

Hybrid Identity, Mixed Marriage, and Catholic Modernity: A Peace Studies Perspective

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Abstract – Modernization theory has drawn rigid boundaries between the religious and the secular, depicting religious identities and institutions as static and incompatible with the modern secular State. On these premises, some scholars have theorized that religious and secular traditions would necessarily drift toward a clash of civilizations. Post-modern thought, on the other hand, has purported the idea that in our day and age, one must pick and choose those elements which befit one's religious identity from different traditions, regardless of their mutual compatibilities. This paper offers an alternative narrative, arguing that the relationship between traditional institutions and identities, religious and secular, is neither rigid nor undifferentiated. It will do so by looking at the evolving Catholic discipline on mixed marriage as a special focal lens through which the «religious» and the «secular» intermingle, creating new possibilities for peaceful coexistence.

1. *Mixed Marriage in the Catholic Church: Modernity in the Making*

Although modern migrations have contributed to their rising number, mixed marriages are not simply a recent phenomenon. In the early history of the Church, for example, it was very common for those who had just converted to Christianity to be already united in marriage, either with Jews or Gentiles. The first apostles, Peter (1 Pt 3, 1-2) and Paul (1 Cor 7, 12-14) viewed mixed marriage as an opportunity for the Christian wife, or husband, to sanctify their unconverted spouse. No matter whom the Christian married, moreover, the religious and secular dimensions were co-imbricated in the nature of Christian marriage itself. Christians were married according to the cultural norms of their respective country and, while lacking any official legal recognition from the Church, they still lived their marriage «in the Lord»¹.

¹ V. Tirimanna, *Interfaith Marriages in the Catholic Tradition*, in *Interfaith Marriages in the Pluralistic Context of Asia: Challenges, Theological reflections and Pastoral Approaches* (FABC papers, no. 118), p. 16.

In time, the Church started developing a specific theology of marriage and marriage law, which showed a more defensive approach with respect to mixed marriages. The first explicit *prohibition* for mixed marriage in canon law was introduced in the XII century by Huguccio in the context of the great schism between the Latin and Eastern Church. Huguccio distinguished a *diriment* from *prohibitive* impediment to marry outside the Roman Catholic Church. The objective of the first was to prohibit Catholics to marry non-baptized, making their marriage invalid. The objective of the second was to prohibit Catholic to marry non-Catholic Christians (namely Eastern-Orthodox), who were considered heretics, making their marriage illicit (although valid). In this respect, Huguccio was one of the first 'modernists' in the history of the Church to have drawn a rigid boundary between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', as they relate to the institution of marriage.

The late Professor of Canon Law, Franciscus Ter Haar, points out that «these same laws continued in force during the Middle Ages, although it was not necessary to draw attention to them frequently»². However, in the aftermath of the Counter-Reformation, when Protestantism had spread over Europe, and even questioned the sacramental nature or indissolubility of marriage, the Popes «deemed it their duty repeatedly to forbid and condemn mixed marriages in the most emphatic and weighty terms»³. Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical on *Christian Marriage* read:

«Care also must be taken that they do not easily enter into marriage with those who are not Catholics; for, when minds do not agree as to the observances of religion, it is scarcely possible to hope for agreement in other things. Other reasons also proving that persons should turn with dread from such marriages are chiefly these: that they give occasion to forbidden association and communion in religious matters; endanger the faith of the Catholic partner; are a hindrance to the proper education of the children; and often lead to a mixing up of truth and falsehood, and to the belief that all religions are equally good»⁴.

Only in the presence of «just and grave causes»⁵, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith granted a dispensation from the prohibition to enter a mixed marriage, provided due regard for a set of conditions. First, the priest had to show that he had done everything he

² F. Ter Haar, *Mixed Marriages and their Remedies*, New York 1933, p. 4.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum* (1880), § 43.

