



**Religious Life and the Cultures – the
Consequences for our Life and our
Mission**

14th April 2026

**Interculturality within
our communities**

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Summary

What is culture?

The term culture is complex and has therefore no uniform definition

Psychologists have often been reluctant to define culture explicitly

For these different reasons, the communication scientist and psychologist Gerhard Maletzke says very clearly that there is no uniform definition of culture that is generally accepted

But all the same, there are some common elements that can be found in the different definitions of culture:

Culture as a system of values, norms and practices

Culture as a network of institutions and rules

Culture as the sum of knowledge about techniques and strategies for solving certain daily problems

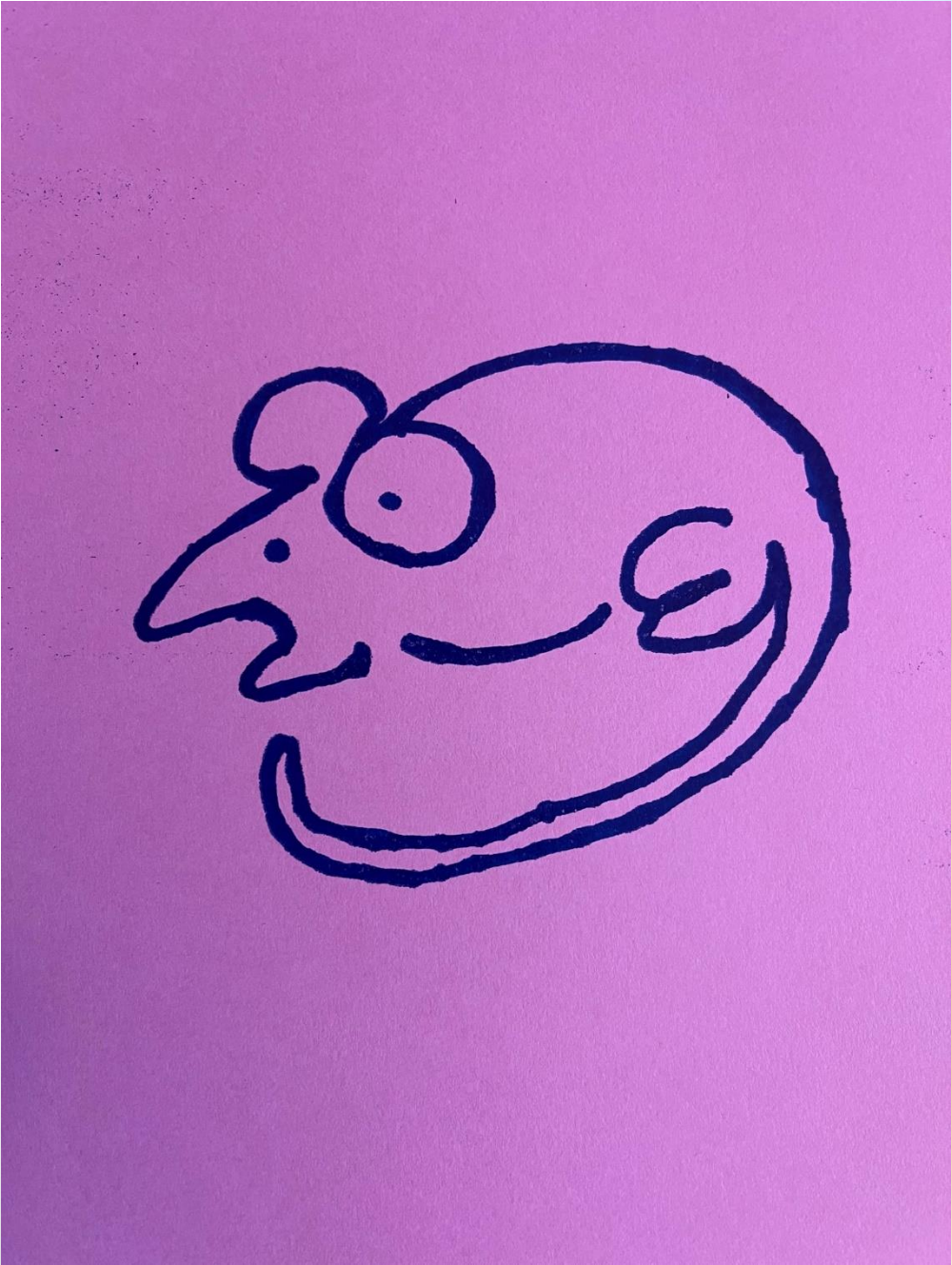
In a summary:

Culture includes what makes you and me human

It includes what has already been found and what is invented

A hand holding a glass of orange juice. A large green arrow points from left to right across the middle of the image. The text 'The importance of culture in our lives' is written in white on the green arrow.

The importance of culture in our lives



The importance of culture in our lives

The encounter with foreigners is also an encounter with foreign cultures

Culture plays an important role in interculturality because it shapes our whole behavior

It is thus fundamental in our lives:

Geert Hofstede uses the computer language to describe culture and calls culture **software of the mind**

Diana de Vallescar Palanca compares culture with the **black box** of an airplane

What is interculturality?

Interculturality is often associated with the terms multiculturalism and transculturality and these terms are sometimes even confused with each other

This makes it necessary to understand and differentiate these terms

Even though all three terms are based on culture and describe forms of social coexistence, they differ from each other

While multiculturalism clearly distinguishes itself from interculturality and transculturality, the definitions of interculturality and transculturality are not necessarily distinctively different - they overlap

Multiculturality

Multiculturality describes forms of social coexistence of national and cultural groups

Cultural diversity within the different national groups are recognised

The individual groups are understood as independent groups with equal rights within the society

There is no strive for Assimilation

The model of a multicultural society primarily describes the phenomena of living side by side

When talking about multiculturalism, the focus is on living side by side to one another

Consequently, there is striving for

- tolerance
- understanding
- acceptance and
- avoidance of conflict between the different cultural groups

Multicultural approaches support the desire for cultural diversity and try to create understanding between the different cultural groups

There is no striving for togetherness here

The cultural groups meet each other with tolerance and respect, but without entering into a process of interaction or exchange with one another

There is the need to move from multiculturalism to interculturality in religious congregations

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graph TD; A[There is the need to move from multiculturalism to interculturality in religious congregations] --> B[This is because a multicultural approach or a multicultural concept forms the basis for coexistence without conflicts in multicultural societies]; B --> C[But in my opinion, this is not suitable for religious community life since the phenomena of mixing up with each other and the exchange of cultures and ideas are not topics of multiculturalism]; C --> D[However, these phenomena are central in the community life of religious, where members have different cultural backgrounds]; D --> E[And this is because interculturality in religious life is about togetherness and not about living side by side];
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This is because a multicultural approach or a multicultural concept forms the basis for coexistence without conflicts in multicultural societies

