

## **The ‘Hermeneutics’ of Interchurch Families – A Practical Model for Receptive Ecumenism?**

*Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi  
Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium*

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### ***Receptive Ecumenism and Interchurch Marriages***

Paul D. Murray succinctly describes the principle of “Receptive Ecumenism” as operating a “programmatically shift from prioritizing the question ‘What do our various others first need to learn from us?’ to asking instead, ‘What is that *we* need to learn and can learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?’”.<sup>1</sup> He further call this “third-phase” ecumenism a process of “patient, grace-filled learning of how each is called to grow to a new place where new things become possible”.<sup>2</sup>

It is quite obvious that such a programmatic shift calls for a real conversion of mentality and attitude. According to Murray, a number of pragmatic insights and assumptions are at the basis of such a conversion within the ecumenical movement:

First, there is a growing awareness within the Christian traditions of their “own respective wounds, difficulties and needs” which cannot be resolved from within the own existing resources and consequently call for “refreshment and renewal from without, from the alternative logics and ecclesial experiences of other traditions”.<sup>3</sup>

Second, there is the assumption that any further progress will only be possible if each tradition moves *away* from ideal, theoretical ecclesiological constructs and moves *towards* the lived reality, taking into consideration its best practices as well as the difficulties and problems, tensions and contradictions to be found there.

A third insight here is that the idea of “getting the best china tea service out” has in the end not served the ecumenical movement. Instead of showing oneself in the best possible light to one’s distant relatives who come to visit, the Christian churches have realized that they should allow the elements which they kept “locked behind the close doors of the intimate family space” to come to view.<sup>4</sup>

Overcoming self-enclosure and openness to the other, a realistic look at one’s own strengths and shortcomings, and honesty and transparency vis-à-vis oneself and toward others – these seem to be three key principles for receptive ecumenical learning.

In this paper I would like to briefly present and analyse an “ecumenical methodology” that has a lot of similarities with the one suggested by Receptive Ecumenism; one, however, that

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<sup>1</sup> P.D. MURRAY, “Introducing Receptive Ecumenism”, in: *The Ecumenist* 51 (2014), 1-8, at 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 5.

has a slightly longer state of history and practice and therefore is perhaps less likely to share in one of the limitations Murray notes for the Receptive Ecumenism project, namely that it operates “along the lines of an external consultancy model” and therefore militates “to some degree against achieving strong ownership” of the results by its respective agents.<sup>5</sup> The “hermeneutics” of interchurch couples, as I call it, provides a practical model in line with the concept of Receptive Ecumenism that has so far not adequately been acknowledged, neither by the official churches nor by the ecumenical movement – despite a glossy rhetoric that has at times referred to these marriages as “builders of unity” (Paul VI), symbols of “the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity” (Pope John Paul II), or “practical laboratory of unity” (Pope Benedict XVI).

I will first define what I understand by “interchurch couples/marriages/families” and explain why it is vital for individuals in such relations to work through their religious differences by engaging in a mutual learning process. In a second step, I will briefly portray and analyse some of the specific hermeneutical skills that interchurch families have developed and then provide a concluding remark.

### ***Interchurch Couples: Loyalties Divided between Partner and Church?***

When referring to couples and marriages in which the partners are two baptized Christians from different church traditions, many church officials and academics today refrain from using the former and more generic term “mixed marriages”. They prefer the term “interchurch marriage”. “Interchurch” then denotes a marriage or family in which each partner or spouse participates actively in his or her particular church and to various degrees also in the partner’s church; he or she is also supposed to take an active, conscientious role in the religious education of their children.<sup>6</sup> This definition explicitly distinguishes between authentically interchurch marriage and family life and nominally “interchurch” relationships. In numerous, religiously indifferent types of mixed marriages one spouse often drops out of the church and children receive religious education from only one parent; or, in a worse case when both parents drop out of religious affiliation, their children may have no religious education at all. Strictly speaking then, the term “interchurch” applies only to the first category.

