

Zeitschrift: Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie

Band: 109 (2019)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Inter-(ecclesial-)cultural learning as receptive ecumenism : prospects for an intra-Christian dialogue

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-939206>

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Inter-(ecclesial-)cultural Learning as Receptive Ecumenism

Prospects for an Intra-Christian Dialogue

Douglas Pratt

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been something of a methodological turn in ecumenical reflection and action. Receptive Ecumenism speaks of a shift of ecumenical orientation – from churches negotiating some form of institutional “togetherness” with a view to achieving “full and final union”, to an act of sharing experiences, activities, and insights for mutual learning and reciprocal enrichment. The Church in the local context is validated as the arena of mission, gaining support from, and contributing its experience back into, that sense of “membership one of another” which transcends denominational particularity. Ecumenism is thus more clearly construed as a relational *modus operandi* rather than an ecclesial structural goal.

In this paper, I will explore the meaning and application of the term “Receptive Ecumenism” as a strategy of intercultural and inter-ecclesial ecumenical learning. I begin with the question: What is Receptive Ecumenism? Then I explore the concept in reference, first, to the relational process of being Christ-like; second, as a transformative praxis, or being Church ecumenically; third, as the relational dynamic of being an ecclesial fellowship in *missio Dei*; and fourth, as the ecclesial identity of belonging together in Christ. The conference at which this paper was first presented engaged two levels, or forms, of interculturality. On the one hand the cultures of place: Indian and European. On the other hand, the cultures of ecclesial identity: Mar Thoma and Old Catholic. We learn from each other in the give and take of intercultural relations at both levels. And in the context of the ecumenical frame of the relationship, the motif of Receptive Ecumenism applies. Accordingly, I also ask how Receptive Ecumenism might inform relations between the Mar Thoma and Old Catholic Church communities, as well as other bilateral ecumenical relationships elsewhere.

2. What is Receptive Ecumenism?

In essence, Receptive Ecumenism is an ecclesial dialogical process of openness and willingness to be critically self-reflective so that, in humility, each can learn or receive from the other. Professor Paul Murray of Durham University, United Kingdom, who devised the concept and coined the phrase “Receptive Ecumenism”, has stated that it

(...) represents a way of ecumenical ecclesial conversion and growth that is both remarkably simple in vision and remarkably far-reaching in potential (...). (...) receptive ecclesial learning is envisaged as operating not only in relation to such things as hymnody, spirituality, and devotional practices but as extending to doctrinal self-understanding and, even more so, respective structural and organisational-cultural realities.¹

The critical issue, namely “whether we can live difference for mutual flourishing rather than mutually assured destruction”, as identified and articulated a decade or so ago, remains painfully present within the orbit of current geopolitical as well as local sites of tension.² And if in today’s world the quest for inter-communal and inter-religious harmony is pressing upon us, then the “simple point vis-à-vis Christian ecumenism” is the challenge for Christians to build and improve *intra*-religious relations in a manner that, hopefully, provides both a way forward for the Christian community as a whole and a relational model that can have a wider application in other contexts.³ The central idea, according to Murray, “is to take seriously the reality of the contemporary ecumenical moment”, which is marked by a falling away from the impetus for some form of structural or organic union in fulfilment of the goal of ecclesial unity.⁴ In light of that reality, and upholding, still, the goal of full ecclesial union as an eschatological intent, the thrust of ecumenism *now* is on the way of ecclesial living under the horizon of the eschatological goal, but without pursuing a temporal and structural expression of it in an attempt to realise or implement it any time soon.

¹ Paul D. Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism. The Basic Idea’. Unpublished paper (2012), 1. Murray is a Roman Catholic lay theologian and professor at the Centre for Catholic Studies, Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, UK.

² Paul D. Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning. Receiving Gifts for Our Needs’, *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008) 30–45: 31.

³ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning’ (as note 2), 31.

⁴ *Ibid*, 32..

