

A Systematic Conceptualization of Intermarriages¹

In the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

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Approximately 67% of all marriages conducted in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA) are designated inter Christian. When marriages taking place outside the GOA are also considered, it is estimated that 75 -80% of all marriageable adult members are intermarrying. As a result of these trends, the GOA commissioned the Interfaith Research Project (IRP) in an effort to (a) develop a clearer understanding of this population's unique challenges, and (b) seek to minister more effectively to this growing group of faithful. One outcome from this research has been the emergence of an Orthodox developmental ecological grounded theory of interfaith marriages in the GOA. This paper will seek to outline the methodology employed to generate this theory. Two illustrations will also be proffered describing its utility. Additional discussion of this theory's usefulness for clergy and lay workers will also be presented.

Introduction

Statistics kept by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA) suggest that the intermarriage challenge is not only real, but is deserving of more careful attention. A cursory look at a few figures kept by the GOA's Department of Registry suggest that over the past 22 years the percentage of inter Christian marriages conducted in the GOA has

¹ The population of marriages that this paper will concern itself with is rich and diverse. As a result, the following three descriptors have been selected, and will be utilized in this paper: inter Christian marriages, interfaith marriages and intermarriages. Inter Christian marriages will refer to marriages that have taken place in the GOA between a Greek Orthodox Christian and a non-Orthodox Christian. Interfaith marriages will refer to marriages that are inter Christian or inter-religious. These types of couples may or may not have been married in the GOA. These marriages can also be intercultural and interracial. The term intermarriages is the most inclusive term. This descriptor will be utilized to refer to inter Christian, inter religious, intercultural, interracial marriages, as well as marriages that take place between a Greek Orthodox Christian and a non-religious person.

steadily increased from 46% to 64% (Yearbook, 2000). In addition, statistics also suggest that nearly two of every three marriages are now designated inter Christian. It should also be noted here that Archdiocesan statistics only reflect those weddings performed in the GOA, and do not account for those persons who identify themselves as Greek Orthodox, but have chosen to marry outside of the church. When efforts have been made to factor these faithful into the statistics kept by the GOA, some scholars have speculated that intermarriage rates exceed Archdiocesan statistics (Counelis, 1989; Moskos, 1993), while others have been more specific and estimated that intermarried rates are presently “over 80%” (Lorant & Wingenbach, 1996). Irrespective of exact percentages, what is very clear is that even the most conservative figures indicate that nearly 67% of all marriages conducted in the GOA are inter Christian, intercultural, and in some instances, interracial in composition (Joanides, 2000).

In addition, since there is no evidence to suggest that these trends will change in the foreseeable future, it has been maintained that if interfaith marriages are not presently the norm in the GOA's churches, they will likely be in the near future (Counelis, 1989; Harakas, 1997; Moskos, 1990). One can also convincingly argue - as many respected scholars have - that indifference to these trends could negatively impact the GOA's efforts to enter into the 21st century as a viable, healthy, religious and spiritual presence (Constantelos, 1997; Harakas, 1997; Krommydas, 1997; Moskos, 1990; 1993; Patsavos, 1997).

Responding to these Statistics and Trends

Because of the large numbers of inter Christian marriages conducted in the GOA, an Intermarriage Research Project² (IRP) was commissioned in 1998 to examine these marriages. While it is impossible to discuss all the results that emerged from the IRP, this paper will seek to summarize a central component of this work. To be more specific, this paper will describe and outline a grounded theory that emerged entitled, *an Orthodox, ecological, developmental grounded theory of interfaith marriages in the GOA*. Furthermore, like all theories, it is anticipated that this theory will assist the reader in developing a clearer, more sophisticated understanding of a very complex challenge that faces the GOA, to God's glory and the salvation of the marriages and families discussed in this paper.

