

God in our image



Questions for discussion

1. How has your culture influenced church life and practices in your context? How has Christianity affected or influenced your culture?
2. How much cultural diversity is compatible with Christian unity?
3. Paul affirmed that any one baptized in Christ is a new creation: “the old has passed away, behold, the new has come”. How do we live out our new identity in Christ amid our persisting social identifications (i.e. gender, ethnicity, nationality) among other persons also created in God’s image?
4. Churches in different parts of the world have responded to the relation of Jesus Christ to history and culture in various ways. How should Christ’s message interact with seemingly oppositional historical, cultural and political realities?
5. How do you view the relation between Christianity and other faiths? What lessons can the churches learn from their missionary activities in previous generations? What is your church’s understanding of mission?
6. Does the Christian identity between old and young generations in your church differ? What are the young peoples’ views on the relationship between culture and faith?

On Baptism, Eucharist and Culture...

The taxi lurched to a sudden halt. Canon Peter Milton had arrived at the home of Joseph Nsimba sooner than he had expected. “Africanization” was the subject he came to discuss with this retired pastor of sixty years’ service. The memories of such veteran church leaders were providing his colleagues at church headquarters with invaluable data. Here are a few of the highlights recorded by Milton during the next few hours of their probing conversation:

Milton: What is the relation between church sacraments and African culture? What are some of the theological and pastoral issues which still need more attention?

Nsimba: Baptism and Holy Communion vividly convey the meaning of the person of Christ as well as his saving work. During the missionary era, however, the reality of Christ was often confused with the forms of Western culture. Christ was domesticated. He was proclaimed only in the context of Western categories and symbols. These were seen as being superior to the indigenous and so-called “pagan” cultures of Africa. The teachings and practices of the missionaries frequently carried with them the economic, political, and ethical systems and values of Western cultures.

Milton: Would you please cite some examples?

Nsimba: In many churches, Africans were told to take “Christian” names. Only after the Bible was translated in our own language did we realize that the names of many missionaries, such as Martin, Leon, Harvey, Olivier and Dorothee, were not in the Bible. We also learned that Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose and many other Western theologians did not have Christian names. Furthermore, most astonishing of all, Jesus did not invent a Christian name for himself. He was given a name which derived from the Hebrew verb that means “to save”. By this name God honoured the Chosen People and their culture and revealed to them in person the true meaning of salvation.

In my Congo culture, a name was given to the child six days after birth. That name performed many functions. It was used, for example, for ritualistic protection against evil powers. By somebody’s name, one could often guess the history of the individual or the family and tribe to which she or he belonged. But missionaries didn’t believe that such African names could also be used at the time of baptism.

Milton: How about local practices in Holy Communion?

Nsimba: The sole use of bread and wine—foods unknown to the diet of many Africans—was identified not only with the missionary’s foreign economy but also with the white people’s sorcery and witchcraft. Some African Christians refused to commune because it was believed that the white people’s bread and wine used in the Eucharist were the flesh and blood of men and women whom the missionaries had killed by their sorcery. Taking part in Holy Communion was therefore viewed by some as an initiation rite into the social evil most feared in the native community.

Now, as for polygamy...