But in my opinion, this is not suitable for religious community life since the phenomena of mixing up with each other and the exchange of cultures and ideas are not topics of multiculturalism

However, these phenomena are central in the community life of religious, where members have different cultural backgrounds

And this is because interculturality in religious life is about togetherness and not about living side by side

Interculturality

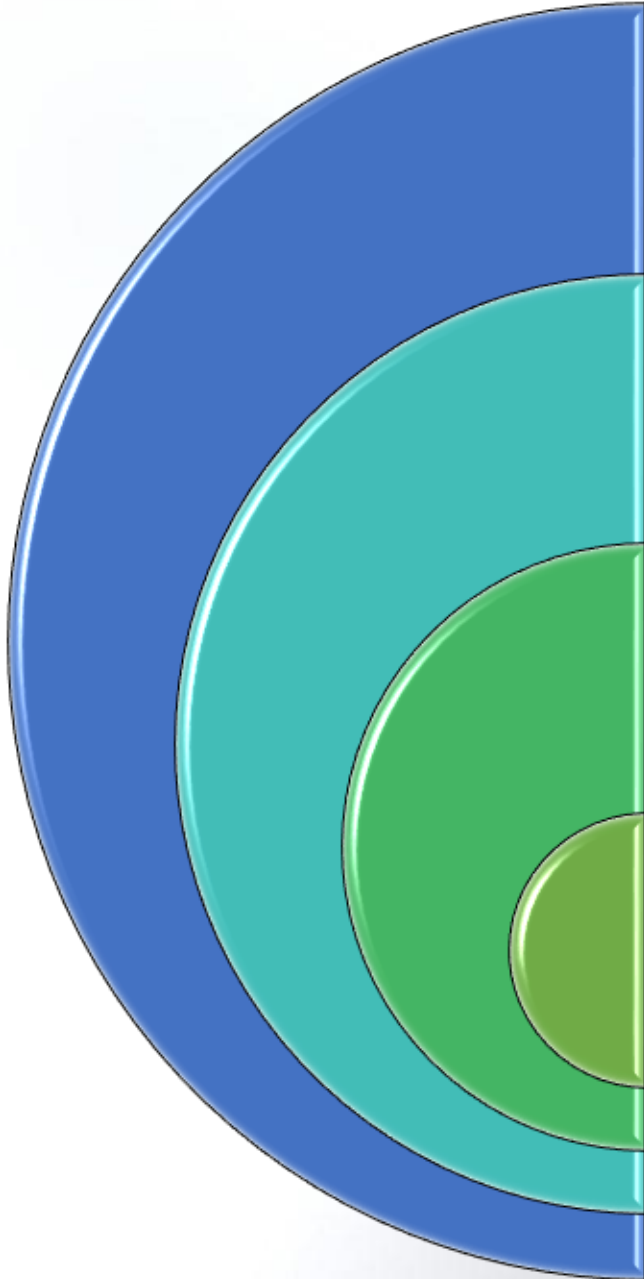
Interculturality refers, among other things, to encounters and exchanges between cultures - while preserving one's own cultural identity;

Interculturality perceives and appreciates the cultural diversity of people

Interculturality recognizes that people are equal in many ways - and therefore works to overcome

- racist
- sexist and other
- inhuman attitudes

Interculturality reveals how much people and cultures influence one another - and challenges us to critically question our own lifestyles and cultures



Interculturality sees every single person as a distinctive person with his or her own dignity

Interculturality goes beyond the boundaries of cultures and thereby also pays special attention to the diverse cultural formations within a culture

Byram puts it this way:

“interculturalism involves a conscious capacity to ,mediate‘ between two or more cultures, to observe similarities and conflicts, to generate a relationship between oneself and others, and to accept the role of a mediator”

The word *inter* in the term interculturality refers to a special form of relationships and interactions which, on the level of group phenomena, symbolise the development of a new culture

Finally, interculturality opens up new possibilities of perception by paying attention to the space *between* cultures

I call it the *third culture*. This is not just about differences and similarities, but above all about overlays, mutual dependencies and mutual penetration of boundaries and contacts

A redesign of a new culture should be possible in
this room *between* the cultures

And this is what is expected of us in our intercultural community lives:

To interact with the different cultures

To learn from the different cultures

To be ready to question one's own culture critically

To be in the position to see one's own culture not as the ultimate/best culture, but to perceive one's own culture as one from many other cultures

To be willing to give something up from one's own culture and be ready to learn something from another culture or from other cultures

To be able to accept the diversity in cultures. In this connection, Thomas of Aquinas once said in his famous Summa Theologica: God loves and blesses diversity because it is part of his creation

Transculturality

Transculturality as such, means that the encounter between two different or even opposing cultures can consequently lead to a blurring of the boundaries, but possibly also to the elimination of these boundaries

Even though I pointed out at the beginning that interculturality and transculturality cannot be clearly separated, there is still an important difference between the two terms:

With interculturality, the relationship between two different positions and perspectives is emphasised more strongly, while with transculturality, more emphasis is placed on the *common*, both on the similarities that exist "beyond" cultural differences, as well as on those similarities, that arise as a product of intercultural interaction

Transculturality emphasises the similarities between cultures, and the distinction between what is one's own culture and what is from a foreign culture is often no longer possible or hardly possible

Although transculturality can be seen as a concept that tries to grasp a transitional social form of coexistence and can provide valuable suggestions for shaping social coexistence and as such for community life, interculturality fits better into religious community life

Because "in order to treat people equally, it may be necessary to make differences - that is, to treat unequal things unequally"

In summary,

multiculturalism puts emphasis on living side by side,

transculturality stresses what is common in the different cultures

and *interculturality* is comprehensive because it pays attention to both similarities and differences in different cultures

Therefore, though both multiculturalism and transculturality are good basis for living together, it is important for religious communities to move to interculturality

Because it is the differences in cultures that become a challenge and an enrichment for living together and not the similarities

It remains a challenge to keep the uniqueness of the different cultures in a community and at the same time to find a common way of living together

Group work

What have we been experiencing in our communities?

Multiculturality,

Transculturality or

Interculturality?



