

# Images of Christ

Colleagues,

This week and next we offer you successive installments of an essay one of us plucked from Gospel Blazes in the Dark, the mini-trove of papers we told you about in ThTheol #702 (<https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur112411.shtml>). The author is the Rev. Dr. Joest J. Mnemba, a Roman Catholic diocesan priest in Malawi who, back in the '80s, earned a doctorate at Christ Seminary-Seminex and the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Ed Schroeder recalls having been in steady conversation with him during his time at Seminex, though he can't recall having had him in class. Early in the past decade Ed and Marie spent several days in Malawi at the behest of Fr. Mnemba and his bishop, Patrick Kalilombe, who had dispatched him to Seminex in the first place. How the bishop got to know about Seminex is next week's story.

Fr. Mnemba takes up a topic that his pastoral and theological counterparts in the U.S. pay too little attention to, we fear. At issue is the Gospel, the "mega-joy" that God's messenger "good-newsed" some shepherds with (so reads the Greek) on the original Christmas night. The question is how to describe "this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." If Americans and westerners in general are less inclined than once they were to come "with haste" to check it out, might this be due in part to the western church's insistence on using desiccated words and concepts to identify the One at the heart of the fuss? "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Yes, blessed be the preacher or parent who repeats this a week and a half from now; but let him or her remember that none of the key words in that sentence packs the punch it once carried. U.S. presidents don't style

themselves as “saviors of the world” the way Rome’s Caesars did. Not even the English, I’ll bet, will still doff caps and mutter “m’lord” as the local poobah saunters by. Gone, in other words, are the cultural resonances and political overtones that made these terms a critical frame of reference for grasping the wonder of who Jesus is-and of equal importance, who he is not.

And if we think we’ve got a problem in the West, try conveying the good news of Jesus in sub-Saharan Africa. This, of course, is Fr. Mnemba’s calling, one that he’s been busy with for a good long while. The paper you’ll read was first presented in 1988 as a public lecture at the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College. He wants to know (you might say) how the Word-become-flesh can dwell among Malawians in such a way that they too can behold his glory. Knowing neither the language nor the culture, we can’t begin to weigh the aptness of his proposals as a means of connecting the Scriptures’ witness with the lived experience of a particular people. Nor do we know what reception his ideas got from the local cognoscenti, or whether anything came of them. If we urge you to take the time to read them anyway, it’s because, like it or not, we all face the challenge of connecting biblical language and image with the verbal and conceptual currencies of the cultures we swim in. Perhaps a close reading of Fr. Mnemba’s effort will help you identify some principles to bear in mind as you tackle the challenge yourself-already this Christmas Eve.

A caveat. Our own questions for Fr. Mnembe would center on the nature of the task that Christ was born to accomplish as much for Malawians as for Canadians, say. We suspect there’s more to be said on that subject than he manages to say here. But more on the subject when next week arrives. For now, enjoy.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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# Images of Christ in Africa – Part 1

## Introduction

The picture that most African Christians have of Christ is that he is an “expatriate” or *mzungu*, like the missionary who introduced him. That is to say, he is the God of the West, a stranger to Africa. While Christ must always be an “outsider” (i.e. above any culture), under certain aspects it still remains true that if Christianity is to be really identified as local, then Christ must be understood, not as an alien, but as the one who was to come, the one who comes to fulfill the deepest aspirations of all human searching for God.

We have to remember that Jesus as a historical person is both particular and universal. As a particular individual, the man Jesus belonged to the Jewish ethnic group and culture; but as the one risen from the dead, as the glorified one, he is no longer limited to a particular culture. [1] Because he is a universal person, Africans have also the right and privilege to see him in terms of the fulfillment of African tradition. We can see him, therefore, as the fulfillment of ancestral dreams for a powerful mediator. What follows is an attempt to provide one way of depicting meaningful images of Jesus the Christ in the African context.

## Lord of Creation (Mwinimoyo/Namalenga)

The image of Christ as “the Lord of Creation” is the one that seems to be most relevant to the African way of life. [2] Throughout Africa, people look at the World and the entire universe as sacred. The world is the domain of the spirits, whether it be in the forests, rivers, mountains, lakes or in the sky. In this respect, ancestors play a great role in the lives

of the living. In particular, they are the progenitors of life acquired from God, which they in turn effectively share with their clan descendants. Parents therefore do not just give life to their children at one point, say at the moment of birth; they continue to give life. [3]

Here, it is not only human life that continues to flow from God. All other life that is necessary to sustain humanity-the life of plants, the sun and the stars, the life of minerals [i.e. with their curative powers]-all flow continuously from God. Because of all this, Africans tend to believe in a common origin of life and a common destiny for all. There is therefore an interdependence between human life and the universe which supports it.