⁵ «Including the inevitability that the couple would be married by either a Protestant minister or a civil magistrate». E.B. Seamon, *Interfaith Marriage in America. The Transformation of Religion and Christianity*, New York 2012, p. 67.

could to dissuade the Catholic from marrying a non-Catholic. Second, the non-Catholic partner promised *in writing* not to interfere with the free exercise of religion of the Catholic spouse, that the children be *unconditionally* baptized and educated in the Catholic faith and that he accepted the indissolubility of marriage⁶. Third, the wedding had to be celebrated in the Church at the only presence of the Catholic priest, with no involvement or participation from any other non-Catholic minister. All these conditions were later inscribed in the 1917 code of canon law, which held until Vatican II, when the ineluctability of religious pluralism, coupled with the growing appreciation for freedom of choice and interreligious/ecumenical dialogue, later led the Church to further mitigate the canonical discipline concerning mixed marriages.

In 1966, for example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Instruction on Mixed Marriage* acknowledged

«that the peculiar conditions of our age ... have made the observance of the canonical discipline in regard to mixed marriages more difficult than in times past. Under these circumstances it now happens that communications, acquaintances, and contacts of Catholics with non-Catholics are more frequent, and so the bonds of friendship are more easily established between them which, as is evident from experience, are wont to bring on more frequent occasions of mixed marriages»⁷.

In light of these changed circumstances, the *Instruction* continued, it seems «that the rigor of the current discipline concerning mixed marriages (must) be mitigated, not indeed in those matters which pertain to divine law, but in some norms introduced by ecclesiastical law by which the separated brethren not infrequently think they are being offended»⁸. Four years later, in 1970, Pope Paul VI's *Apostolic Letter on Mixed Marriages*, stated that:

«'Man has the natural right to marry and beget children', and that 'the Church, by her laws, which clearly show her pastoral concern, makes such arrangements that on the one hand the principles of divine law be scrupulously observed and that on the other the said right to contract (mixed) marriages be respected'»⁹.

Ton Meijers, Canon Law Professor at Tilburg University, rightly points out that Pope Paul VI's *Apostolic Letter on Mixed Marriages* was an explicit

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19660318_istr-matrimoni-misti_en.html

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19700331_matrimonia-mixta_en.html

22 | attempt to implement the doctrine of *Dignitatis Humanae* as it relates to mixed marriage, and bridged the gap between the Church and the secular State on religious freedom¹⁰. Paul VI's *Apostolic Letter*, moreover, was supported and followed by intensive and productive dialogue on the theology of marriage and mixed marriage between the Catholic Church and other denominations, at both the local and global context¹¹.

Eventually, their reception led to the implementation of the new 1983 code of canon law and, more recently, to the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (ED), released by the Pontifical Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU). The new ED directives require that

«in carrying out this duty of transmitting the Catholic faith to the children, the Catholic parent will do so with respect for the religious freedom and conscience of the other parent and with due regard for the unity and permanence of the marriage and for the maintenance of the communion of the family»¹².

The new directives extend to the point of acknowledging that even the non-Catholic parent may feel the like obligation to educate the children in his or her own religious faith. For this reason,

«If, notwithstanding the Catholic's best efforts, the children are not baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church, the Catholic parent does not fall subject to the censure of Canon Law»¹³.

Not to mention that the new ED encourage couples in mixed marriages to:

«learn more about their partner's religious convictions and the teaching and religious practices of the Church or ecclesial Community to which he or she belongs ... to be reminded that prayer together is essential for their spiritual harmony and that reading and study of the Sacred Scriptures are especially important».

While the new *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (ED) applies to mixed marriages between a Catholic and a

¹⁰ T. Meijers, *Reform with Continuity: Religious Freedom and Canon Law*, in S. Hellemans - J. Wissink (edd), *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity*, Münster 2012, p. 114.

