

Can teachers see Australia's new caste-ism?

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Abstract

We live in a world of social change. Within that world, Christian teachers are used to thinking of all people as made in the Image of God. That assumption has often meant practising a deep respect for all people. This respect has similarly extended to how Christians understand relationships in the classroom. Yet there are competing narratives about the design and purpose of life within our Western world. Part of this competition of ideas is caught up in implications that come from how we view human beings as persons. This article proposes that one of these new Australian alternatives to Christian ways of viewing life is creating an unstated but real caste system amongst so-called different kinds of persons.

Caste-ism as exclusion

It is a disturbing experience to be openly refused hospitality because of a perceived breach of non-violent public conduct. It happened to me once in India. A friend took me to a village where he had set up a school which included visiting medical teams and social support teams (including micro-finance programs). This village was part of what are called the Dalits of India. The Dalits are the traditional lowest social group of India, below the slave caste.

If I close my eyes, I can still see the aged and bent elder who came and took my hand, and with tears in his eyes, continued to thank me for what I had done. What was this marvellous thing? I had simply sat on a mat and played and interacted with some of the children of the village from that school. Earlier, I had been to their classroom and told them a story, via a translator. I and two young teachers had then walked through the classroom interacting with each student, including giving them a memento of our visit and shaking hands with each of them.

Why might this elder be so moved by this simple act, which we hopefully would consider routine? It

was because we were the first people of 'importance' (they had never seen a PhD type person before) to treat their children the same as everyone else. And no leader had ever sat on the dirt on a cane mat to play with their children.

I felt completely inadequate, because I was simply doing what I had always done since my youth. My Christian parents taught me to respect all people. And they showed me what that looked like, even when they disagreed with others.

However, when the chief elder (of an upper caste) in that village heard that I had been to the Dalit part of the village first, he refused to meet with me. I had transgressed the social order. I later heard a Brahman priest explain that such conduct – of ignoring the social behaviours linked to caste – “destroyed the order of the universe”.

Technically, any discrimination based on this structure is not legal in India – Gandhi worked to achieve this. Some Indian scholars believe that it was this part of his work that resulted in his assassination. Yet, I have seen such discrimination enacted in India.

These experiences taught me afresh that perhaps I should not take for granted the principles of respect that my parents taught me. On what did they base their beliefs and subsequent behaviour? It was because they believed every person was made in the image of the Creator God (see Genesis 1:16-17). Thus, despite any differences in capacity, rank, responsibility or authority, they believed all persons were of equal worth (see Galatians 3:26-28). This equality did not mean they assumed that everyone was the same, simply that they were to be regarded and treated with equal respect. My sister and I were taught that on this basis you treated people equally, without fear or favour.

This equality of respect did not mean that you would always agree with their opinions or their actions. But you always respected them as a person. I learnt much later, as an addictions counselling psychologist, that this also meant that I could respect people in deep pain, and yet learn not to be an enabler of their disordered thinking and conduct.

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Is caste-ism manifest in Australia?

Is this kind of thinking about differences and respect dominant in Australia? Or, put another way, is this kind of thinking about respect still “common sense” in Australia? Or is it now “less common” than it used to be? Nick Cater (2013) wrote that he saw a new elite growing in Australia. Cater explained what he believed was a shift from a previously generally egalitarian Australian society to one where a new ‘elite’ class was having disproportionate influence:

For the first time there were people who did not simply feel *better off*, but *better than* their fellow Australians ... Today, however, they call the shots, since their voices represent the majority view in the media, education, the law and the political class.... Sneering was taboo in the Australia I arrived in [1989]; today it is ubiquitous. (p. 7)

Does such a shift in social milieu have an impact on education? Cater believed so, stating, “The nature of today’s presumptive ruling class that claims authority not by wealth or force, but by moral superiority, endows it with a deeply illiberal streak harmful to civic debate” (p. 10). Further, this lack of civic debate is, according to Cater, because of what I will suggest is an intellectual caste system:

There is no difference in social status between brain or brawn. All honest toil deserves equal respect, and income is justly earned.... [This Australian] egalitarianism is threatened by the assumption that *some* citizens, the educated ones, are smarter than the rest, and that therefore their opinions should carry more weight. (p. 87)

How is this message that some people are worth more than others communicated within intellectual discussion? Cater nominated “ecologism” as the focal point to structure and limit debate, asserting, “public life has been taken over by an assertive minority who seeks to marginalise debate, unless it is conducted on their terms [quoting Codevilla]” (p. 85).