George A. Kilcourse has recently complained that a lack of terminological distinction in this regard may yield misleading conclusions about the religious profile of authentic interchurch couples.<sup>7</sup> He was referring to the emerging body of empirical research that is investigating what is now commonly called “religious heterogamy”, the fact that couples come from different religious backgrounds, and its effects on the marital relationship. What Kilcourse is preoccupied with is that without any conceptual differentiation some of this research seems to substantiate the churches’ former warning that marriage with a partner from a different denomination leads into religious indifferentism and lowers the couples’ church involvement. For example, a 1995 study of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University on marriage preparation in the Catholic church in the US found that individuals in what was

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G.A. KILCOURSE, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, New York, NY: Paulist, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G.A. KILCOURSE, “Interchurch Families as Domestic Church: The Improbable Grace”, in: T. KNEIPS-PORT LE ROI ET AL. (eds.), *The Household of God and Local Households. Revisiting the Domestic Church*, Peeters: Leuven, 2010, 335-348.

indiscriminately called there “interchurch” marriages, were less likely to participate in church activities or the sacraments and equally less likely than those in same-church marriages to experience a strong sense of religious belonging. The study suggested that these couples might be more at risk for drifting away from church practice, and place less emphasis on religion in raising children than do same-church and interchurch couples who have changed to same-church affiliation.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, based on a US national sample of Catholic and Protestant homogamous and heterogamous marriages Williams and Lawler have corroborated earlier research according to which religiously heterogamous respondents reported lower levels of religiosity than same-church respondents on a number of religious variables and were less likely to emphasize religion in raising their children.<sup>9</sup> While the findings showed that individuals from different church traditions already came into marriage with a weaker sense of denominational identity, no evidence was found for an overall decline of church attendance during their marriage. The only area where interchurch respondents were more at risk for drifting from church involvement than same-church respondents was in terms of change to no religious affiliation.

These findings appear in new light when one considers whether cross-denominational individuals on average are more likely to drift away also from their partners. Studies over the past decades have provided consistent evidence that marriages in which husband and wife hold similar religious beliefs and participate jointly in religious practice have higher marital stability and report higher marital quality.<sup>10</sup> As interchurch couples usually report greater religious differences and less joint religious activities than same-church couples, one may assume that they score lower in marital satisfaction. Williams and Lawler, however, found no significant differences in marital satisfaction between different-church and same-church respondents when putting different denominational affiliation in line with other socio-demographic or heterogamous variables such as ethnicity, age or education.<sup>11</sup> They concluded that there is no relationship between religious heterogamy and marital satisfaction if religious heterogamy is measured in terms of different church belonging.

The tableau changed, however, when perceived religious differences concerning a number of topics (e.g. religious beliefs, importance of prayer and of church attendance, etc.) and joint religious activity were included in the analysis. Both became significant predictors of marital satisfaction, but in the positive direction: more joint religious activities and fewer perceived religious differences were associated with greater marital satisfaction. “This suggests there may be unique benefits or advantages to being interchurch in addition to its potential disadvantages... Those interchurch couples who successfully find a way to deal with their religious differences and fashion a joint religious life may enjoy marital benefits not available to same-church couples.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> CENTER FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY, *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting it Right* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> L.M. WILLIAMS & MICHAEL G. LAWLER, “Religious Heterogamy and Religiosity: A Comparison of Interchurch and Same-Church Individuals,” in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (2001), 465-478; see also Center for Marriage and Family, *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. L.M. WILLIAMS, N. ULM & J.E. BAKER, “Addressing Religious Differences in Couples: The Two Churches, One Marriage Program”, in: *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 24 (2013), 93-109.

<sup>11</sup> L.M. WILLIAMS & MICHAEL G. LAWLER, “Marital Satisfaction and Religious Heterogamy: A Comparison of Interchurch and Same-Church Individuals,” in *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (2003), 1070-1092.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 1088.

One conclusion which may be drawn from these findings is that religious differences matter the more important religion is to the individual or couple. Interchurch individuals for whom religiosity does not mean much are obviously not very likely to withdraw even further from church practice (and if they do, they may lose any religious affiliation at all); nor will they easily drift away from the partner for purely religious reasons. Low religiosity may therefore contribute to religious factors having less influence, either positively or negatively, on the marriage. High religiosity, by contrast, is found to aggravate religious differences and will probably put these couples at greater risk for marital problems.

However, religion can not only be a “divisive force” in marriage, it can also be a “cohesive or bonding force” as evidenced by the positive marital outcomes when the spouses manage to cope with their religious disparities and create a shared religious life. This suggests, and herein lies a second conclusion, “that it is not religious differences per se that are problematic, but how they are managed”.<sup>13</sup> In other words, interchurch individuals who do not want their religious beliefs and practices having a negative effect on the quality of their marriage need the ability to communicate with and mutually respect one another while exploring their differences – including the religious ones.