Methodology

A Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research methodology was chosen. Some of the salient reasons prompting this decision follow. First, social scientists have utilized qualitative research approaches to help them study and understand the human condition for decades (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Second, qualitative research is emergent and discovery oriented, and has been deemed well suited to study complex human phenomena that are typically not well understood. Specifically, qualitative research permits the examination of large amounts of diverse, seemingly contradictory information. This means that new interpretations and connections are discovered between the various disparate pieces of information that emerge during the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Third,

² While much of the information included in this article may have some application to all types of intermarried couples, it should be noted that the primary focus of the IRP was to investigate inter Christian couples. That being the case, the reader should be aware that many of the challenges facing other types of intermarried couples will not be considered in this paper. For additional information about the IRP, write

consumers of qualitative research vicariously participate in respondents' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Fourth, qualitative research tends to be heuristic in character. The range of possible solutions to a problem, or the number of possible answers to a question, are thus reduced through a qualitative investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

A Qualitative Grounded Theory Approach

There are a number of methodological approaches available to qualitative researchers (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and each approach is uniquely suited to the research question being considered (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Since one of the objectives of this research was to generate a thick, rich, systematic description and theoretical conceptualization of the challenges that inter Christian couples face, a qualitative research methodology was selected and utilized as the method of choice for the IRP (Glazer & Strauss, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1994, 1997). This approach allowed a conceptually rich, systematic theory to emerge that was grounded on 376 respondents observations and descriptions.

Description of the Sampling Technique

After receiving permission from each Diocesan bishop, priests were contacted in each Diocese in an initial effort to recruit couples for this study. In total, 38 Greek Orthodox priests assisted the researcher in his efforts to identify potential informant couples for the IRP.

Participating clergy in each Diocese submitted couples' names to me, and a pool of potential couples was assembled. I subsequently contacted couples by phone in an effort

to form focus groups. During the selection process, I was particularly interested to include participant couples who could provide a rich description of their lived experiences as inter Christian couples and parents. As such, a purposive sampling approach was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Description of Collection Method

Because of the potentially large numbers of respondents involved in this study, a decision was made to conduct focus groups. Focus groups have proven to be an efficient and effective way to gather information from large numbers of respondents (Kruegar, 1998; Piercy & Nickerson, 1996).

The researcher also attempted to form groups with participants who have as much in common as possible. This technique made it less likely that participants would be debating each other, and more likely that a recursive, reciprocal dialogic process would develop that would allow participants to build upon each other's observations and descriptions (Morgan, 1998; Piercy & Nickerson, 1996). In most instances, two different types of focus groups were conducted in each diocese. However, there were two exceptions, the Chicago Diocese, and the Archdiocesan District, where there were three groups were conducted. One type of focus group was comprised of couples who were part of the "X" Generation (ages 20-34), and a second type of focus group was comprised of "Baby Boomers" (ages 35-50). This decision was made in an effort to isolate any idiosyncratic cohort differences. Each group met for a two-hour block of time. In total, 20 focus groups were conducted.

I also sought to include as many different perspectives as possible in these conversations. Spouses with high, moderate, and low levels of religious and/or ethnic

attachments were recruited. As such, immigrants, first, second, third, fourth, and fifth generation participants, as well as converts, were represented in this study. This approach was taken to ensure that the emerging information would be reflective of a wide range of voices and perspectives.

In addition to the focus groups, twenty individual one-hour follow up debriefing telephone interviews were conducted with selected focus group participants. These interviews took place after the researcher had analyzed the transcripts from each focus group. The researcher simply read his analysis to focus group participants and requested feedback. These debriefing interviews functioned to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data collection process (Joanides, Brigham & Joanning, 1997).

Description of Respondents

A total of 202 participants took part in one of 20 focus groups that were conducted from April 1998 - December 1999. One hundred and twelve Baby Boomers who were married an average of 13 years, and had 2.1 children, and 90 "X"ers who were married an average of 4 years and had .9 children participated. Each participant couple was comprised of one Greek Orthodox Christian and one non-Greek Orthodox Christian. Fifty percent were Orthodox or Greek Orthodox, 32% were Roman Catholic, 16% identified themselves with a Protestant Church, and 2% failed to declare a religious affiliation. Many couples (28%) identified themselves as inter Christian, and in most cases, inter Christian and, intercultural (65%). Some identified themselves as inter Christian, intercultural, and interracial (5%). Respondents were from 29 different cities, with varying levels of affiliation with one of 24 different Greek Orthodox Churches.

