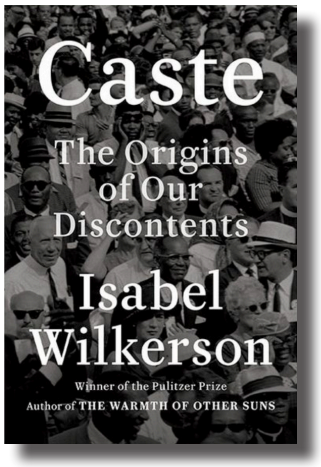
Literature in Review

By The Rev. Michael Spencer



Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

Isabel Wilkerson
Random House (2020)

Truths That Are Self-Evident

Each year, I teach a course on the historical background and religious practice of Hinduism and Buddhism. Class discussions inevitably find their way to the topic of the Hindu caste system and the students' deep concern regarding the dehumanizing elements associated with the worst of the stratification of castes as they have developed in India. Comparisons are often made with American society and how the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence resist the tendency towards caste stratification. After all, we are all created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights. Thank goodness America has not endured the same troubles and tribulations that come with a caste system! In fact, as history continually reminds us, the realized truths of our inalienable rights and human equality are not so self-evident, or at least not universally so. My students and I would do well to stop throwing stones and instead contemplate the reality of the glass houses we live in.

In her most recent book, *Caste: The Origins Of Our Discontents*, Pulitzer Prize winning author Isabel Wilkerson follows up her debut work, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, with a thoughtful, meticulous, and eye-opening look at the caste system which underlies the fabric of American society. In many ways, *Caste* is the logical sequel to her debut work which focused on the stories of the Great Migration. While *Caste* does not share the same focus on multiple narratives and human journeys, it provides the historical backdrop to understand the social hierarchies and dynamics that served as the catalyst for these journeys away from the geographic center of the American caste system. This is not an easy read and yet a most necessary one as we

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consider the reality of the world in which we live, the reckonings against racial injustice of the past summer, the nature of animosity, othering, and aggression towards non-majority individuals and communities, and the way forward towards a society where anti-racism might define our perspective and move us closer to Dr. King's vision of a more Beloved Community.

Reading this book should be a prerequisite for any educator who seriously seeks to help students contemplate the undergirding America social architecture and simultaneously strives to educate future architects who might help build a better and more just world. In shining the light on the pervasive nature of the American caste system, Wilkerson picks up the gauntlet thrown down by James Baldwin in *A Talk to Teachers (1963)*: "the purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself... To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity... The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change." Wilkerson takes on this task, calling out the American caste system that places people into the assigned roles of a play in which we are not able to fully be ourselves, "performing based on our place in the production, not necessarily on who we are inside... cast into a long-running drama that premiered on this soil in the early seventeenth century."

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Wilkerson pulls no punches in the historical comparison of the caste systems of America, India, and Nazi Germany. This is not a comparison that we wish to consider, but one which, when considered, illuminates the understanding not only of past, but of present and future as well. It is hard to reckon with the beginning of the caste system in America—the arrival of the first Africans in 1619—and the systematic subjugation and stratification of human beings through the very explicit atrocities of the early Republic up through the veiled caste system that still influences our human interactions and national dialogue. The distortion of human relationships which pervaded the beginnings of the American caste system in the South have lingering effects on the implicit ways in which we interact with each other today. And while the American version of caste is different then its Indian incarnation, the similarities were striking



enough for Dr. King to be introduced in India as a fellow untouchable from the United States. Wilkerson writes about King's own epiphany when confronted with this jarring introduction and its accompanying realization, no less amazing than the fact that the Dalit community in India could spontaneously join in the singing of *We Shall Overcome* because those sentiments rang true in their soul just as it does in ours. And while it is deeply unsettling to consider similarities with Nazi Germany, Wilkerson deftly highlights the ways in which the Nazi creation of a hierarchical system and the acceleration of caste paved the way for the dehumanization of a people not so different from the experience of Africans in this country during the years of slavery. The Nazis looked to America for a blueprint to the Nuremberg purity laws while not going as far as the "unforgiving hardness" which they perceived in the American system and the emphasis on complete racial purity. That is hard to read and helps to explain how we arrived at our current predicament and racial reckoning.

Wilkerson's comparisons between caste systems highlight commonalities: the "pillars of caste" that include an emphasis on divine will, purity, dehumanization and stigma, and inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority. In considering these pillars of the American caste system, Wilkerson provides well-researched examples from historical documents. While she provides an analysis of the system, she also highlights the ways in which society has become dependent on these classifications to the point that the truth of caste in America remains largely unexplored despite, or because of, its insidious nature. The hierarchical divisions of this system undergird the assumptions of American society, bolstering the power of dominance and supremacy while feeding misplaced psychological needs and internalized oppression. Extricating oneself from this system requires an act of will in addition to a softening of heart. Wilkerson demonstrates both in the writing of her book, which is punctuated by moments from her own experience and journey to awakening. With the eyes of hope and faith, she offers up a vision for a world where "we would all be invested in the well-being of others... a world without caste would set everyone free." May we have the courage to pursue it and the will to accomplish it. ●

The Rev. Michael Spencer serves as the Vice Rector for Faculty at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire where he also teaches Humanities and coaches rowing. He is member of the governing board of the National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES) and the author of published articles, sermons, and poetry including a CSEE curriculum in Applied Ethics. As a Cape Verdean-American his lived cultural experience informs his personal and professional commitment to the work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice helping to move the school forward toward becoming a Beloved Community.