both that there was no problem and that nothing could be done about the problem (56). Viswanath points out that power relationships within our systems inform governance, not only in India but throughout the world. Prevailing thought, dominant discourses, and interpretation are actually more powerful than policy or law, and she exposes the illusion of neutrality that is rarely acknowledged.

As a therapist, one of my first counseling explorations with each client is to query the person’s understanding of the location of the problem. I often learn that people have come to see problems as located within themselves, within their lives. Practices that externalize serve to separate persons from problems in helpful ways, creating space for new possibilities. Similarly, when we locate social problems within people or groups rather than in structures that are broken and damaging, we limit options for well-being. In mental health and in political discourse, we routinely

⁴ See the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.

expect persons to “uplift themselves,” while ignoring the oppressive influence of destructive systems (44, 66, 68).

There are many intersections between Viswanath’s telling of Dalit history and the stories of Indigenous peoples around the world, including in my Canadian context. Self-determination was not available to Pariah communities (256), and neither is it widely accessible to Indigenous communities in Canada. The reasons for this are complex and frequently tied to government protection of economic resources, as was the case in Dalit history (36).

Christian evangelism has been a historic companion to the European colonial enterprise. Interestingly, what Indian missionaries called “conversion” was actually more of a political alliance from the viewpoint of the Dalit. The Dalit did not “accept Christ,” though they did accept the benefits of Christian allegiance offered by the missionaries. Ironically, “turning to Christ” was a form of resisting the political and social realities that governed Dalit people’s lives; it was a way to gain agency when their own context offered none. The conversion transaction was more political than spiritual (69, 75). Viswanath’s research also highlights that Christian missionaries, through their correspondence with the sending churches and groups, accidentally provided vast historical data about Pariah peoples that would not otherwise exist (10–12).

I’m grateful for what this text taught me about historic India, which is beneficial for its own sake. But I’m also grateful for how this text taught me to look at my own Canadian backyard, providing fresh reminders of how power operates. The more power/influence/privilege we have, the more we are afforded the ability to see a problem or situation as small; as located in a small space; as having little relevance. The more power we have, the more we are able to deny the existence or validity of another’s experience and get away with it, as has happened to Dalit peoples and Indigenous peoples worldwide.

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Peter M. Sensenig, *Peace Clan: Mennonite Peacemaking in Somalia*, Pickwick, Eugene, OR, 2016. 260 pp. \$25.60. ISBN: 9781498231015.

What happens when sincere disciples of different faiths meet in weakness? That’s the question Peter M. Sensenig explores in *Peace Clan: Mennonite Peacemaking in Somalia*. In this volume, he documents the story of over sixty years of Mennonite witness and service in Somalia. Working from primary sources, Sensenig docu-