¹¹ See, for example, the «Theology of marriage and the problems of mixed marriages. Final report of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran-Reformed study commission, 1971-1977»; the «Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission on the Theology of Marriage and its Application to Mixed Marriages' Final Report, 1975»; «Testo Comune per un Indirizzo Pastorale dei Matrimoni tra Cattolici e Valdesi o Metodisti in Italia, 1997».

¹² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_25031993_principles-and-norms-on-ecumenism_en.html

¹³ *Ibidem*.

baptized non-Catholic, the same guidelines are applied to a marriage where disparity of cult is involved, with the only exception that, in the latter case, an express dispensation from the impediment to marry a non-baptized person is required.

2. *Double Belonging and Mixed Marriage*

This shift in the Catholic theology and law on marriage, with both its permissions and enduring restrictions, is actually fostering hybridity and double-belonging within mixed marriages, at least in those countries where civil law does not interfere to prohibit them¹⁴. Mixed marriages increasingly involve spouses of two different Christian denominations (interchurch marriages) and spouses from different faiths (interfaith marriages). From a Catholic theological perspective, the two are not identical: one is formally considered a sacrament; the other is considered only an implicit sacrament or, as John Paul II put it, a «sacrament of creation»¹⁵. However, from an ecumenical and peace-studies perspective, these mixed marriages represent a special place to examine dialogue among and with different traditions. It is from the interfaith or interchurch family, in fact, that mutual respect is first learnt and begins¹⁶. According to Paolo Gomarasca, interfaith and interchurch marriages are precisely a type of mixed marriage in which couples exercise a Hegelian

¹⁴ In Lebanon, for example, the State only allows mixed marriages among individuals belonging to the officially recognized religions and even those are not always made possible, considering the different, and sometimes clashing religious laws which prevail over civil law in the ruling of marriage, divorce and inheritance. E. Raad (ed), *Système juridique canonique et rapports entre les ordonnancements juridiques*, Beirut 2008.

¹⁵ This was the belief of Pope Innocent III, and Honorius III, who «affirmed ... that a sacrament of marriage existed ever amongst the faithful and unbelievers», in virtue of the fact that «marriage has God for its Author ...; and therefore there abides in it a something holy and religious; not extraneous, but innate; not derived from men, but implanted by nature». Leo XIII, *Arcanum* (1880), § 19. To put it differently, as the late Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx writes, «It was not the sacred rites which surrounded marriage that made it a holy thing. The great rite which sanctified marriage was God's act of creation itself ... It was Yahweh and none other who, as the founder of marriage, blessed the union of man and wife. As long as the 'mystery of Christ is not denied' even a marriage between a baptized and a non-baptized 'can be called an implicitly Christian marriage'». E. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, London 1988, pp. 159-160.

¹⁶ The *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993) so states: «These [InterChurch] marriages, even if they have their own particular difficulties, contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and develop both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution they can make to the ecumenical movement. This is particularly true when both parties are faithful to their religious duties». The same is said about interfaith families, by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference in their *Interfaith Marriages in the Pluralistic Context of Asia* document.

24 | type of mutual recognition¹⁷. For Hegel, recognition is a dialectic process in which the identity of each is both preserved and strengthened precisely through the confrontation, or coming to terms with difference¹⁸. Interfaith and interchurch couples do exactly this. They «conscientiously continue to participate in respective churches» – or faith traditions – «and seek to raise children with an interchurch (or interfaith) appreciation, participating in both parents’ ecclesial lives»¹⁹. It is not uncommon for the two partners to share prayer and learn about the other’s religious convictions, without denying one’s own faith tradition. For these couples, and their children, however,

«one religion remains the primary object of religious identification and the norm or criterion through which elements from a different religious tradition may be recognized as true or valuable»²⁰.

Couples living in an interchurch or interfaith marriage can thus claim a hybrid identity, which is not the same as a multiple, or syncretistic identity. According to the Jesuit Professor of Catholic Social Thought, Peter Phan, the latter is more often than not

«a contemporary, post-modern form of syncretism in which a person looks upon various religions as a supermarket from which, like a consumer, one selects at one’s discretion and pleasure whatever myth and doctrine, ethical practice and ritual, and meditation and healing technique best suits the temperament and needs of one’s body and mind, without regard to their truth values and mutual compatibilities»²¹.