In addition to focus group participants, 174 individuals reviewed the emerging results that were posted on the Interfaith Marriage Web Site, and offered feedback on either an interfaith couples feedback form or stakeholders feedback form³. These participants examined the results that were periodically posted, and offered observations and descriptions on feedback forms. The inclusion of these remarks served to reinforce the credibility of the information that was emerging and infused additional richness into the emerging results. When focus group participants, together with those who filled out feedback forms on the Interfaith Marriage Web Site are considered, results from the IRP reflect 376 respondents' observations and descriptions.

Types of Questions Utilized⁴

Before each focus group was conducted, each individual was asked to complete a 24 item questionnaire⁵ that was designed to (a) gather demographic information, (b) identify factors contributing to their decision to intermarry, and (c) gather attitudinal information about interfaith and intercultural marriage. Prior to conducting each focus group, couples were reminded that they were not simply sharing information with the moderator/researcher, but would indirectly be speaking to the clergy and lay leaders of the GOA. I also sought to cultivate respect and candor for all perspectives.

Confidentiality was assured to each respondent. Respondents were assured that their comments would not be identified with them in any future reports and publications.

³ This site served to strengthen the credibility of this research, and can be accessed through the following address at www.interfaith.goarch.org. Additionally, stakeholders were identified as people who had a vested interest in this subject such as clergy, social scientists, parents, divorced persons.

⁴ A copy of the open-ended questions utilized during this study can be obtained by contacting Fr. Charles Joanides.

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Open-ended questions were utilized to generate conversation. Examples of the type of questions utilized follow: What has it been like being involved in an interfaith marriage? What have been some of your surprises, blessings, challenges, and difficulties?

Open-ended questions also tended to change as the research process unfolded. When I determined that I was reaching a point of saturation (a point when redundant information was essentially emerging) new questions were constructed and new areas of inquiry were probed and introduced into the research process. This approach ensured that a broad, systematic description of interfaith spouses and couples personal experiences would emerge.

Techniques used to Ensure Trustworthiness

Code notes were used to assist me in generating conceptual labels, categories, properties, and dimensions. These notes would ultimately function to form the essential features of the grounded theory described in this paper (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1994; 1997). Theoretical notes were employed to assist me in my efforts to begin conceptualizing and formulating relevant subcategories, their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Theoretical notes would also help clarify the given relationships that existed between the subcategories, properties, and dimensions, as well as helping to discover some of the essential features of the grounded theory that would ultimately emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Operational notes were comprised of memos that would provide me with direction regarding sampling, questions, and the possible comparisons that he should follow as the research process continued (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In order to ensure that credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability issues were considered and satisfied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rafuls & Moon, 1996) the following techniques were also employed. The use of member checks, peer debriefing, persistent observation, and the establishment of referential adequacy served to ensure that credibility issues were considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rafuls & Moon, 1996). The use of purposive sampling and my efforts to generate a thick, rich, systematic description of respondent's perceptions would serve to satisfy transferability issues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of an audit trail would serve to meet dependability issues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of an external auditor and my efforts to practice reflexivity would serve to meet confirmability issues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