Forms of cultures

We have two forms of cultures

Individualistic cultures or societies

In individualistic cultures, people see themselves as separate entities and are primarily interested in their own personal needs

Countries that have a high degree of individualism are the English speaking countries, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries

Collectivist cultures or societies

In collective cultures, people define themselves as part of the group and place group goals over individual ones

According to Hofstede, collectivist countries are found mainly in Asia and South America

Their differences in thinking

Individualistic cultures or societies

Social status is earned through performance

In factual discussions, honesty and straightforwardness are valued. Here, status differences play only a minor role

Collectivist cultures or societies

Acceptance of hierarchies and status differences, which are determined by tradition or age

In everyday social interaction direct disputes are to be avoided, especially if they would lead to the loss of face of one of the participants

Individualistic cultures or societies

The ideal is to treat people equally. No differences are made between ingroups and outgroups

Immoral behavior leads to feelings of personal guilt and individual responsibility

Collectivist cultures or societies

When allocating resources, a distinction is made between ingroups and outgroups

Mistakes or immoral acts lead to feelings of shame for the group or for the family

Individualist cultures are in the minority and collective cultures are in the majority with over 70 percent of the world population

Cultural differences in our behaviours

Intercultural conflicts usually arise from misunderstandings, especially in communication

Eye contact in encounters



There are culture-specific differences in eye contact

Western cultures - attention and politeness

Africa & Asia - Aggressiveness and disrespect

Fluency and breaks in conversation



For example, people from southern Europe only make very short breaks between their talks

On the other hand, the breaks are significantly longer among people from Scandinavian countries (northern Europe)

Yes / no answers

The words yes and no have different meanings in different cultures

In some of the European countries (eg. Germany) both answers are understood literally

Asians, on the other hand, often only say yes to express that they hear and understand, but do not necessarily agree

Instead of using the word no, many Asians prefer vague phrases that leave more possibilities open. For example:

- Perhaps
- I am not sure or
- That's very difficult

Criticism



There are huge differences between cultures when it comes to the practice of criticism

In some European countries, criticism is direct, and it goes straight to the point

In some Asian cultures, e.g. criticism is exercised indirectly and between the lines



Story Telling in the group



Ethnocentricity

Every human being is ethnocentric to a certain degree

because our cultures have brought us up and taught us
“how the world really is”

and we believe this

This can lead to the fact

that we see people from other cultures and what they do
as

- *strange* or
- *wrong*

The need to move to Ethnorelativism

Ethnocentrism and discrimination are close to each other

It is there helpful not only to avoid ethnocentrism,

but to move as a community from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism

Ethnorelativism is the ability to experience one's culture in the context of other cultures

It is the ability to see one's own beliefs and behaviours as one of several realities

- to know that there are just as many other valid points of view,
- ways of seeing things and
- ways of dealing with situations as one's own

Prejudices

Prejudices are usually judgments that are made without verifying their validity on the basis of facts

These judgments usually have a pejorative and discriminatory tendency

Prejudices become a sort of defence mechanism

There are sometimes negative prejudices and hostile feelings towards others who think differently when people feel that their daily routines and well-established patterns of thought and behaviour may be disturbed

These negative or hostile opinions sometimes arise just because a person belongs to a particular group

He/she is assumed to have the unsound practices which are attributed to that group

Based on the points mentioned above, prejudices become a challenge in intercultural living which needs to be addressed

because in the encounter of people from different cultures, such ideas and attitudes are almost always present on both sides and they influence the interaction among these people

What I find interesting, or rather dangerous for intercultural living in communities is the fact, that people usually assume that they themselves are free of prejudices

Religious are not immune to this danger and since individuals cannot clear these social prejudices automatically,

this remains a challenge when people from different cultures come together

It is therefore important that religious communities are aware of this phenomenon and to make it a point to talk about it

- Thus, not to make it a taboo topic

It is only then that it will be possible to break down such prejudices

Living in a new culture

Intercultural living presupposes that at least one person or a group of people have moved from one culture to live in a different culture

This makes it necessary to pay particular attention to the phenomenon of arriving in a new culture

Nowadays it is easy and fast to move from one country to another, thus from one culture to another

However, the process of *arriving* in the host country takes much longer than we might think

Diana de Vallescar Palanca says that one's own organism has to get used to the new environment, and it takes an average of six months to get physically adapted to the new environment



Our body shows its mental state in body language and begins to react and to adapt to

- the new rhythms
- the types of nutrition
- climatic conditions, etc.

The psyche, however, needs a bit longer and this can lead to a cultural shock

Nobody really knows what we have left behind and what we are to expect in the new culture and environment

A modulation begins between the near (here) and the far (there)

Such coordinates fulfil a new psychic meaning and lead to a redefinition of a person's affective topography

It is as if the environment, things and people impress him/her in a new way due to the

- memories
- expectations
- fears and
- emotional connections that he/she is more or less aware of

In this context, he/she almost involuntarily strives to regain his/her *there* (where he/she came from) with its mental and affective schemes and behaviours

In his/her *here* (our current situation), his/her homesickness, which is usually strong like never before, appears to be part of his/her life and seem to build his/her new identity

The new cultural situation begins to influence the personality of the person concerned and his/her way of relating to others

His/her reactions and perceptions, how he/she is being perceived by others and what he/she has learned are sometimes confused

In this situation, it is important that we show concern and understanding to the one involved and it is necessary that he/she is assisted in a way the others find appropriate to help him/her arrive *here* - also emotionally and psychologically

Intercultural encounters

Intercultural encounters are delicate and need to be accompanied with care

This is because when people from different cultures come together, different worldviews meet

This makes misunderstandings, misinterpretations and difficulties inevitable, especially due to the fact that each partner takes it for granted that his/her worldview is the only *right* and *normal* one

This is a challenge for both locals and newcomers in a particular culture, initially, for the newcomer who is in a new culture

In view of the foreign customs and traditions, he/she can no longer rely on his/her usual thinking and feels impaired in his/her ability to act in his/her self-confidence

Some react with a *defence* that they assimilate permanently in their behaviour

Others accept this *reality of differences*, create diverse correspondences through which they regain their ability to act and their self-confidence

Also, the locals are irritated by the behaviour of the other, which is foreign to him/her

Experiences of strangeness are made on both sides and it is advisable to exchange these experiences and remain in dialogue



Opening up for intercultural living

To be able to live in an intercultural community, it is important to be open minded and to be ready to accept and learn from other cultures

Learning from other cultures first of all demands, that we respect other cultures and that we are convinced of being enriched by them

This presupposes that we acknowledge the dignity of people from other cultures and that we accept to live with the diversity of cultures in our said community

Such an attitude leads to mutual respect and creates the basics for good intercultural interactions

Some measures to improve intercultural community living

For a successful intercultural living in a community, it is important to be first of all aware that there is no automatism in this regard, but that it requires sensitivity and needs to be developed

Intercultural sensitivity is not natural, and therefore its appropriation needs special attention

Martin Üffing sums this up and says that interculturality does not just happen by putting together under the same roof people of different cultures

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a glass of orange juice. The hand is in the upper right corner, and the glass is in the lower right corner. The background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient of light blue and white.