In other words, Receptive Ecumenism sets aside church union as its driving motivation in favour of something else, namely a new valuation, and way, of engaging in inter-church relations. And in this regard, concerns that dominate church union negotiations – What do our Christian partners need to learn from us? What is for us non-negotiable in terms of re-structuring into a combined future?; and so forth – give way to the humility and openness of seeking simply to learn – to receive – from the wisdom, experience, and integrity of our ecclesial partner. Thus “Receptive Ecumenism is about each tradition taking responsibility at every level of its life for its continued learning and potential further flourishing *in the face of the other*.”⁵ We ask not what it is that the other needs to learn from us, but what it is we may receive from the other that may contribute positively to our own future ecclesial life and will further enrich the dynamic relationship in which we are mutually engaged. As Murray puts it, “the aim is for each of the Christian traditions, singly and jointly, to become more, not less, than they currently are by recognising their own respective sticking points and correlatively learning from and receiving of each other’s particular gifts.”⁶ For the “integrity of traditions consists not merely in doing the same things in different ways and different locations but in doing, as required, genuinely fresh things in familiar or recognisably coherent ways” and, furthermore, that the ecumenical challenge “requires to be lived through attentive hospitality to the truth of the other in specific circumstances.”⁷ With these general remarks concerning the orientation and basic definition of Receptive Ecumenism in mind, I now proceed to tease out the theological understanding and dynamic of this term and how it might contribute to the way we engage in intercultural learning in an ecclesial context.

3. Receptive Ecumenism as Relational Process: Being Christ-like

An Australian ecumenist has explained that Receptive Ecumenism is a church-life process where the critical focus is on what “we need to learn about being Christ-like from one another, rather than what do we have to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁷ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism. The Basic Idea’ (as note 1), 2.

tell the other – or even, how can the other become more like us!”⁸ Dispositions of love and humility mark this process. “It requires us to know – and accept – that we are each different, that we each have our own gift, our own charism.”⁹ Receptive ecumenism is to be understood as a process, something that has to be worked at, developed, and brought to fuller fruition. It is not simply a *pro tem* matter – it is no mere ‘holding pattern’, as it were, awaiting a signal to resume the otherwise normal business of inter-ecclesial negotiation to effect structural change. Nevertheless, receptive ecumenism is formally supported, theologically, by the conviction of “the abiding and permanent *significance* of the call to organic, structural ecclesial unity regardless of the changed ecumenical situation in which we find ourselves” together with “a relaxed conviction that *ecumenical theology must today be a matter of praxis* – of transformative reflection on and therapeutic diagnosis and analysis of practice.”¹⁰ The call to visible institutional unity remains a horizon-beckoning motive; engagement in a relational practice of ecumenism is the immediate and tangible motive.

In this regard, Murray urges, rather evocatively, our need “to ‘lean-into’ the promise of God’s purpose and the presence of God’s Spirit and to ask what it means in practice for us to enter into this more fully in the here and now.”¹¹ The receptive ecumenical context is one of attentive hospitality toward each other; honouring, respecting, and receiving from the lived truth of the other. The motif of hospitality has been usefully employed in the context of Christian reflection upon and approaches to interfaith dialogue. The essential motif of offering hospitality to our neighbour as both a practical and theological act in the blessing of God is both given and received, and applies just as equally to the intra-faith relations of ecumenism as to interfaith or inter-religious relations.¹²

The essence of all Christian mission activity is the practice of embassy – an outward movement of service and engagement – and the welcoming drawing-in of hospitality. Thus “the giving and receiving of hospitali-

⁸ Geraldine Hawkes, ‘Receptive Ecumenism. Encounter with Beauty, Truth and Love’. Unpublished paper (2013), 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning’ (as note 2), 34 (italics added).

¹¹ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism. The Basic Idea’ (as note 1), 4.

¹² See Anglican Network of Interfaith Concerns Report, *Generous Love. The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue. An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2008), 8.

ty is a most powerful sign that those who were strangers are reconciled to one another as friends.”¹³ This is surely a leitmotif of the ecumenical experience; an exemplification of the truth of the Pauline affirmation that Christians are “members one of another”¹⁴. Indeed, there are many biblical references to and models of hospitality.