On the other hand, «the hybrid ‘weaves’ within his own flesh and blood the encounter of two cultures [or religions]»²². This also means a new way of understanding interculturality and peaceful coexistence – one in which the identities neither merge, nor clash. Rather they constantly transform one another, while retaining their distinctiveness²³.

¹⁷ P. Gomarasca, *Meticciano. Convivenza o Confusione?*, Venice 2009, pp. 139, 154.

¹⁸ In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (1807, p. 229) writes that «Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’». http://www.iep.utm.edu/recog_sp/

¹⁹ G. Kilcourse, *Double Belonging. Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, New York 1992, p. 17.

²⁰ C. Cornille, *Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions*, in «Buddhist-Christian Studies», 23, 2003, p. 46.

²¹ P.C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously, Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, New York 2004, 62.

²² P. Gomarasca, *We and Others in Modernity without Boundaries*, <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/mestizaje-of-civilisations/2007/10/01/we-and-others-in-modernity-without-boundaries>

²³ Cardinal Angelo Scola, Archbishop of Milan, and President of the Oasis Foundation for the study of Muslim-Christian interactions uses the word «mestizaje» to refer to the hybridity result-

Paul Knitter, Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture at the New York Union Theological Seminary, describes his Buddhist-Christian, hybrid identity – forged through his marriage with a Buddhist woman – as one of «crossing over from one to the other and then crossing back again»²⁴. He uses the term ‘hybrid’

«not as a term to denote mixture or the development of a new identity from two older ones, but rather as way to describe the encounter between two distinct religious traditions in the life and consciousness of one individual»²⁵.

In his book *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*, he writes:

«Buddha has called me ‘to be a mystic again’ ... With what I have learned from Buddhism, I have been able to retrieve parts of the rich content of Christian mysticism as it is present both in the ‘professional mystics’ of church history (Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich) and also in the new testament writings of John’s Gospel and Paul’s epistles ... Buddha has reminded me and all of us Christians that any kind of religious life or church membership must be based on one’s personal experience. It is not enough to say ‘amen’ to a creed, or obey carefully a law, or attend regularly a liturgy»²⁶.

In virtue of their hybrid-identity, couples and their families nurture what some scholars call a «double-belonging» by which it is not meant that each of them belongs to neither religious denomination, or to both. As Claude Geffré, French scholar of the Theology of Religion, writes:

«it would be absurd to affirm that one can be both Christian and Hindu or Buddhist from the perspective of these traditions as religious systems [*institutions*]. But if religion is understood as an interior [*human*] experience and as the total surrender of oneself to a transcendent and Absolute reality, it would be possible to affirm continuity between my Christian experience and my previous spiritual experience»²⁷.

ing from the encounter with the other. His Foundation examines the social, political and religious implications resulting from the «mestizo of civilizations and cultures» in the Italian context. <http://www.conoscereilmeticcio.it/come-e-perche/>

²⁴ Knitter makes explicit reference to the words of the late, Notre Dame Theologian, Father John Dunne, who is reported to have said: «The Holy man or woman of our time ... is a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions, and comes back again with new insight to his own ... Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time». P.F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*, Oxford 2010², p. 217.

²⁵ K. Suomala, *Complex Religious Identity in the Context of Interfaith Dialogue*, in «Crosscurrents», September 2012, p. 366.

²⁶ P.F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*, p. 15.

²⁷ C. Geffré O.P., *Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion*, in C. Cornille, *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, New York 2002, pp. 97, 100-101.

26 | When understood as such, double-belonging would entail no confusion, or negative syncretism. From a Christian perspective, Claude Geffré argues, it would mean that

«our new Christian identity, which has Jesus Christ as absolute center of reference, could very well assume spiritual attitudes, mental schemes, symbolic resources, and ascetic rituals and practices belonging to other religions»²⁸.

