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IES Dialogues on Differences

Journal Entry 6

7 June 2017

**How do you compare religious practices and beliefs about sexuality in South Africa and the United States?**

This is a tough question for me because I’ve never considered myself religious and know very little about religion. I’m an outsider to religion in both South Africa and the United States. I’ve never practiced and I’ve never worshipped. Heck, I’ve only been to one church service in my entire life and that was intended to be the subject matter for my cultural bubble project. The only religious practices and beliefs that I’m really aware of have been explained by various sources of media and academia, so I’ll give insight based off my own experiences.

Each major religion has introduced moral codes covering issues of ethics, morality, and sexuality. Such moral codes attempt to control the situations which can give rise to sexual interest and to influence people's sexual activities and practices, thus becoming known as a society’s sexual norms or standards of sexual conduct. I believe that it is these norms, rather than the religious beliefs themselves, that so greatly separate South Africa and the United States. Christianity in South Africa prevails as the most practiced religion, but the denominations do not vary greatly from the United States. So why does one country practice virginity testing, Lobola, and polygamy when the other does not?

I think religious syncretism is the reason that South Africa’s religious practices diverged from the practices and beliefs of the United States and other European countries. A society's sexual norms can be linked to environmental and social conditions, religious beliefs, or all of these. In this instance, social and environmental conditions blended two or more religious belief systems into a new system and assimilated traditional African practices such as virginity testing, Lobola, and polygamy into South Africa’s Christian religious practices.

**What was the dialogue like for you? How did it feel to listen to others and express your own opinions? How were you challenged? How did you experience conflict or disagreements? What did you learn?**

The class’s dialogue on sexuality and religion seemed to revolve around female oppression, domination, and subjection in a religious context. As a male, I’m not part of the targeted group so I feel like the discussion would have been more impactful had I been a female. It was however very eye opening to talk about virginity testing, Lobola, and polygamy in an academic context. I had no idea virginity testing was a practice because what is virginity? How can you test a social construct? No one can provide clear definition or devise a way to test it for that matter.

The only moment where I somewhat felt targeted was the #MenAreTrash part of the discussion. At first I was a little angry because I think of myself as respectful, but then after a brief debate in my own head I realized that some men are indeed trash. This hash tag isn’t meant to call out all men, but just the ones who aim to oppress and harm women. Some men are trash yes, just like some women are trash. There are plenty of bad people in this world and this social movement was intended to highlight injustice, not generalize fifty percent of the world.

In this class, you need to realize that everyone is going to have a different opinion. Instead of feeling put down by these opinions, you should use them as a way to grow, mature, and learn about varying beliefs. Doing so improves upon one’s ability to understand the merits of their own beliefs while being accepting of others’. In this class, I think it’s challenging to hear an opinion that lacks an argument. When someone says “I believe x,y,z” and you ask “why?”, it is frustrating to get a response such as “that’s the way it should be” or “just because.” Like, what does that even mean?

**In your conversations with South African acquaintances and American fellow students, have you noticed any links between religion, gender, class and ethnicity?**

Yes and only just recently did I notice this. I think self-imposed segregation in religion is a major parallel between the United States and South Africa. Not only are their 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 color. 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 3km 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.

**In your own life, have you experienced times when your identity has changed – either because you have changed or because your circumstances, location, or community changed?**

Absolutely! My identity has changed several times. For instance, I was a high school student and now I am a university student. I was a competitive swimmer, and now I am not. I think my own identity is influenced most by my current circumstances. But I try to hold onto my past identities. I remember my high school memories and I still know how to swim better than a great number of people. And I think its important to not let go because these past identities have shaped my current identity and will continue to shape my future identity.