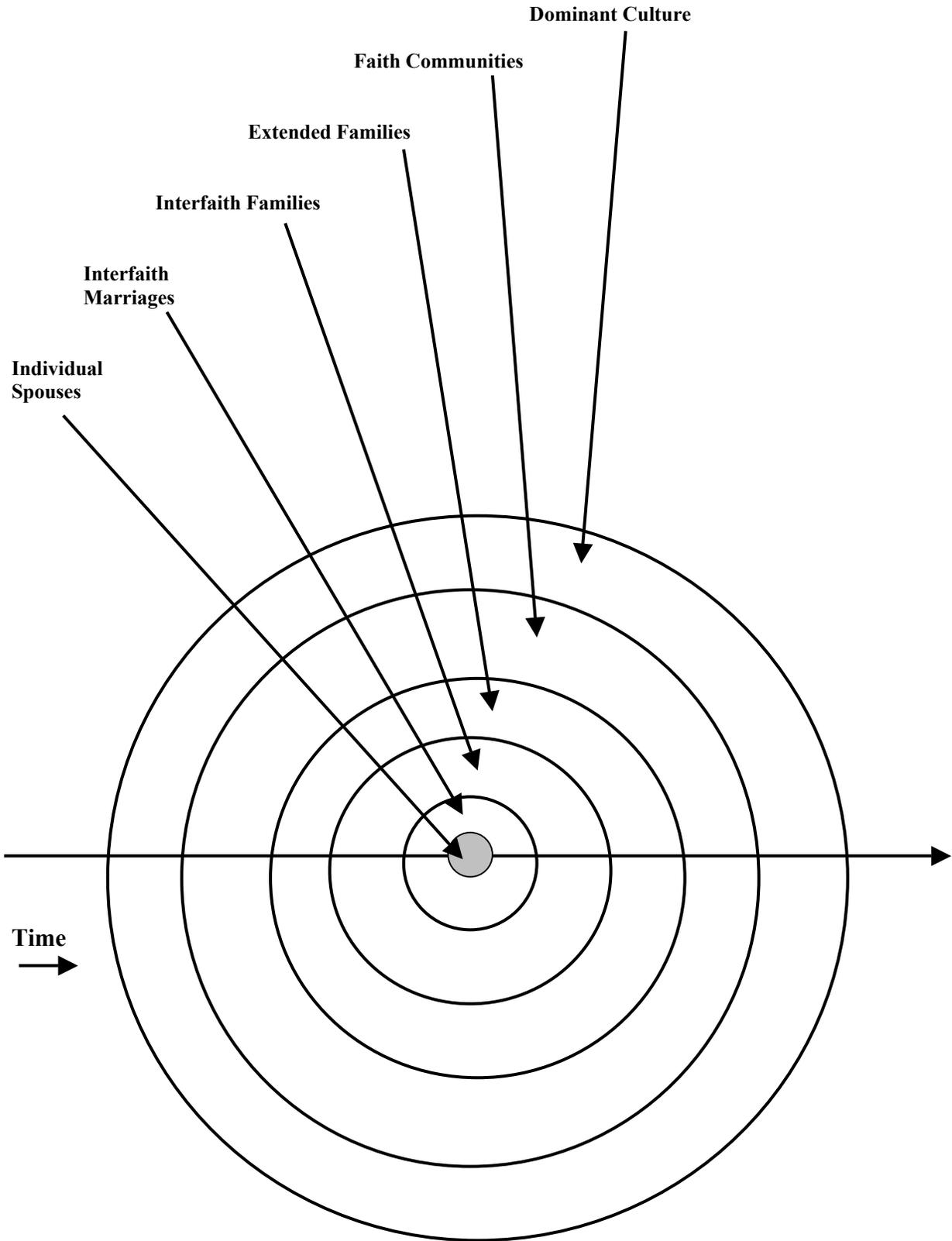
Analysis

The analysis proceeded in three stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Rafuls & Moon, 1996). In the first stage, typically termed "open coding," I attempted to open the data up in an effort to begin building a conceptual framework. This process also allowed me to tentatively begin grouping concepts together and collapsing them under cover terms that are called categories and subcategories. This process also assisted me in tentatively identifying different attributes and characteristics (properties) of each category - called properties - and allowed me to begin dimensionalizing each given property. The second stage in the analysis process termed "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), allowed the researcher to piece together the data that had been taken apart during the first stage of analysis. Axial coding also served to assist me in my efforts to begin putting respondent's descriptions and interpretations of their religious and spiritual lived experiences back together in a systematic form. The third stage in this analysis process is termed "selective

coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this stage I typically sought to explicate and identify a story line that was conceptually and systematically dense, and was derived from the collected data. Thirteen subcategories emerged from this process which served to form the basis of the grounded theory that emerged.