The motif of God being found in the Christ who both goes before us among our neighbours, and comes to us in the guise of the stranger in our midst, provides, in part, a theological rationale for (...) the exercise of hospitality to stranger and neighbour, with the clear message that in so doing an appropriate response and relationship to the Divine is being enacted.¹⁵

Furthermore,

[i]n the life of the Church there may be moments of Eucharistic hospitality, for instance, when the Christian companion of another tradition is admitted to the intimate and tradition-specific enactment of the ritual because, in the prevailing context, for whatever reason, they have no other avenue of accessing this means of grace. The discharge of hospitality is not just a duty; it is also itself a moment of grace infused with deeper spiritual significance.¹⁶

Hospitality “sets the context for mutual respect.”¹⁷ To the extent this is, indeed, a mutual reality, there is great enrichment of both personal discipleship and community identity: those involved “lean-into” the promise of God’s purpose. The focus of Receptive Ecumenism is on what can be mutually and complementarily received as helpful, enriching, and contributive to a wider vision of what it means to be Church here and now; what it means for the Church to be relevant to and for the contemporary world in which it is situated – and that implies, if not demands, surpassing the patterns of narrow denominational identity and focus that have predominated, even in an ecumenical age. Indeed, there is genuine enthusiasm for this way of being Christian and being Church which is underpinned by a lively awareness that mutually instructive ecclesial learning is a creative process. “Like any good learning it will only be effective if each church takes an active part in it.”¹⁸

¹³ Anglican Network, *Generous Love* (as note 12), 13.

¹⁴ Eph 4:25; cf. Rom 12:5.

¹⁵ Douglas Pratt, *Being Open, Being Faithful. The Journey of Interreligious Dialogue* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 139.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gerard Kelly, ‘A New Ecumenical Wave’. Unpublished paper (2010), 7.

4. Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Praxis: Being Church Ecumenically

I suggest Receptive Ecumenism is a process of ecclesial openness and willingness to be critically self-reflective so that, in humility, one can receive from the other and, in doing so, acknowledge the other as different, yet equally, fellow Christian with whom, in this relationship of shared interaction, there exists the prospect of deepening the journey of discipleship and the living out of the way of Christ today. As Murray reminds us: “The recurrent challenge of Christian existence is to recognise that Christianity is not primarily a belief system but a practice – the practice of discipleship. At its heart is a life lived; indeed a life – the life of Christ in the Spirit – that is lived into and lived out of.”¹⁹ Receptive Ecumenism is at heart a transformative practice. It is about Churches – or rather people from different Church traditions and identities – engaging in and celebrating Christian life together: “[A]ll we have already done and will continue to do together.”²⁰ It involves re-imagining what it means to be Church in the context of unity in genuine and lived diversity. And that involves creatively rethinking the “vision and disposition for our journey together in new ways.”²¹ It is about both sharing with and learning from one another, and, in the process, “becoming more fully who we are called to be – institutionally as well as individually.”²²

The focus of Receptive Ecumenism is thus on what can be mutually and complementarily received as helpful, enriching, and contributive to a wider vision of what it means to be Church, ecumenically.²³ This contrasts with the long-standing model of ecumenism regarded in essence as a process of negotiating an organic or institutional structural unity that predisposes participants towards being sensitive to what might be “lost” vis-à-vis the outcome, and so therefore what needs to be preserved in the context of negotiation. This is the ecumenism of unification, the assumption that the driving motif – “that we may all be one” – necessitates a singular result: One Church Institution, whether by dint of a new creation, or by being enfolded back into a presumed original structure. This reduces the ecu-

¹⁹ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning’ (as note 2), 36.