That is, Cater mapped how the sustainability of the planet has become a “cause” (which is more narrowly assertive / aggressive than defence of an “ideology”) that transcends academic enquiry and advancement based on physical and intellectual effort. He also mapped how in this intellectual climate (excuse the pun) “Religious attachment is an uncannily accurate marker of the cultural divide in contemporary Australia” (p. 100).

Therefore, to be on the side of the “assertive minority” can lead to excluding others when they disagree with these “fixers” of society:

Paradoxically, almost all progressive thinkers would imagine themselves as liberal and open-minded,

tolerant of diversity and receptive to rational debate.... Yet in their disdain for other people’s values and their presumption of a greater purity, they display pious disregard for the choices of their fellow citizens. (p. 113)

Caste-ism from ignoring God

Another Australian journalist has written a book reflecting on the current soul of our nation. He focussed on the risks of ignoring our religious heritage. Sheridan (2018) took up this last point of Cater’s and tracked where he believed there has been an abandonment of Judeo-Christian understandings of society to the detriment of the advancement of critical reasoning within Australian education and society generally.

Sheridan noted that those of religious conviction have been increasingly encouraged to keep their faith at home stating, “the rules of the argument are rigged so that religion is not allowed to win any points with a certain kind of determined secularism” (p. 29).

Similarly to other authors before him (Hunter, 2000; Machuga, 2002; Hare, 2003; Blamires, 1963 / 2005; Swinburne, 2013; Scruton, 2014; Walsh, 2018), Sheridan (2018) noted that one driver of this situation is a betrayal of human nature. He summarised this dynamic as follows:

But the soul – the embodiment of our deepest integrity and destiny – gave way to the self, as the therapeutic age replaced the age of belief.... From soul to self to brand is a steep decline in what it means to be human.... A certain panic at the existential emptiness of liberal atheism impels liberalism to a new authoritarianism. Everyone must genuflect to the same secular pieties.... Nothing is more powerful now in Western politics, or more dangerous, than identity politics. (p. 31)

Dalrymple (2015) also noted the self-focussed orientation that can be described within contemporary psychology and education:

But the overall effect of psychological thought on human culture and society, I contend, has been overwhelmingly negative because it gives the false impression of greatly increased human self-understanding where it has not been achieved, it encourages the evasion of responsibility by turning subjects into objects where it supposedly takes account of or interests itself in subjective experiences, and it makes shallow the human character because it discourages genuine self-examination and self-knowledge. It is ultimately sentimental and promotes the grossest self-pity, for it makes everyone (apart from scapegoats) victims of their own behaviour... (p. 112)¹

Sheridan (2018) went on to explain the impact of such a shift in terms of reductionistic thinking

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processes, and a pretence of rationalism when explaining the stance of atheism – for atheism also needs presuppositions that take us to statements of faith. With reference to some of the moral issues of our time, Sheridan also noted that, in place of a centred ethical system based in the disclosed words from the Creator, the new elites prefer to medicalise evil:

To medicalise evil is surely to misunderstand it profoundly, but it is the go-to response of our time... Only the spirit cannot be admitted into our explanations.... If our world is just atom and energy and evolution then whether we like it or not, it has no moral character at all. It's just a question of our paltry preferences. (pp. 126,129) (see also Szaz, 1974 / 2010)

I would suggest that these general reviews of Western and Australian social life provide a description of the platform for what is being suggested as a new Australian caste-ism. That is, these ways of thinking support structural shifts in our society towards a society less able to engage respectfully in the face of differences, at a time when different points of view seem to be more varied.

My Indian experiences taught me first-hand that very large numbers of people could believe that the universe could be structured so that certain categories of people could be treated differently, in radical ways, because of their category of personhood. No-one debated that all those Dalit people in India were human beings. However, some (many?) were very clear that Dalits were less fully a person than other types of humans.