### ***“Interchurch Family Hermeneutics” in Practice***

A first-hand account of how interchurch couples very practically manage to make a positive use of their religious differences is offered in a document entitled “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity” that was adopted as a kind of manifesto by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families near Rome in 2003.

This text provides a narrative account of how authentic interchurch couples and their families self-describe the specific learning process they have gone through when building up a shared religious life. Put in a systematic way, four competences in particular are referred to here. I will very briefly summarize them:

1. In its second part entitled “The Contribution of Interchurch Families to Christian Unity”, the Rome document starts out to describe the initial phase of an interchurch marriage:

When an interchurch couple first meets, the two individuals often share the mutual ignorance and prejudice of their fellow church members. They can easily assume that the differences and tension between their two ecclesial communions, which have been causes of separation in the past, are irreconcilable. But because they love and respect one another, and try to forgive each other’s weaknesses, they soon grow to love and respect each other’s churches. (C 1)

It is important to note that this approach conceives of the loving relationship as embracing the partners not only in their personal characteristics but also in their social connectedness and thus also as bound up with a religious community. The document explicitly points out that “as marriage partners... (interchurch couples, TK) want to share all that is of value in each other’s lives, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial communions” (B 2). Thus, in a process of exploring and of getting to know the other in his/her ecclesial involvement, ignorance and prejudice toward the other church are said to be overcome and mutual respect to take place. Likewise, the process of exploration pertains

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 1089.

also to the partner's church community in its concrete reality including "ways of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority, and ethics" (C 2). This can lead to "a mutual appreciation of the positive gifts of each other's churches and a mutual understanding of their weaknesses" (C 2). We find here a first basic criterion for a specific "interchurch hermeneutics" which is to *improve knowledge and gain understanding of and respect for the other and his/her religious affiliation*.

2. A further stage is reached when in that same spirit and practice of "mutual immersion and participation in the life of their two church communities" (C 1) the spouses are enabled "to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being" (C 2). The document distances itself from a form of perception and judgement that is determined by one's "own values, emphases, use of language and structure of thought" – a perception and attitude that has been characteristic for a past polemical mentality "in which one church often defined itself by what another was not". Interchurch couples who are able to *overcome such "cognitive egocentrism" and empathize with the other and the other's church by assuming his/her perspective* thus witness to a second hermeneutical skill.

3. A third competence emerges when interchurch families report on their coming to understand "that the same truth can be expressed in a variety of forms, and that very often the more ways in which it is expressed, the deeper we penetrate into its reality" (C 2). Through their way of living in each other's religious tradition "they realize that all differences are not church dividing, but many are complementary and can lead to the enrichment of diversity" (C 1). What is described here is the cognitive ability to *transcend the own and the other's position and attain a meta-perspective from which initially perceived divergences appear reconcilable and new sense is generated*. The relevance of this ability can hardly be overestimated when interchurch families are to develop a shared religiosity rather than leading a religious life in parallel. To do so, a fourth and final competence is needed which leaves the realm of pure cognition and turns into practice.

4. What is meant here is the capacity for *self-conscious ethical decision making and action*. Interpersonal identity development requires that a person who has got insight into the relativity of his/her own and the other's perspective is able to suspend and revise his/her previous reliance on and trust into external sources of authority and the value systems connected to them. Successful interchurch families will automatically develop a critical judgement vis-à-vis particular beliefs and practices of the denominational churches if they are to construct a shared religious identity. The Rome document welcomes this last competence for instance when interchurch couples are granted the right "to forge their own particular family traditions which may incorporate much of the (Christian spiritual, TK) traditions of the two families in which they were brought up, but now fused into a new pattern" (B 2). It is taken into account that "(t)here can be a clash between what...(interchurch families, TK) wish to do and judge to be right for their family life and its unity, and the (often conflicting) attitudes and rules of their respective two ecclesial communions" (B 5). In cases of conflict, the principle is recognized "that to go beyond the rules is not always to go against them" (B 5).

### ***Concluding remark***

It has become clear that such hermeneutical competences appear as an indispensable tool for interchurch individuals to strike a balance between their loving commitment to the partner on

the one side and allegiance to their own church community on the other. The intrinsic connection between partnership quality and religious involvement shows that satisfying spousal community in the interchurch family cannot be achieved by ignoring or putting aside religious differences but only by working them through and by reaching new common ground beyond formerly held religious positions. Could it be that authentic interchurch couples and families have practiced already for quite some time what the ecumenical movement is now discovering under the term of receptive ecumenism?

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