²⁰ Hawkes, ‘Receptive Ecumenism’ (as note 8), 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cf. Gabriel Flynn, ‘Vatican II and the World Council of Churches. A Vision for Receptive Ecumenism or a Clash of Paradigms?’, *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008) 6–29.

menical venture to the art of subtle ecclesial seduction: an enticing of the (inferior/later) partner to join with or return to the (superior/earlier) partner such that the ecumenical goal is, in effect, equated with but one partner's ecclesial identity. It presupposes an understanding of ecumenism as essentially and ontologically static: the very idea of Church is taken to mean a divinely given concept of something that, in its endurance through time and space, implies something essentially fixed such that what is concretely the case now is, at best, an approximation, an imperfect and limited reflection of what should be the case and that, once the case is obtained, then nothing further is needed or required. Some institutional expressions of Christian Church presume, or have presumed, their arrival at or coincidence with the divine template. But even here, as in all cases of Christian identity, history shows change, development, dynamism – marks of the living relationship with God who is both transcendent and immanent; who is Absolute Creator, responsive Son, and interactive Spirit.

In many respects, Receptive Ecumenism is not so much a wholly new stance so much as a re-focusing upon and adopting a new mode of intentional strategizing in respect of ecumenical relationship as such. Murray avers that “the distinctiveness of Receptive Ecumenism lies not in its having developed the basic idea of ecumenical learning and receptiveness *de novo* but in the way in which it takes this admirable disposition and accords a strategic, programmatic priority to it in the hope of releasing its potential and shaping influence in ways previously not achieved.”²⁴ In particular, the way of Receptive Ecumenism is premised on a self-reflective moment that asks “how the difficulties in one's own tradition might, with integrity, be creatively addressed; and one's tradition accordingly re-imagined in the light of learning from one's significant ecumenical others.”²⁵ Furthermore, the conviction concerning this is that it is “an ecumenically significant question with great transformative potential that can continue to be asked even where there is no realistic chance of coming to closer, programmed agreement” or other forms of structural combination.²⁶

What might this mean for the prospects of inter-ecclesial learning as such, and across different cultural and linguistic contexts, in particular? Receptive Ecumenism does not just apply to theological and pastoral

²⁴ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning’ (as note 2), 39.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

fine-tuning exercises between denominations with a shared language and otherwise common or compatible culture. The worldwide Christian community is hugely diverse in terms of linguistic, cultural, and historical identity. And alongside theological positioning there lies a raft of other dimensions to the Christian life that can be engaged – the challenges of parish life; perennial issues of theological education; questions of diaconal ministry as a mark of the church's life; and an expression of the order of ministry, among many others.

5. Receptive Ecumenism as Relational Dynamic: Fellowship in *Missio Dei*

As noted, ecumenical engagement has often tended to be reductionist and one-way resulting in a fraught process of ecclesial posturing and negotiation. As a consequence, church union, the organic goal of the ecumenical movement, has seen very little real or lasting success – the examples of the Churches of North and South India, Uniting Churches in Australia and Canada, among others, notwithstanding. Receptive Ecumenism, however, offers a more dynamic approach: oneness is the gracious gift of an encompassing dynamic fellowship; a genuine unity in diversity, and diversity held together in unity, that allows for both continuing plurality of ecclesial identity and structure as well as a necessary on-going dialogical engagement as the vehicle for the dynamism of the unity of being together on a journey of discipleship. Importantly,

(...) the primary aim is about promoting growth *within* each of the traditions rather than, directly at least, *between* them. As such, Receptive Ecumenism represents a strategy aimed not, in the first instance at least, at *overcoming* difference, nor at finding common middle ground *between* the traditions, but at seeking to promote learning precisely *in face of* and *across* continuing difference (...) in such a way as implies not the forsaking and diminishing of diverse particular identities but their intensification and enrichment.²⁷

Receptive Ecumenism is perhaps more an example of realising, rather than being a realised, eschaton: ultimate destiny is in the way of being, not in a final resting point. Receptive Ecumenism is thus relational and existential; indeed, it expresses a relational ontology of the Christian life. The focus is on a lived relational reality for co-operation, partnership, creativ-

²⁷ Ibid.

ity and gracious forbearance in a climate of mutual hospitality. This enables a dynamic ecclesial interrelationship to be manifest: Unity in God the Father is the horizon for diverse encounter with God the Spirit and manifold inspirational apprehension of God the Son. Mutual learning and acceptance is the *modus vivendi*: being minister, priest, and servant to each other. Identity affirmation and deepening is the existential outcome: both personal (we are all equally Christian, and differing so) and corporate (the strength of unity in Christ found and manifest through the mutual reception of our diversities).