Caste-ism protected

This social construction - believing that humans can be placed into gradations of significance - validated the different treatment that each group received. Another personal example that I saw in India was Dalit students always being seated at the back of a classroom and not being expected to ask questions. This is why our shaking hands with all our students was so radical (unbeknown to us at the time).

How is such caste-ism reflected in Australia? One could argue that in our country the opposite is happening. We have increasing sensitivity to

¹Such a critique has a significant history: see for example, Paul C Vitz (1977) *Psychology as Religion: The cult of self-worship*. Eerdmans; Gary R Collins (1977) *The Rebuilding of Psychology: An integration of psychology and Christianity*. Tyndale House; Mar P Cosgrove (1979) *Psychology Gone Awry: Four psychological world views*. IVP; John D Cater & Bruce Narramore (1979) *The Integration of Psychology and Theology*. Rosemead Psychology Series; John White (1987) *Putting the Soul back in Psychology*. IVP; Paul Kline (1988) *Psychology Exposed: Or the Emperor's New Clothes*. Routledge

providing equality of opportunities for all people. We have more laws to protect us against certain discriminations than ever before. We generally avoid confusing our governance of the State with our governance of our faith-based institutions (although current debates about “religious freedom” vs. “sex discrimination” may challenge that). Personal choice in how we structure our relationships has rarely been so free (although one could argue that if one was wealthy and free in the time of the Roman Empire, our kind of personal moral freedoms were just as present there).

Yet we have secrets in dirty corners of our society. The hushed but growing reality is that we are creating categories of persons amongst human beings. For example, our laws are leaning towards sex-selective killings of unborn children. How is this caste-sim? It is caste-ism because we divorce the physical reality from our personal preferences – we separate facts and values, as Francis Schaeffer might say. We know that a foetus is a human being. Science tells us that there is a physiologically unique person being formed in the womb. The unborn child is a different human being to his or her mother. Yet she or he is not accorded unalienable rights as a person.

How real is this? Abortion laws in NSW allow any abortion up to the end of the second trimester, even though there are ‘guidelines’ to prevent sex-selection abortion. But parliament did not make it illegal to do so, and cooperative medical practitioners will find ways around the guidelines – even up to the point of birth (simply imagine a mother claiming she is pre-suicidal contemplating the birth of the child, and two medical practitioners will oblige her the abortion).

We have created our own Dalit children. Other Australian Dalit children are those unborn ones who may be physically or intellectually considered not perfect enough—for example, Down syndrome children. I have seen documented (from a WA senator) a child being aborted because one arm was going to be shorter than the other; and in the same research, because a child was going to be too short.

And our legislators are like the Brahman priest. Again, even though there are “guidelines”, medical practitioners will be under increased pressure if they challenge these abortion practices, because the soul-less orthodoxy will claim that they have challenged “the order of the universe” and thus should be punished.

There is other growing membership of our Australian Dalit caste-ism. If one is considered not worthy to continue living, because of dysfunction of some kind (including pain that can be mostly

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controlled), then one can be defined as not worthy of the human right to life. It matters not that the person doing this categorising is the individual under consideration—the rest of society agrees with them, and thus enables that another category of personhood is not worthy of life.

How does this happen? It is not driven by physical science. It is driven by different “operating systems of the mind” (Poplin, 2014). One mind-set believes that human nature comes from chance physical events across time, and thus is based on disruption and fragmentation. If that is how we view our bodies, our personhood based on our physical reality can have no natural moral demands on us individually and as a society. Therefore, there is no moral dilemma in creating categories of persons that can be treated differently in terms of access to human rights.

However, if we have a mind-set that says that nature, including our bodies, exhibits a plan and purpose, then our physical realities can provide moral direction for us as individuals and as a society. Nancey Pearcey (2018) summarised these two mind-sets as follows, “In the academic world, a teleological view of nature as purpose-driven has been ousted by a materialist view that sees nature as devoid of spiritual and moral meaning” (p.162).

