

gies. According to Kwok, even feminist theologians have not sufficiently grappled with “how white women ha[ve] colluded in colonialism and slavery” as well as in the neocolonialism of globalized capitalism and “development.”¹ This critique certainly applies to Adeney’s work. To name but one example, she describes a worship service into which Indonesian women incorporated “traditional Indonesian dress” and used rice and Indonesian wine as the elements of Communion. Instead of recognizing this as a powerful act of decolonizing worship, Adeney reduces it to an aesthetic choice to incorporate “beauty” into worship (46).

Such an oversight reveals that while Adeney’s work valuably recovers the underemphasized voices and contributions of women to Christian mission theology, it does not sufficiently critique the underlying triumphalism that continues to characterize most Christian understandings of mission. Ultimately, her work needs the “other wing” of postcolonial theologies in order to present a more complete and complex portrait of women’s mission theology.

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Tim Otto, *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict over Gay Relationships*, Cascade, Eugene, OR, 2014. 154 pp. \$17.00. ISBN: 9781625649768.

I am well acquainted with the “conflict over gay relationships,” at least within Mennonite Church USA. The “at variance” notation on my Ministerial Leadership Information form is a testament to my personal engagement with questions of marriage and inclusion in the church. I am frustrated with the current state of denominational conversation and would love to find a resource that could truly transform the conflict. And that is why I was interested in reviewing Tim Otto’s *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict over Gay Relationships*.

Otto’s discussion of economics and family are insightful; according to him, the capitalist ethos tells us that we are “a bundle of needs” and that our romantic partner’s primary purpose is to meet those needs (28). The Christian perspective, he argues, must oppose this idea of marriage as just another means of consuming a product. Otto clearly shows how consumerism can lead to unhealthy relationships—platonic and romantic, straight and gay.

I also appreciate the author’s encouragement for churches to provide theological

¹ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 18–19.

and practical supports for married couples—to celebrate the faithfulness and commitment that is so often dismissed in our consumer culture. Otto rightly notes that same-sex couples often have difficulty finding social supports for marriage in the broader culture and therefore particularly need these supports from their faith communities (107).

As pastor of an intentional Christian community, Otto consistently pushes his readers toward a richer understanding of Christian community. The individualism that has become the gospel of Western society is antagonistic to the heart of Jesus’s teachings, yet Christians and Christian churches can easily get swept up in that individualism. “Though we’ve been trained to think about our bodies as private property,” writes Otto, “Scripture teaches us that we are connected and we affect each other” (46). A deep understanding of community is critical as we navigate questions about how we should live—including questions about how we understand and live out our sexualities.

As much as I appreciate the general theological groundwork put forth by Otto, his application of that theology to the specific question of faithful sexuality is problematic.

Those relatively new to the conversation might find two aspects of the volume particularly helpful. First, Otto shares about his personal struggles as a gay Christian; and I believe hearing each other’s stories always moves us in a faithful direction. Second, chapter 12 provides a gentle and clear discussion of the scriptures most often cited by those who oppose same-sex romantic relationships, and chapter 14 presents the biblical case for affirmation of sexual minorities in the church. Many of us have heard stories such as Otto’s over and over again; many of us have read—and used—explanations of the so-called “clobber passages” until we can recite the Greek of Romans 1 in our sleep. But for those not already in the thick of things, Otto provides a helpful entry point.

Ultimately, though, Otto does not provide a model I am willing to adopt for “transforming the conflict over gay relationships.” His key arguments about biblical sexuality are flawed. He claims that “Christianity declares that sex is not just a recreational activity, but is meant to *bring two different people together into a committed, loving unity*” (54), and goes on to say that a “Christian sexual ethic demands that we respect the unifying function of sex” (56). I agree with him up to this point, but he loses me when he argues that a “unitive understanding of sex poses a challenge to those who advocate for same-sex relationships” (56). Otto’s argument here is that the difference of male and female are necessary for the unity. This understanding seems much more rooted in Eastern mysticism—with ideas of essential opposites, of yin and yang—than in a biblical Christianity. This understanding of unitive sex also becomes very complicated for those who are transsexual, and it leaves no room for those who do not claim an exclusively male or female identity. Otto does

provide some counter-arguments to the traditional notion of unitive sex, but he does not go far enough in pointing out the dangers of such a view.

Because Otto himself is a gay Christian, I was somewhat surprised to find harmful generalizations in this book. At one point he mentions the “permissive sexual ethic that tends to accompany the affirming position” (103). The reality is that those of us who affirm same-sex relationships do not all hold to the same sexual ethic any more than do those who condemn such relationships. Still, there are good conversations within the affirming community about what it looks like to be faithful in our sexual relationships.

Otto also mentions that “gay culture” does not promote healthy romantic relationships of love and fidelity (106). This seems like a gross generalization; if by “gay culture” he means secular/popular gay culture, he may very well be right, but the same could be said of “heterosexual culture.”

Finally, in the most problematic statement of the book, Otto writes: “Because the debate [over sexuality and marriage in the church] is about a *non-essential* aspect of the Christian faith, it might be a good opportunity for individuals who disagree with the denomination’s stance to practice what theologian John Howard Yoder calls revolutionary subordination” (116, emphasis original). Otto spent significant time articulating how and why our sexuality and sexual relationships are integral to our personal and communal lives of faith. For him to then name the question of gay marriage as “non-essential” sends a mixed message. For a gay or lesbian couple seeking to live fully into their God-created selves and to participate fully in the Christ-centered community of church, I would say “the debate” is definitely essential. For those of us who consider exclusion of (non-celibate) LGBTQ people a deep injustice within the church, “the debate” is certainly essential.

In addition, Otto’s use of the concept of “revolutionary subordination” is deeply problematic, as he is citing a theological principle espoused by a known sex offender. Recently published articles have shed light on the extent of Yoder’s sexual abuse against women,² and these abuses shed light on the potential danger of this concept.³ One might, for their own reasons and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, choose to practice revolutionary subordination. I respect Otto’s personal choice to remain celibate. But those in power—in this case the dominant heterosexual (and/or closeted) denominational leadership—are acting unjustly when they ask those with less power to practice revolutionary subordination. As a theological principle, revolutionary subordination has a high danger of becoming spiritually abusive and

2 See Rachel Waltner Goosen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7–80.

3 Hannah Heinzekehr, “Can Subordination Ever Be Revolutionary? Reflections on John Howard Yoder,” *The Femonite* (blog), August 9, 2013, <http://www.femonite.com/2013/08/09/can-subordination-ever-be-revolutionary-reflections-on-john-howard-yoder/>.

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