When Christ is introduced into such a world-view, he seems to embrace all creation and seems to transcend even the ancestors. Why is that so? In the African philosophy of life, in particular focusing on life as sequence of “self-giving” or sharing, one of the most important presuppositions is that the flow of life is a necessary condition of our being able to live fully.[4] As the Chichewa proverb puts it so well, *kupatsa nkuyika*, (to give is to put by). Really, to live authentically or meaningfully as a social person, we in our turn must automatically pass on life. Jesus can be interpreted as the Ancestor, the Creator or Life-giver as dramatized in John 1. Furthermore, the Johannine Jesus says of himself as the supreme life-giver: I have come in order that you might have life-life in all its fullness [5].

### **Christ as our Mediator (Mkhalapakati)**

The idea of mediation is one of the most common in African societies. The king or chief is normally never addressed directly, but through mediators. In the same way, ancestors who are considered to be very close to God, the fountain of life,

play the role of mediators for the living when these want to approach God in moments of distress, drought, crisis or other calamities. [6] In the same vein, Christ could be seen as one of our elder brothers who intercedes for us after his death and resurrection. Moreover, in virtue of the fact that he sits at the right hand of the Father, he fits in very well with the African idea of mediation, in particular as having a powerful intercessory role. Besides, not only does he surpass the ancestors, as Son of God he becomes our professional intercessor.

Some key passages in the Bible seem to highlight Jesus' role as a mediator in a more powerful light. The priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 is one such example. Jesus is also presented as a powerful mediator or high-priest through whom we are led to the Father in the classical texts of Hebrews 5: 1-10; 8:11-28. From these texts it is obvious that the African concept of mediation is in complete harmony with what the Bible is saying.

### **Christ as "the First-born of Creation" (Mbadwa/Mwana wachisamba)**

Jesus Christ can also be seen as "the First-born of creation", who has passed before us to the Father and has been lifted up so that he can draw all things to himself. In our African Traditional Religion, ancestors are the great mediators or intermediaries. The living people or offspring, mbumba have a real solidarity or communion of life with their deceased ancestors sometimes called the spirit fathers or elders of the clan, makolo. These living dead guarantee stability, solidarity and progress in the present community. [7]

In this respect, we could also assert that Christ is our "Ancestor" par excellence, because he plays the role of mediator and because through his passion and death he has actually proceeded us *adatitsosolera njira* in "passing over" to his

Father. He is therefore the Mbadwa, the first citizen of heaven. Moreover, as scripture attests, before Jesus' death on the cross, "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised." After Jesus' resurrection they came forth from their tombs and entered heaven so that the rest of humanity could follow.

Another equally enlightening presentation of Jesus as the Mbadwa is discussed in the farewell discourses of John the Evangelist [especially in chapters 14-17], [8] where Jesus says among other things: I go to my father to prepare you a place [14:3]. Besides, he emphasizes the fact that he is the source of new life, the way, the truth, the life, the head, the vine and so on. This way of speaking is very much in line with African thinking. Therefore, this image of Christ as "the first-born of creation" appears to be most relevant.

### **Footnotes:**

[1] An excellent discussion of the motif "Christ and culture" can be found in H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), pp. 116-41.

[2] John Mutiso-Mbinda, "Anthropology and the Paschal Mystery" in B. Hearne (ed.) *The Paschal Mystery of Christ and of all Humankind*, (Eldoret, Kenya: Goba Publications, 1979), pp. 51-52.

[3] J. G. Donders, *Non-Bourgeois Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 11.

[4] J. G. Donders, *op. cit.* p. 12.

[5] The motif "life" is one of the most popular in the gospel of John as it is mentioned fifty-two times. For an extended discussion on this see, Jose Comblin, *Sent from the Father*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), p. vii.

[6] J. Mutiso-Mbinda, *op. cit.* p. 52.

[7] J. Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 81.

[8] F. Ellis, *The Genius of John*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), p.81.

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

December 22: Part 2 of Fr. Joest Mnemba, "Images of Christ in Africa." Christ as Lamb Who was Slain, Christ as Healer, Christ as Chief.

December 29: Jerry Burce, "Justification in Nickel Words," an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification.

January 5: Bishop John Roth, "How to Disagree Well," thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.