

Breaking Out of My Cultural Bubble:  
A Shift in Perspective on Christianity in Cape Town

Jacob Alspaw  
Cultural Bubble Research Project  
IES Dialogues On Diversity – Tessa Moll  
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Students should individually attend one event in Cape Town that takes them “out of their bubble” in some way. This could be a polemical lecture or play, a neighborhood festival, a student organization meeting, or any other event so long as it somehow relates to the content/objectives of the course. It should not be an activity done for another class. Afterward, the students will find a brief news or scholarly article that supports or contrasts what they learned through their experience. A 3-4 page reflective essay synthesizing the experience, the article, and what they learned will be submitted for grading. Students will follow up with brief formal presentations in class. Paper will be due the day before Session 8 at 5pm on Vula.

Many see the importance of religion as connecting the races, cultures, and societies of the world for thousands of years. It has given the world universal languages and cultures among those who believe in a higher power. Religion has given worshipers a meaning to life that may otherwise seem meaningless and depressing. The gods receiving the worship and praise may not be the same, but the practices are usually similar and serve the same purpose--to give direction, courage, insight, and a divine connection. We are always looking for "a purpose in life". Life without intention and meaning is boring. But what does religion mean to me? No aspects of my cultural bubble overlap with religion. Religion is entirely out of my cultural bubble which is why I chose to use church service visits as the subject of my cultural bubble project.

Religion is out of the realm of my identity. Before this project, I had never been to a church service and, still, I've barely a clue of what is really going on during the event. I was raised by agnostic parents and placed in a public school system that taught the hard sciences over faith and creationism. There's always been this thought in the back of my mind; why worship a god that lets bad things happen to objectively good people? There's this relatable Game of Thrones quote that somewhat summarizes my beliefs.

*Lady Melisandre: "I only do what my Lord asks."*

*Sir Davos Seaworth: "If He commands you to burn children, then your Lord is evil."*

This quote will probably only make sense if you've seen the show (hopefully its not a spoiler). Basically, a high priestess burns a king's daughter as a sacrifice to the Lord of Light or God. I honestly don't even see this as much of an exaggeration today. We hear about slaughters carried out in the name of God from the media on an almost weekly basis now. And to worship an entity that allows that just isn't for me. Moreover, I just think its silly to worship an all powerful "God" who made us in his own image. Why not the giant flying spaghetti monster depicted in the recognized religion called Pastafarianism. What makes one more believable than the other?

Even though I don't consider myself religious, I don't hold prejudice against those that do. They have found faith, while I have not found mine. And its nice to have faith. Faith is a beautiful human emotion that holds significant importance to billions of people. I've wanted to experience faith at least once, which is why I used this project as an excuse to go to church twice. But why strictly a focus on Christianity and not Islam? I think about my decision and I believe it was facilitated by an American stereotype of the intensity of the Islamic faith and its inability to be

accepting of outsiders and especially non-believers. I resemble a practicing Christian more than a Muslim; I blend-in in one group more than the other, so I wasn't sure if Muslims would view my presence and intentions—to observe them—as inappropriate, in poor taste, and offensive. I was trying to be polite by not appropriating their culture and belittling their faith.

My first visit to Sunday church service was June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017. There were three services that day: one at noon that families attended, and ones at 5:00 pm and 7:00 pm that are known for student attendance. I visited the last service of that day. I took an Uber to the non-denominational church in Rondebosch commons. From first sight I new the church was financially well-off. The Uber driver pulls up to a gated complex where one large building sits. I walk inside and sit near the very middle because I was too afraid to sit in the front, but still wanted an up-close and personal experience. It was contemporarily decorated; the walls were covered in stone, the seating was comfortable and stylish, the lighting was relaxed, and tile covered parts of the floor. People gather in their seats and I notice that the congregation, comprised of mostly students, is 200 whites and less than five non-whites, an odd imbalance considering the demography of the University of Cape Town's student body.

The pastor gets on stage and he is dressed casually in a short sleeve t-shirt and khaki pants. He may have even had tennis shoes on, but I can't remember. The pastor begins the service by dedicating it those who are new in the congregation (it makes me wonder what are the odds he would do this when I'm present). He begins with a few announcements of new baptisms, holiday club volunteering, and volunteering for the homeless. Afterwards, the churches rock band gets on stage and performs 4 kind-of catchy songs. Three were in English and one was in Xhosa. The congregation was reaching out with their hands, on their knees praying, eyes closed, and singing along during songs as means to embrace Christ's love. The band exits and the pastor begins his sermon. A bowl is passed around and people were placing money into it. I had seen this before in various forms of media, but only later found out that its called "the offering" because I don't know my terminology. As the bowl is being passed, the pastor says the theme for the day's sermon will be about generosity. What he said next really upset me: "I'm not asking for your money. Jesus is asking for your money". I'm still not entirely sure if that's what he meant to say, but what it sounded like was a pastor using a sermon on generosity to solicit money for the church. It's strange

though because other IES students had a similar experience at a church during an overnight field trip in the Khayelitsha township.

After the bowl is finished being passed around, many people in the congregation pull out their study bible or mobile phone bibles to follow along with the pastor. The pastor begins a passage analysis of Christ's generosity and how others around him were not. This section took the most time and wish I wrote down the verse but I forgot to. The sermon concluded with snacks and a reminder that the church's library was open for loaning books. I called an Uber and returned home to ponder the experience.