Rather it is something that needs to be consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for and attentively nurtured

It requires certain community structures, some basic personal attitudes and a strong missionary spirituality

Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication is the key to a meaningful intercultural living and the basis on which intercultural communities can be built

However, language as a means of communication is complicated, because we are not always able to fully express what we really mean, think or feel

Communication uses both verbal and non-verbal symbols which complicates the communication process when people from different cultures encounter each other

This is because not only their language is different, but also their culture contains shaped-methods of non-verbal communication and the meaning they give to certain things

Every culture shapes and develops behaviours and ways of thinking that differ from other cultures

These behaviours and ways of thinking are expressed in language. For instance, the same gesture can have diverse meanings in different cultures

Our cultures thus play an important role in intercultural communication due to the influence they have on our language, because

“Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression of their society [...]. The fact is that the *real world* is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of a group [...]. We see and hear and otherwise experience the world very much as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Pamela J. Cooper...)

In order to be able to understand each other, not only language production

- what is said,
- but also language reception – how what is said is understood, is important

since different languages have different meanings for words.

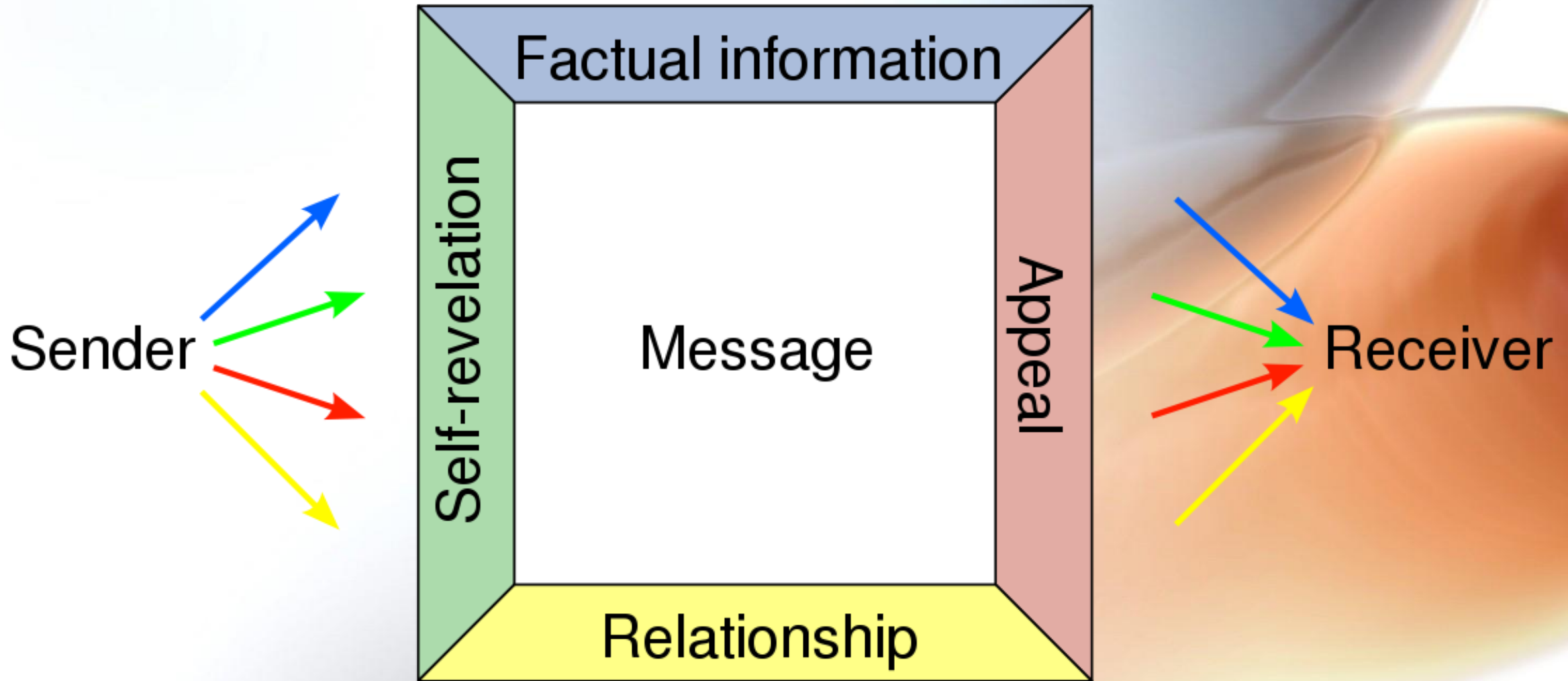
For example, the German language has the *Sie-Form* and the *Du-Form* – all meaning *you*. If I don't know someone and I want to show respect, I would use *Sie*, but if I know the person very well or we are friends, I would use *Du*. In English however, there is only that word *you* for both

These are deeply rooted in the cultural upbringing of an individual, which in turn is expressed very strongly in his/her language structures

These connections give language a special meaning as a means of communication between people from different cultures

Therefore, in order that what is said is being properly understood by the recipient, patience, enquiry and the desire to understand the other person are needed in intercultural communication

Communication square



Intercultural communication goes further; it goes beyond language

Language is only a small part of culture that is seen

Usually, there is a larger part that cannot be perceived directly

What can be seen directly is called *visible or surface culture* and is said to be about 10% of culture

and what cannot be seen directly is called *invisible or deep culture* and is estimated to be about 90% of culture

I am not so particular about the accuracy of the percentages here, because these figures differ a bit from researcher to researcher

My main concern is to underline the importance of the *invisible or deep culture*, because, effective intercultural communication can only take place, when we begin to understand the *invisible or deep culture*

Surface and Deep culture

Surface culture

What can be observed first, when I meet a stranger

These are the immediately recognizable characteristics and products of the respective culture

The visible realities, such as:

- Language
- Clothing
- Architecture
- Art
- Food or
- Forms of living together

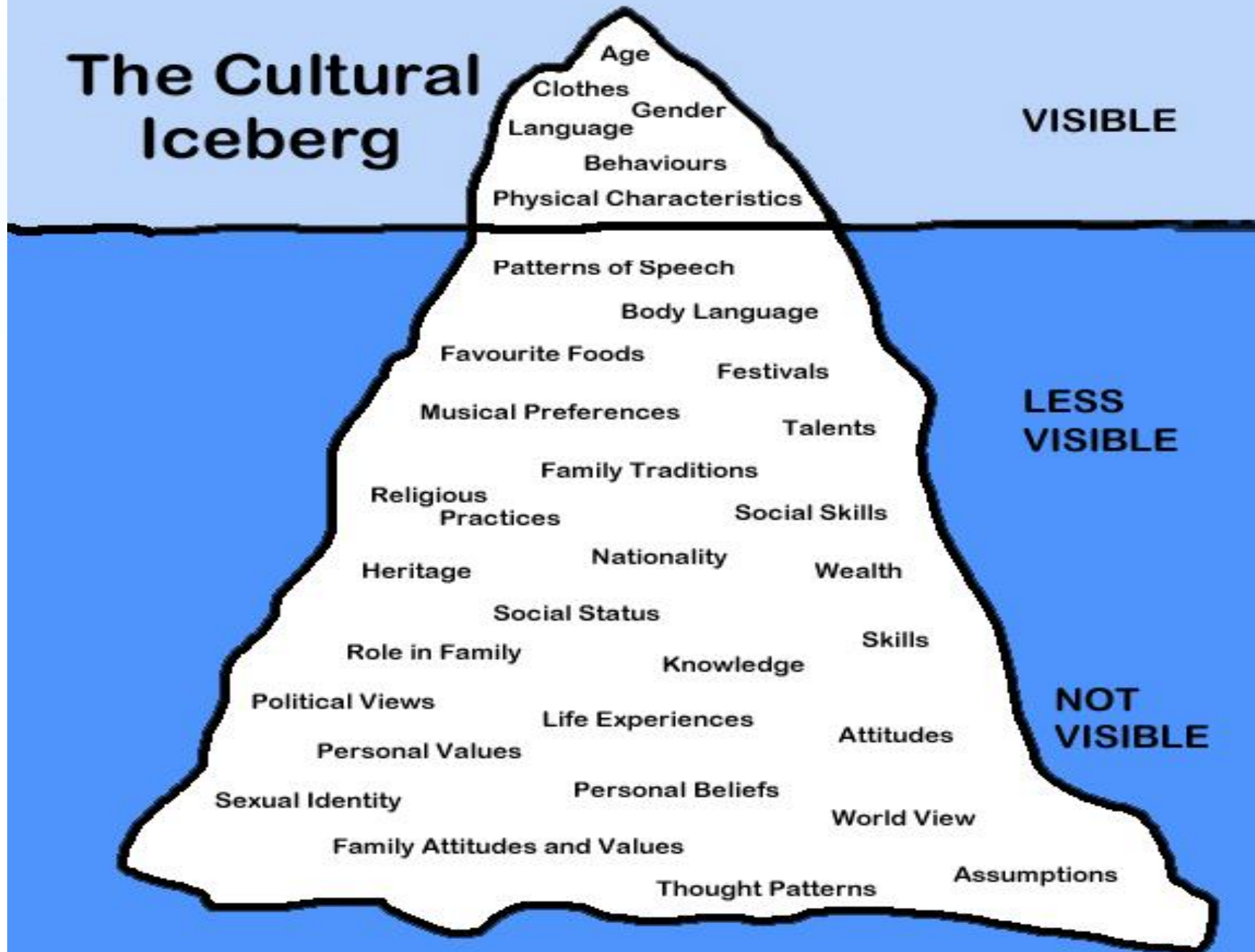
Deep culture

On the other side refers to invisible norms

They are not tangible or obvious and include:

- Feelings
- Thoughts
- Attitudes
- Convictions
- Fears and
- Values

The Cultural Iceberg



Work in pairs

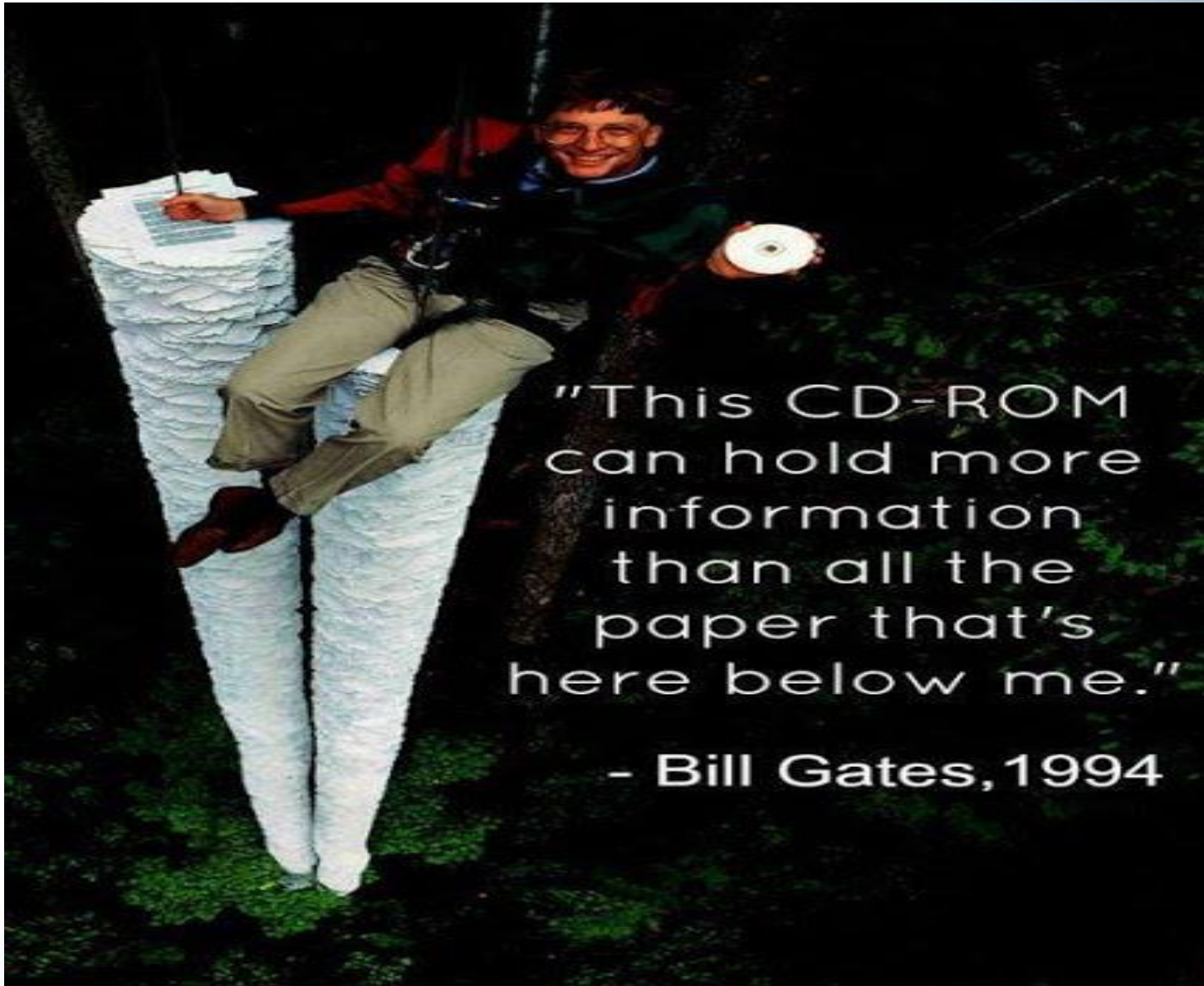
What are my intercultural experiences?