If we accept Pearcey’s explanation, our morality, if it is purposeless with reference to its physical grounding, can be just a social construction. Whatever the majority in power determine to be real, is real. CS Lewis (1943 / 1978) predicted this kind of scenario almost a century ago:

The last men, far from being heirs of power, will be of all men most subject to the dead hand of the great planners and conditioners and will themselves exercise least power upon the future.... Either we are rational spirit obliged forever to obey the absolute values of the Tao, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, but hypothesis, have no motive but their own ‘natural’ impulses. (pp. 36, 44)

Such redefining of natural law by social controllers helps us to understand another part of our growing Dalit group—that is, those people who insist that we must respect the physicality of our femaleness and maleness. They too will be considered not worthy of being able to appeal to a justice system based on grounded evidence. They will increasingly be sent to trial and judged on their ‘sub-standard expressions of personhood’. These persons may be deprived of work, family and eventually freedom, because they do not believe the correct categories of persons as per the prevailing identity politics.

Sheridan (2018) continued to contextualise this for us in Australian society:

For without God, human beings are no longer unique and universal, no longer special in nature. They are just one more chancy outcrop of the planet and its biosphere, ultimately no more worthy of consideration than a cockroach. If we lose God, we lose something essential of our humanity. (p. 32)

History of course reminds us again and again that such deprivation of the belief in the purpose-driven sanctity of human life leads to massive oppression, and in many cases, killings. That is why the atheistic regimes of the twentieth century managed to kill more people than any other conflicts across human history. Jonathan Haidt (2013) has tried to explain this conundrum in terms of moral values formation. His conclusion is that we have lost the language to discuss these issues (and thus he has formed the *Heterodox Academy*). Jordan Peterson (2018) is trying to expose how the social sciences are misused when the operating systems of the mind are closed to historical and researched social patterns based on what he calls ancient wisdom.

Will these kinds of social psychology efforts be enough? Or will the categories of persons in our Australian Dalit caste-ism continue to grow? Will we as Christian educators be able to discern when these pressures are impacting on what we teach, and how we teach it?

When such forces were being seen in the early twentieth century, novelists picked up their pens and wrote in narrative form of their concerns. Huxley’s (1932) *Brave New World*, or Orwell’s (1950) *1984* are classics that foretold of such pressures and their impact on social life, including education. Bradbury’s (1951) *Fahrenheit 451*, and in a similar vein, the more recent *Book of Eli* movie (Johnson et al., 2010), also reflect the impact of denying universal respect for all people, regardless of capacity or status. These narratives masterfully demonstrate that creating castes is intimately linked to restricting access to humanising literature, and the way men and women relate to each other (Michael Walsh’s 2018 work, *The Fiery Angel*, unpacks the current attacks against humanising literature well).

Less well-known is Walter M. Miller’s (1959) *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Towards the end of the book we are introduced to “Mercy Camps”, which are places of death for those who are too sick, as defined by those in political authority (echoing the Nazi gas-ovens). In this society, “Mercy Camps” become the only rationalised way of dealing with categorical difference in personhood through a lens of fragmented, purposeless and disrupted nature.

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Another (chilling) literary reaction to the vision of soul-less society where humans are placed into categories of persons is by the author of *Bladerunner*, Philip K. Dick. In his short work, simply titled *Pre-Persons* (written in response to *Wade vs Roe* in 1974), he imagines a future where the US legislators have decided that abortion is legal until the soul enters the body. The way this is determined, as decreed by the experts, is by whether a person has the ability to perform simple mathematics calculations (around the age of 12). The main protester—a former university mathematics major—demands to be taken to the abortion centre, since he claims to have forgotten all his algebra. However, deep in his soul, he knows that his victory in having three boys with him released from the detention centre is short-lived.

Or in the metaphor from CS Lewis' (1945) book on the same theme, the saviour turns out to be a ravenous, hideous strength (see also Tinker, 2018).

That is why I close my eyes and remember that old bent man in India. He had more beauty in his soul than any of the so-called leaders creating our Australian caste-ism in this land of plenty. Maybe in our classrooms, we need to learn to be hungry in different ways here at home. **TEACH**

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Photography: NNSW Adventist Education image files

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