I decided I needed another similar experience to compare the first experience to, but the second experience needed to be in a different environment. I decided to attend the Methodist church next to our house on Chapel Road in Rosebank. I didn't actually attend the sermon, but instead sat outside for a few hours completing other assignments and recording observations at a bench that let me peak inside when the church doors were open. The church is a dilapidated building that held at most two early morning sermons. The complex is not as extravagant as the first church by any means. There is a much smaller seating area and its tucked into a small lot with very little parking options. As the congregation assembled, I noticed that the audience was almost entirely comprised of non-whites of all ages. I can't speak to the exact numbers because I wasn't inside. I just watched everyone enter. The church choir began to sing and the strength in the vocals made it sound like everyone inside was participating. The service was relatively short and the singing dominated the time. People were leaving in matching attire; the men wore red and black suits and the women wore the same style of dress. Many exited the area by walking down the street. Others hoped in parked taxis, the kind that whistle to you as you walk in the street.

Based on my church service visits, it's obvious that religion in Cape Town is important to many. Religion has been influenced by heritage, history, and tradition. The past controls the city and its effects are still felt today. What I'm not entirely sure of though is why does the inequality that cripples Cape Town exist in an accepting environment like church service. Wouldn't the disadvantaged group join the advantaged group in a better environment if given the chance? Considering my two experiences and the congregation's lack of diversity, it seems like the answer is overwhelmingly no. Segregation still exists within Cape Town's religious scene, but the segregation seems to be purposeful, intentional, accepted, welcomed, and tolerated despite the

inequality. This form of segregation is known as racial self-segregation. My cultural bubble project has made me wonder if Apartheid and post-Apartheid conflict has influenced today's lack of diversity in various church services.

When the Dutch became the first European trading power to set up permanent settlements in South Africa in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they brought with them their Dutch Reformed theology to the African continent. Formally founded in 1652 by Jan van Riebeck, the Dutch Reformed Church, DRC for short, was the commanding church of South Africa whose current headquarters are located in Pretoria. Since then, the history of the church has very much been affiliated and in support of the white-Afrikaner community of South Africa and its political agenda. The DRC supported the Apartheid movement, which institutionalized separation and stratification of the people of South Africa according to race. The social segregation of Black, Coloured and White people was reflected in the establishment of churches of these three groups (Dutch Reformed Church; 2017).

Certain individuals within South Africa's religious communities, like Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, rose to power in the anti-Apartheid movement as a result of their religious beliefs. These activists worked publicly and secretly in various anti-Apartheid organizations to express their support for democratic change in South Africa and contempt for segregation and racism. Desmond Tutu once said that "faith is a highly political thing. As followers of God we too must be politically engaged". Regardless of religious affiliation, all of South Africa's anti-Apartheid activists shared a belief that Apartheid was morally and ethically unjustifiable, inhumane, cruel, and a sin (Religious Faith and Anti-Apartheid Activism).

The church's unwavering support for Apartheid got it expelled from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the 1980s. "In 1986 the church showed its repentance by preaching for all members of all racial groups to pray under, one umbrella, thus making South African history by welcoming Black people back in the church" (Dutch Reformed Church; 2017). Racial divides still exists within the church in spite of the end of Apartheid. In 1996 the mainly-white DRC had 1,288,837 members, the mainly-coloured Uniting Reformed Church had 1,216,252 members, and the mainly-Indian Reformed Church in Africa had 2,386 members. More recently the church branded Apartheid as a sin in the hope of reunifying its congregants on the basis of belief as opposed to race (Dutch Reformed Church; 2017).

It is obvious that self-segregation is not a myth as shown through the Cape Town religious scene. Apartheid has had its influence on why this may be a phenomena today. Either many still hold grudges as a result of past conflict, or this conflict has carried on for so long that self-segregation has become familiar, comfortable, and even natural. South Africans found themselves engaging in political activism and fighting against religious segregation for its sinful nature, but carried on the tradition anyways.

The United States is no different. Self-imposed segregation in religion is a major parallel between the United States and South Africa. Not only are there different denominations separated by belief, but it seems in both the United States and South Africa that people separate the practice of religion based on skin colour. There are two practicing Methodist churches in the same general area, but the one next to IES housing has a 95% black and coloured congregation while the other in Rondebosch commons has a 95% white congregation. That is something I find so strange. Within three kilometres there are two identical churches, but with very different demographics. Why is this so? The church in Rondebosch commons holds a service for the UCT student body, so why then at a university where non-white students outnumber white students is this church service primarily white affiliated? The same is true in the United States; there are traditionally white churches and black churches.

At the end of the day, people like familiarity. This gives them comfort and, to a degree, a sense of security. As just about every individual seeks these things, self-segregation is the result. You can see this segregation take place, be it by nationality, religion, and even disability. With Apartheid now recognized “as wrong and sinful in its fundamental nature” by the DRC, we can see that Cape Town has become increasingly progressive. It may not be too long before racial tension and familiarity dissolves and an increase in church congregation diversity is seen.

### Bibliography

(2011, March 30). Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Retrieved June 21, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/dutch-reformed-church-drc>

(n.d.). Religious Faith and Anti-Apartheid Activism. Retrieved June 21, 2017, from <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/sidebar.php?id=65-258-6&page=1>