What have I learnt from that?



Generation Gap





"This CD-ROM
can hold more
information
than all the
paper that's
here below me."

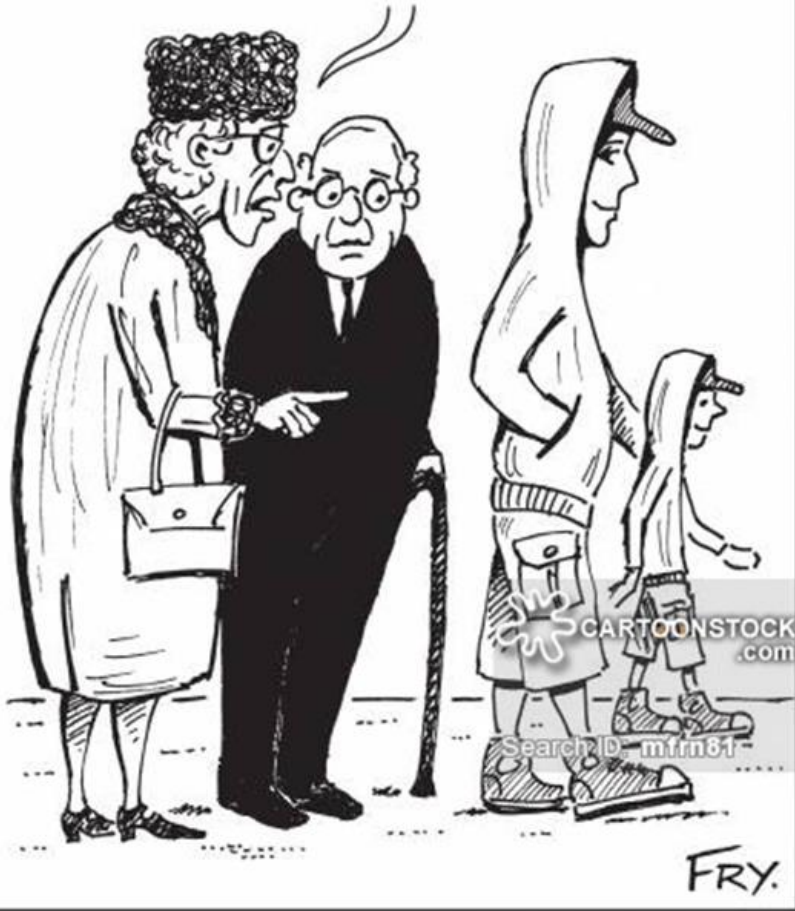
- Bill Gates, 1994



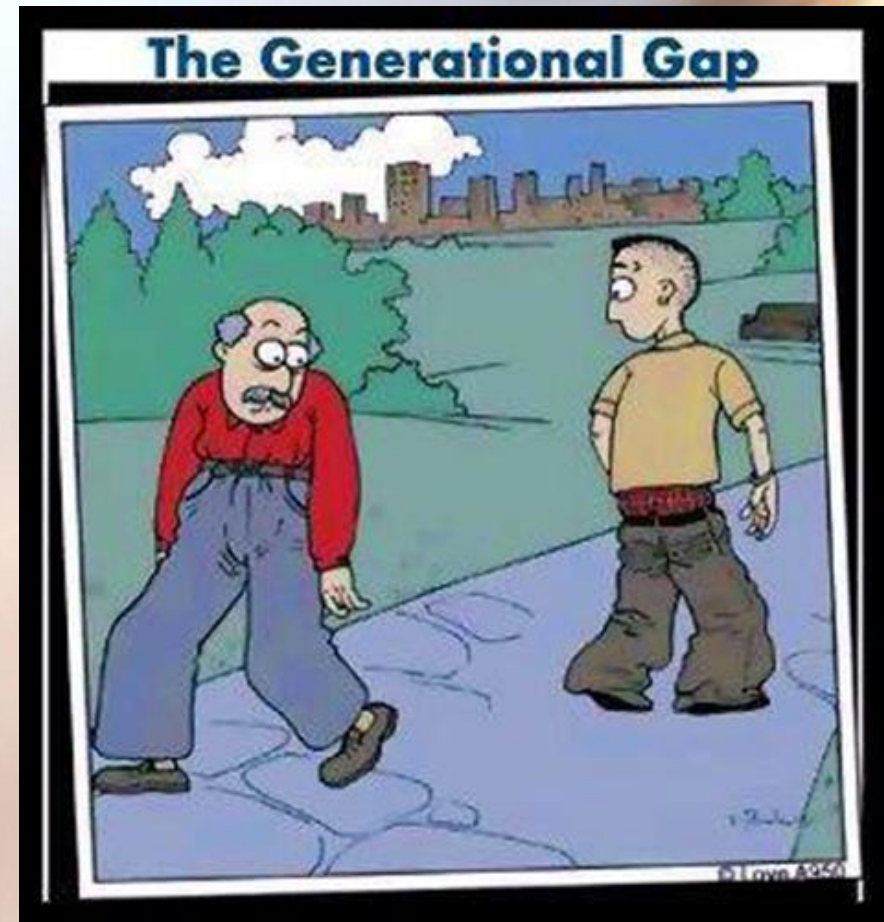




"When we were young we used to dress like our parents - these days parents dress like their children!"

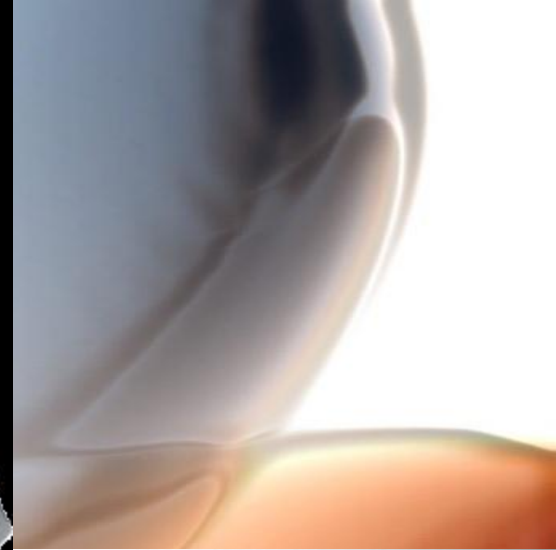


31/12/2025



Generation gap





Dealing with differences within an intercultural community

Accepting and learning to live with diversity in an intercultural community means we have to be able to live with differences

One of the important things is to have the ability of *not denying differences*

It often happens that we avoid naming differences between cultures, fearing that this could foster conflict and xenophobia

Differences between cultures are natural



Their denial is not the way to eliminate conflicts in the long term

Differences should therefore be acknowledged and taken seriously, but without the usual derogatory connotations