When ecumenical dialogue and relationship ceases, there is no more dynamic, so no more dynamic unity: *ergo*, no ecumenism. The greater purpose of ecumenical dialogue is to be engaged in the perennial task of ever seeking to fulfil, together, the call of the *missio Dei*; to be Christ to and servant of one another; and together, in dynamic interrelationship, to be Christ to and servant of a world in need. Thus, as a consequence of mutual reception – wherein the Spirit guides and inspires in and through the variety of gift (charism) that is found richly in and through the very diversity of Christian identity and ecclesial arrangement – might churches in the togetherness and tension of their dynamic unity be able to be truly the Church *in and for* the world?

6. Receptive Ecumenism as Ecclesial Identity: Belonging Together in Christ

Receptive Ecumenism is also narrative-extending. That is to say, the multilayered Christian narrative that shapes the ecclesial identity of each faith community is enriched by its very participation in the concrete project of ecumenical engagement, so enhancing Christian identity and deepening the sense of Christian belonging together in Christ: “whose we are and whom we serve.” It is grounded and innovative, reflecting the best of the concept of a living tradition. Thus genuinely fresh things happen; the life of the Christian community is not a matter of repetition *ad infinitum* of things past. And the receptive ecumenical relationship is marked clearly by reciprocal authority: no one partner can dominate, but where practical or other circumstance calls for a lead from one, this is offset by a reciprocating action of leadership by the other, so complementing and extending the leadership of both.

The inclusive life of the Church is found in the identity of an ecumenical fullness which in turn is based on the receptive interweaving of the

ecclesial gift. It advances the *missio Dei*; it is for the sake of a world ever in urgent need of justice and redemption, not for the satisfaction of administrative arrangement premised on the lowest common theological or organisational denominator. And the mark of catholicity is important. By being in an ecclesial context of ecumenical partnership and engaging in Receptive Ecumenism, an inclusive dynamic is manifest: the universal body of Christ is a living body; the sum of its mutually interacting parts. This can have significant implications for bilateral ecumenical dialogues where issues such as the interchangeability of ministry, the mutual recognition of different but equally valid expressions of episcopate, and matters of inter- or full communion are to the fore. Receptive Ecumenism can offer both a theological principle and a programmatic praxis.

7. Conclusion

From the foregoing, we may discern marks of Receptive Ecumenism as follows: it combines engagement in the concrete acts and practices that constitute church life, together with exercising self-understanding in relation thereto. It attends appropriately to the structures of church life that will facilitate this ecumenical reality. The receptive ecumenical context is one of attentive hospitality toward each other; honouring, respecting, and receiving from the truth of the other. Enthusiasm for this way of being Christian and being Church is underpinned by a lively awareness that, indeed, ecclesial learning is a creative process. Genuinely fresh things can happen. The life of the Christian community is not a matter of simple repetition *ad infinitum* of things past. Tradition is not static.

Receptive Ecumenism may be regarded as an example of and a methodology for intercultural learning which, in the context of ecumenical relationships, amounts to a path of inter-ecclesial learning. Its fundamental premise is clear: ecumenical interlocutors come together not to proclaim themselves to each other, but to listen to what the other has to share and, importantly, to what the other asks. The learning moment occurs in the dynamic of a question formulated and a response forthcoming. There is here no presupposition by either party that the other is to be treated with a measure of reserve on account of a manifestly predetermined agenda that forecloses the ecumenical discourse between them. What might all this mean for the ongoing relationship between the Mar Thoma Church in India and the Old Catholic Church of Europe? What might it mean for other ecumenical relationships in other parts of the world?