3. *Hybrid Identity, Double Belonging, and Inculturation*

One way to explain the process leading to hybridity and ‘double-belonging’ is «inculturation». This notion has been used ever since the Second Vatican Council to refer to the adaptation of the Gospel message to a cultural context different from the one where it first presented itself²⁹. As Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* puts it:

«The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, ‘remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root’. In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of her varied face’ ... Through inculturation, the Church ‘introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community’, for ‘every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived’ In this way, the Church takes up the values of different cultures and becomes *sponsa ornata monilibus suis*, ‘the bride bedecked with her jewels’ (Is 61:10)»³⁰.

However, since there is no clear demarcation between culture and religion, religion being an essential element of culture in all its different facets, then the process of «inculturation» is essentially an «interreligious» process³¹. In other words, as Catherine Cornille, Professor of Comparative Theology at Boston College, puts it:

«to attempt to reformulate a religion in categories and symbols belonging to a different cultural context implies engagement with the religion or religions that traditionally have shaped that culture»³².

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, § 44.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), § 116.

³¹ J. Ratzinger, «Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures». Speech given to the Presidents of the Asian Bishops Conference, March 2-5, 1993.

³² C. Cornille, *Double Religious Belonging*, pp. 46-47.

This same idea is purported by Claude Geffré, who masterly writes:

«The inculturation of the gospel in a culture evokes a complex process of mutual adjustment ... and since Christians encounters not only cultures but also religions to which these cultures are directly related, it not only exercises a critical function with regard to cultural and theological totalities but also undergoes a process of assumption and transformation (by these other religions). Hence to become a Christian after belonging to a non-Christian tradition does not necessarily mean alienation from either the previous cultural and ethnic identity or from one's previous religious identity ... Even if it is a matter of simple analogy, the relationship of Christianity to Judaism has a paradigmatic value with regard to the relationship of Christianity to other religions. Just as the church does not integrate or replace Israel, in the same way it cannot be said to integrate or replace the religious truth that may be present in another religion»³³.

A process of 'inculturation' has for instance taken place in the dialogue between the Catholic and Reformed Churches around the very issue of interfaith marriage and the theology of marriage. While the Reformed Churches speak of marriage as a covenant made possible by the grace of Christ, the Catholic Church holds that the free act of exchanging vows and consuming the marriage is the source of its grace and sacramental nature. A patient and slow dialogue between the Catholic and Reformed Churches on this and other issues has brought to light the cultural and philosophical presuppositions of their theological differences: more precisely their different conceptions of efficient causality. Reformers argued for a long time that the notion of efficient causality could only be appropriately attributed to God, the Creator, or else lead to the false divinization of the created world. On the other hand, Catholic scholars trained in Thomas Aquinas' philosophy held that efficient causality could be attributed to both God and creatures, in virtue of the Thomistic notion of participation by analogy. The impasse has been slowly overcome through a common conceptualization of the divine-human efficient causality relation in terms not of concurrence, but subordination. In light of this patient philosophical dialogue, the Roman Catholic-Lutheran-Reformed study commission (1971-1977) on the theology of marriage and mixed marriage accepted to speak of a «covenantal view of the sacrament of marriage», one in which the sacrament of marriage is understood as both giving and receiving grace³⁴. This new common understanding

³³ C. Geffré O.P., *Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion*, pp. 97, 100-101.

³⁴ «To bring together in this way the initiative of the promise in regard to the spouses and the recreative experience which the spouses are called to have of its power over them, is to speak of the sacramental power of marriage considered in the light of the Covenant. It also means that marriage is a sign of the Covenant». Final report of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran-Reformed Study

28 | of marriage neither denies the respective theological worldviews, nor does it leave them unchanged. It thus represents a good example of inculturation at play.