In this way, they can be addressed and common ways for living together can be found

Furthermore, it is important to *consider differences as a source of enrichment*

It is good to be aware of the fact that differences can not only present challenges but they can also offer opportunities and enrichment in intercultural communities

Additionally, *intercultural dialogue should be encouraged*

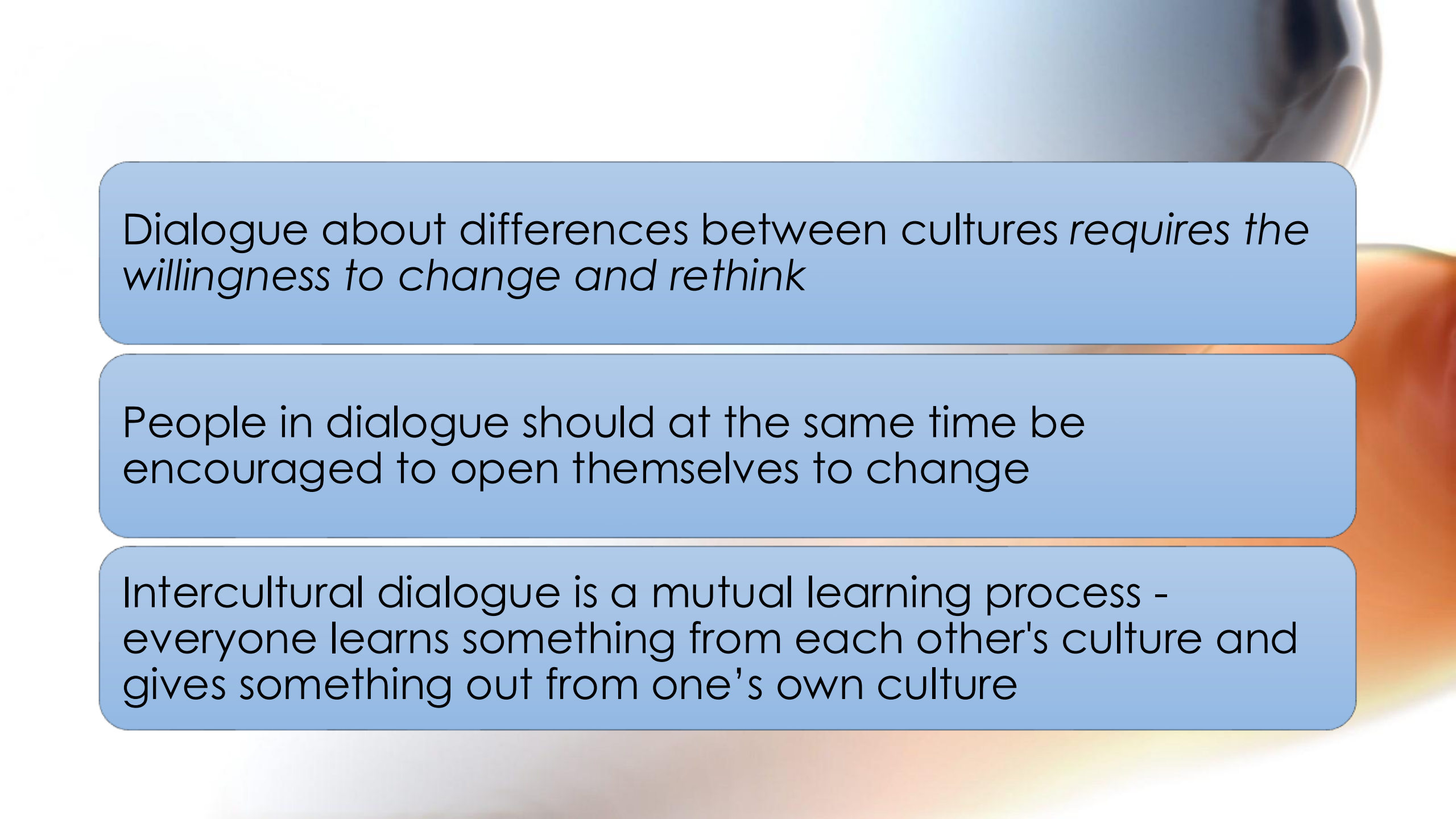
A competent approach to cultural differences in an intercultural community requires not only the addressing of problems and irritations that arise from misunderstandings, but also a dialogue on controversial validity claims of values, etc., - or simply of communication rules, because a mutual understanding can only be deepened through dialogue

It is therefore vital, that *intercultural dialogue is direct and concrete*

There is the danger of not dealing directly with foreigners when it comes to issues concerning them, but rather relying on read theories and reports of the media, which can lead to prejudices

We cannot remain by the description of others, their culture and practices that we get from the media, if dialogue is to succeed in a community

We have to speak directly with those concerned in order to get to know and understand them and the differences between us better



Dialogue about differences between cultures *requires the willingness to change and rethink*

People in dialogue should at the same time be encouraged to open themselves to change

Intercultural dialogue is a mutual learning process - everyone learns something from each other's culture and gives something out from one's own culture

This interplay of different cultural aspects in dialogue and living together leads to changes or renewal of all concerned

And this openness is necessary because intercultural dialogue can only bear fruit if renewal of cultures is allowed

All these being said, it is useful when dealing with intercultural differences to become conscious of the fact that our behaviour is shaped and influenced by our own cultures and therefore allow rethinking



