

Caste -- The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

Week 3 – Part Three: The Eight Pillars of Caste

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion.

On page 99, The Foundations of Caste – The Origins of our Discontents, we read:

These are the historic origins, the pillars upholding a belief system... It mattered little that they were misperceptions or distortions of convenience, as long as people accepted them and gained a sense of order and a means of justification for the cruelties to which they had grown accustomed, inequalities that they took to be the laws of nature.

- Consider the phrases “*belief system*” and “*laws of nature*”; what does each bring to mind for you? Can you think of an example when a ‘law of nature’ turned out to be a ‘belief system’?
- Now consider the phrases “*sense of order*” and “*means of justification*”; what does each bring to mind for you? Can you think of an example when they were related?
- Think of some ways that belief systems and laws of nature can bring a sense of order.
- Think of some ways that rules and laws of institutions and governments can bring a sense of order.
- Think of times when overvaluing a sense of order caused harm.

1) Pillar Number One: Divine Will and the Laws of Nature

On page 104, we read:

The United States and India would become, respectively, the oldest and the largest democracies in human history, both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of the sacred texts of their respective cultures. ...

These tenets, as interpreted by those who put themselves on high, would become the divine and spiritual foundation for the belief in a human pyramid willed by God, a Great Chain of Being, that the founders would further sculpt in the centuries to follow, as circumstances required.

- Were you surprised to read that the “oldest and the largest democracies in human history” are “both built on caste systems”? What are your thoughts on why this may be the case?
- Consider the words “who put themselves on high” and “as circumstances required” and see if you notice any examples of this behavior and justification in the world this week.

2) Pillar Number Two: Heritability

On page 105, the author says:

To work, each caste society relied on clear lines of demarcation in which everyone was ascribed a rank at birth...

On page 106:

It is the fixed nature of *caste* that distinguishes it from *class*, a term to which it is often compared. Class is an altogether separate measure of one's standing in society... If you can act your way out of it, then it is class, not caste.

- According to the author, both caste and class impose rankings on people. Have you previously thought of caste and class as separate rankings? What contributed to your perception?
- As you think about dismantling racism and other oppressions, what will need to change to dismantle caste rankings? class rankings?

3) Pillar Number Three: Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating

On page 112:

... endogamy laws had the effect of controlled breeding, of curating the population of the United States. This form of social engineering served to maintain the superficial differences upon which the hierarchy was based, "race" ultimately becoming the result of who was officially allowed to procreate with whom. Endogamy ensures the very difference that a caste system relies on to justify inequality.

... The protocol was strictly enforced against lower-caste men and upper-caste women, while upper-caste men, the people who wrote the laws, kept full and flagrant access to lower-caste women, whatever their age or marital status. In this way, the dominate gender of the dominate caste, in addition to controlling the livelihood and life chances of everyone beneath them, eliminated the competition for its own women and in fact for all women.

- From these excerpts, and from the section as a whole, how does the legacy of endogamy laws remain with us today?
- Can you think of any more recent laws or practices that continue to keep the castes separate in terms of marriage and mating?

4) Pillar Number Four: Purity versus Pollution

On page 125:

By extending the dream of domination over the land and all others in it to anyone who could meet the definition of *white*, the American caste system became an all-or-nothing gambit for the top rung.

On page 127:

No matter which route a borderline applicant took to gain acceptance, the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms. What a thin, frayed thread held the illusions together.

On page 129:

The burden fell on those in the lowest caste to adjust themselves for the convenience of the dominate caste whenever in contact with white people.

On page 130:

And the daughter's tears brought the mother to tears over the manufactured terror she had allowed to consume her and over the box that she realized in that moment had imprisoned her for all of her life.

- What are some ways that the "dream of domination" and the "route to gain acceptance" are promoted today?
- Were any of your feelings about laws and justice through the courts affected as you read about the various rulings regarding whiteness and citizenship in this section?
- How did it make you feel to read "the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms"?
- Sit with the 8th principle words "journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community" and the phrases in this section "the burden fell on those in the lowest caste", "for the convenience of the dominate caste", "manufactured terror", "box ... that had imprisoned", and "frayed thread that held the illusions together". What comes to mind for you?

5) Pillar Number Five: Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill

On page 132:

... he defined the fifth pillar of caste, the division of labor based on one's place in the hierarchy. Therein, he identified the economic purpose of a hierarchy to begin with, that is, to ensure that the tasks necessary for a society to function get handled whether or not people wish to do them...

On page 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.

On page 136:

Making enslaved people perform on command also reinforced their subjugation. They were made to sing despite their exhaustion or the agonies from a recent flogging or risk further punishment. Forced good cheer became a weapon of submission to assuage the guilt of the dominate caste and further humiliate the enslaved. If they were in chains and happy, how could anyone say that they were being mistreated?

- This section provides some historical context for the ways in which Blacks in the US were forced into certain occupations by the dominate caste. In today's society, who handles the necessary tasks that no one wants to do and why might that be the case?
- Consider the description of "forced good cheer" and whether you had considered it in the terms presented in this section before. After reading the description, does it cause you to view any movies / books / advertising differently? Does it cause you to consider the societal expectation that Black people not get angry in a different light?

6) Pillar Number Six: Dehumanization and Stigma

On pages 141-142:

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.

...

Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it. ... Dehumanization distances not only the out-group from the in-group, but those in the in-group from their own humanity. A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.

... Individuality, after all, is a luxury afforded the dominate caste. Individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatized.

On page 144:

... "Whatever was considered a natural human reaction was disallowed for the subordinate caste. During the era of enslavement, they were forbidden to cry as their children were carried off, forced to sing as a wife or husband was sold away..."

... They were punished for being the humans that they could not help but be.

On page 146:

In Virginia, there were seventy-one offenses that carried the death penalty for the enslaved people but only imprisonment when committed by whites... A black father in Georgia could "be flogged for teaching his own child" to read.

- While many events in this section occurred prior to our birth, what are some examples of dehumanization of groups that occur today?
- What are some examples of natural human reactions that are disallowed today? Why are they disallowed?
- What inequities can black people face today in terms of laws and access to education?

7) Pillar Number Seven: Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control

On page 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. Evil asks little of the dominate caste other than to sit back and do nothing. All that is needed from bystanders is their silent complicity in the evil committed on their behalf, through a caste system will protect, and perhaps even reward, those who deign to join in the terror.

- While most of the US examples in this section are from the days of slavery and Jim Crow, can you draw any parallels to the violence and terror of those times with events in your own lifetime?
- What choices do you have access to that give you the option of remaining silent?
- What might you lose by speaking up?

8) Pillar Number Eight: Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority

On page 164:

“The human meaning of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honor and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety,” wrote the preeminent American scholar of caste, Gerald Berreman. “A description of caste which fails to convey this is a travesty.”

- Reflect on the UU 1st principle “*The inherent worth and dignity of every person*” and pillar number eight’s dichotomy of “inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority”. Which message comes across the strongest in our daily lives?