It seems to me that the way of Receptive Ecumenism means that, for instance, when Mar Thoma and Old Catholic Christians engage, neither party need be concerned by pressure to appease or negotiate in order to preserve and protect that which is distinctive in the respective identities and ecclesial cultures. Rather, each is free and open to sharing how it is with his or her Christian life and unique context *now*, and in so doing explore what the experience of each may have to offer and contribute to as well as to receive from the other. Receptive Ecumenism reinforces openness to engage, together, in exploring the shared and the distinctive elements of Christian heritage and history. In so doing, each is open to the possibility of serendipitously stumbling across a fresh perspective, a different hermeneutical slant, that may contribute to the enrichment of one's own tradition and, perhaps, shed a new light on a troublesome dimension or unresolved problem.

Ecumenical discussions in a variety of contexts today range over questions of dialogical and theological compatibility, and the nature and purpose of ecumenical relations per se. To move forward we must dive into the deep waters of history in order to plumb the depths of both our distinctive denominational identity as well as our shared ecumenical heritage. All of this does two things. It enables an exploration of issues around and factors bearing upon the ecumenical present. It sets the scene, in effect, for the possibility of both a shared learning process and mutual learning through such sharing. And this is a precondition for the successful application of Receptive Ecumenism as an intentional process.

Issues of pastoral challenge and the global socio-economic context constitute two dimensions that impact contemporary Christian life. They impact our churches; our people. They provide arenas where the particularity of problems and impacts felt by one may, in light of the experience of the other, provide the opportunity for an ecumenical reception to take place: a new insight, a fresh learning, a helpful suggestion, is received. Further historical, biblical, ecclesiological and inter-religious reflections and insights can lead then into a discussion that, hopefully, will facilitate and focus the learning moment that is the essence of Receptive Ecumenism and, indeed, the hope of all ecumenical dialogues. Receptive Ecumenism is not a route to a monolithic goal of organic union. It is rather an expression of the interactive interplay of diverse ecclesial identities and intentions where no one party predetermines the shape of the final outcome. The ecumenical journey is ours to engage in; the final goal is in the gracious will of God, and by God's grace we engage the journey with deep intentionality and full integrity.

George Douglas Pratt (1949 in Auckland, New Zealand), Ph.D. (St Andrews, 1984), DTheol. (Melbourne College of Divinity, 2009), has been teaching Religious Studies at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, for over thirty years (1985–2018), commencing as a lecturer and concluding with the rank of professor (associate 2006–11; full 2011–). He is a New Zealand Anglican priest, with a licence to the English Church in Bern. With a specialisation in Theology and Interreligious Studies, Pratt has been an adjunct professor at the University of Bern, in the Institute (formerly Department) for Old Catholic Theology, since late 2011; and since 2018 Honorary Professor in Theological and Religious Studies at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research and publishing interests encompass inter-religious and ecumenical issues, Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, Christian engagement in interfaith dialogue, and contemporary issues of religious diversity and extremism.*

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Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag erkundet «Receptive Ecumenism» als Strategie für interkulturelles und zwischenkirchliches ökumenisches Lernen. Er untersucht das Konzept im Hinblick auf den relationalen Prozess der Christusähnlichkeit; als transformative Praxis, in ökumenischer Weise Kirche zu sein; als relationale Dynamik kirchlicher Partnerschaft in der *missio Dei*; und als ekklesiale Identität der Zusammengehörigkeit in Christus. Die Konferenz, bei der dieser Beitrag erstmals präsentiert wurde, bezog zwei Ebenen oder Formen von Interkulturalität ein, nämlich die Kulturen vor Ort (indisch und europäisch) und die kirchlichen Identitätskulturen (Mar Thoma und altkatholisch). Dementsprechend endet der Beitrag mit der Frage, wie «Receptive Ecumenism» die Beziehungen zwischen den Mar Thoma und den altkatholischen Gemeinschaften sowie andere bilaterale ökumenische Beziehungen prägen könnte.

Key Words – Schlüsselwörter

Receptive Ecumenism – Mar Thoma Church – Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht – ecumenical relations – intercultural learning