**Change of
perspective
is
necessary**



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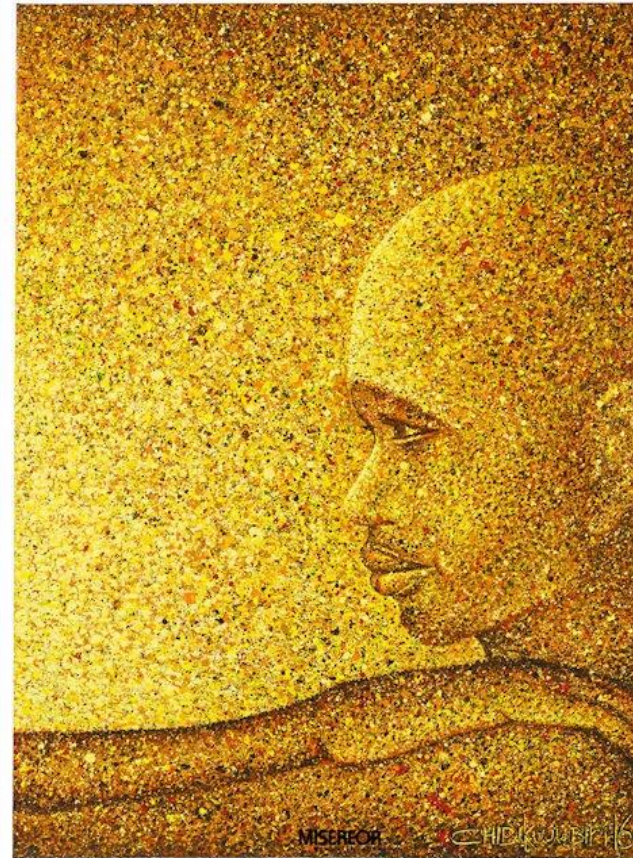
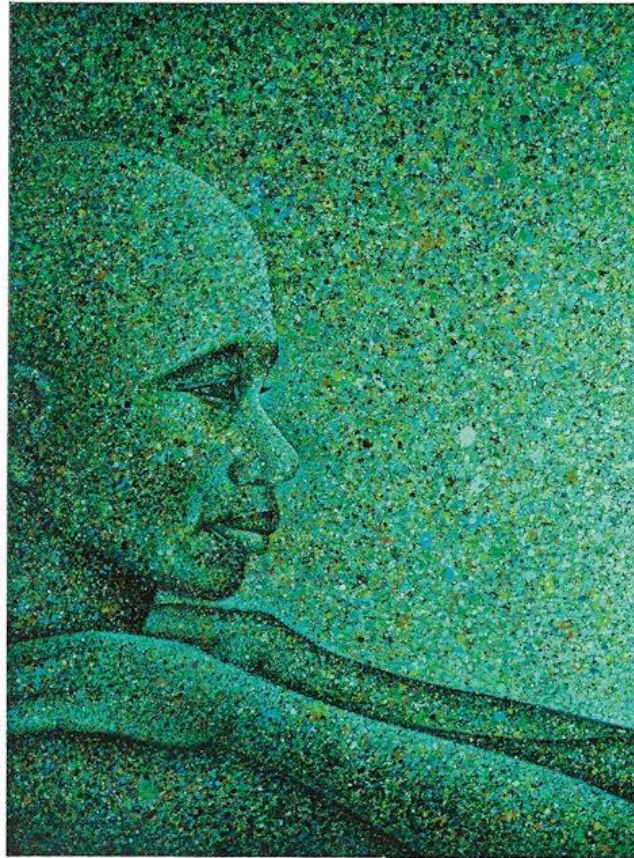
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Just because you are right does not mean I am wrong.

You have just not seen life from my perspective.

True encounter changes people!



Das MISEREOR-Hungertafel 2017 „Am lieb, weil du bist“ von Chikubi H. © MISEREOR

MISEREOR CHIKUBI H

Summary

In the encounter with other cultures, it is important to be in **dialogue** and to be critical about one's own culture and cultural practices

Because as Hostede says:

The inability to question ones own cultural practices and values appears to bring a great potential for conflict when members of different cultures live and work together




Respect for all people and their cultures is also necessary

This creates a good basis for dialogue

It is also advisable to try to **understand** the other person and their culture

Because as Henry Ford once said:

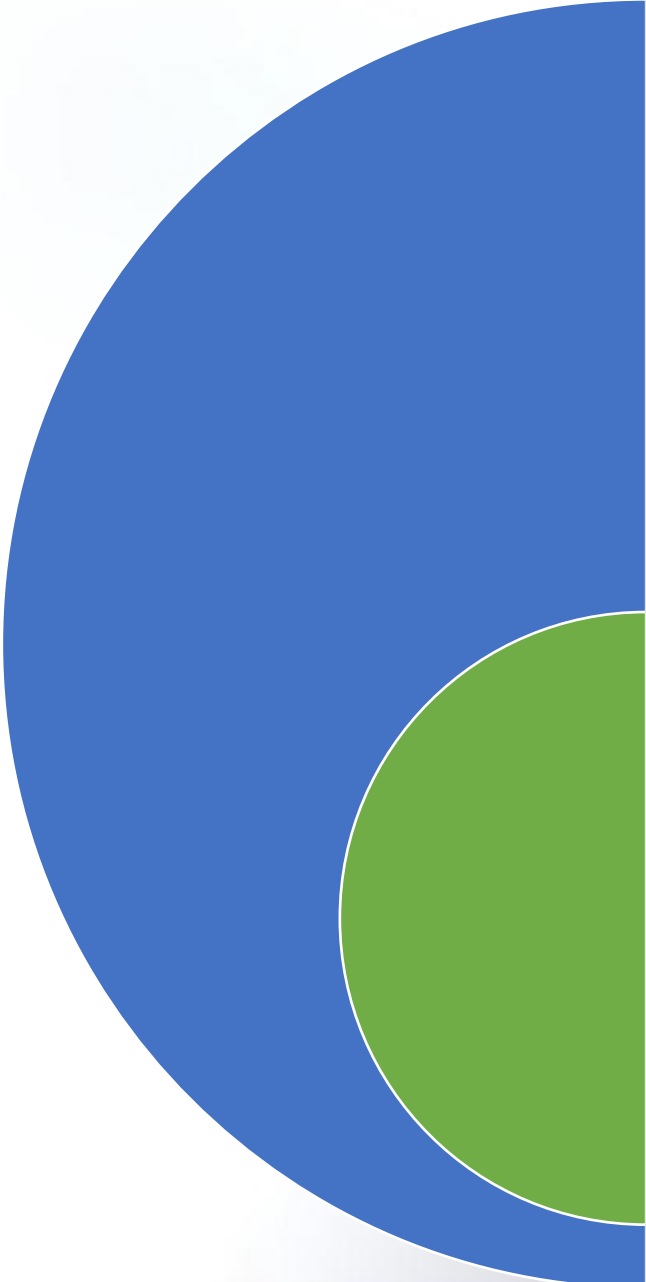
The secret of success is to understand the other person's point of view



Intercultural living is an opportunity, and yet it remains a challenge that requires determination


The local culture should not be neglected, but paid attention to, since interculturality doesn't exist in a vacuum

It should be clear to all religions that intercultural living together is a process that requires effort, both from the local and the foreign religions



It is important to ensure that the challenges associated with intercultural community living are not left unattended to, but are discussed

It is necessary in intercultural communities to recognise both similarities and differences, specify problems and formulate expectations



It should be clear to all
religious that
intercultural living
together is a process
that requires effort,
both from the local
and the foreign
religious

In intercultural
community life, it
should be possible to
rephrase the
message in the letter
to the Galatians

Instead of the
sentence:

There are no longer
Jews and Greeks, no
more slaves and free
people, no man and
woman; for you are all
one in Christ Jesus (Gal
3:28)

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graph TD; A[we should be able to say:] --- B[There are no longer religious from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania, because we are all one in Christ Jesus and are brothers and sisters]; A --- C[not in the sense that the individual loses his identity, but in the sense that living together is possible despite the different cultures];
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