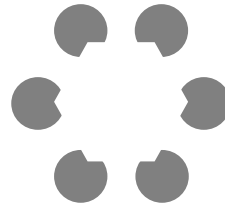


The Reification Fallacy (Peter MacKenzie)

A term that I have encountered in my studies is reification (from Latin *res* : thing and *facere* : to make). Reification occurs when people take as real, something that is abstract. We can see this happen in the illustration of ‘pac-men.’ A single pac-man draws our attention to a circle with a wedge taken out.

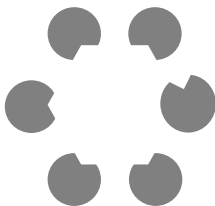


When we align six pac-men our attention is drawn to a hexagon in the centre – but does the hexagon really exist? We see it, it’s there, but we create it in our mind by extrapolating the lines between the pac-men.

Using the image above, this is what we do with “church.” The gathering of a group of individuals creates a shape that we call church. The process is totally natural - it is how we establish groups and identity. But the reification fallacy emerges when we begin to think that the group, called church, is an actual thing.

I hear this in the language we use all the time. “The church believes ...”, “the church loves ...”, “the church welcomes...” These are positive – the negative side is “the church condemns...”, “the church ignores...”, “the church doesn’t care...” In these statements we assume that the church is form of physical entity – at least in our language.

The problem with reification is that it oversimplifies a complex organisation and leads to bias and prejudice. There is a tendency to have stricter parameters of who is in and who is out. Consider the pac-men again – one seems to be out of place, even though it is no different to the others.



We create the shape in our minds, and then ostracise the one that doesn’t fit our created shape. We create a sense of church in our heads, and then exclude those who do not conform.

So often when I read in the media a statement that begins “the church...” I want to respond and say “that’s not the church I know.” I want to break down society’s reification of the church into some sort of monolithic monster and defend it.

Then I am reminded that we need to do the same thing within the church. We need to break down the exclusive boundaries that we create in our mind that define the church and allow God’s kingdom to reach further than we can dare imagine.

Ironically, the oneness of Christ's body, the church, will not be found in a singularity, but in the diversity of all those who call upon his name. The kingdom of God has no borders, the house of God has no walls, and the people of God are diverse – and that's okay.