An Orthodox Developmental Ecological Grounded Theory of Inter Christian Couples in the GOA

In the simplest of terms, a theory "is a set of related concepts and constructs that exist in meaningful relationship to one another. Each concept or construct has no meaning in its own right. The relationship is one of complementarity and meaningfulness in context and only in context" (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, pp. 356 - 357). Family scholars and researchers utilize many theories to help them understand and explicate individual, marital and family behavior. In addition to my Orthodox perspective, two theories seemed especially useful in my efforts to interpret and organize the volumes of emergent information during the collection and analysis stage - social ecological theory (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993) and family development theory (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Rogers & White, 1993). A succinct description of their usefulness will briefly be discussed below.



**An Orthodox Developmental Ecological Grounded
Theory of Interfaith Marriages in the GOA**

An Examination of the Ecological Dimension

As results from the IRP emerged, participants' observations and descriptions repeatedly alluded to a distinct social ecology that impacted individual, couple and family religious and spiritual well-being. This social ecology also influenced couples' efforts to incorporate ethnic traditions into their marriages and families. The above diagram describes this social ecology. Specifically, this diagram provides a visual picture of the main human ecological subsystems that affect inter Christian couples who worship in one of the GOA's churches. The smallest circle at the center suggests that interfaith spouses are part of an interfaith marriage. This schematic diagram indicates that interfaith marriages are part of an interfaith family, and interfaith families are part of at least two extended family systems.⁶ This diagram also illustrates how interfaith spouses, their marriages and families, as well as their extended families, are generally couched within two faith communities. These faith communities are also embedded in our dominant American culture.

What is not as evident from an examination of this diagram, is another prevailing observation that typically characterized respondents' remarks. Specifically, participants repeatedly observed that interfaith spouses have certain needs, as do interfaith marriages, interfaith families, extended families, and the faith communities to which they belong. Moreover, in a perfect world where everything lines up and fits together all these disparate needs fit together perfectly. In an imperfect world like the one that we all live, these needs do not always fit together perfectly, but conflict with each other. Consequently, inter Christian spouses and couples repeatedly described numerous

⁶ If spouses have been previously married, then the children may be part of the divorced partner's extended family. In these cases, one or more extended families can potentially influence interfaith families.

challenges they faced in their efforts to strike a balance between these conflicting subsystem needs.

Respondents also stated that if they were successful in striking a balance between conflicting subsystem needs, their religious and cultural differences were generally perceived from a positive, enriching perspective. Furthermore, they maintained that their religious and cultural differences seemed to have a generally positive impact on individual, couple and family stability and well-being. Conversely, if participants were unable to strike this balance, spouses' religious and cultural differences were construed from a deficit perspective. In these instances, participants viewed their religious and cultural differences as potential threats to individual, marital and family satisfaction and stability. They also observed that their religious and cultural differences had a negative impact on individual, couple and family stability and well-being.

A Closer Look at the Developmental Dimension

As we mature, we pass through a life cycle and encounter qualitatively different challenges from one stage of the life cycle to the next. For example, while teens are busy differentiating from their parents, young adults might be trying to acquire financial independence, middle aged adults might be busy raising families and cultivating careers, and older adults may be preoccupied in reviewing their lives and finding positive closure. Just as the individual encounters different developmental challenges as he or she matures and ages, social scientists have also posited that marriages and families pass through a life cycle that challenges them with specific tasks that must be negotiated and resolved (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Rogers & White, 1993).

With regard to the IRP, respondents' comments repeatedly alluded as to how individual, couple and family maturation tends to influence subsystem needs and challenges. Specifically, they observed that the challenges newlyweds will encounter and negotiate will be different than the challenges that couples with young children will face, or the challenges that couples with adolescents will face, or the challenges that couples who have launched their children may face. Respondents observations and descriptions clearly indicated that individual, couple and family maturation can have a profound impact on the types of needs and challenges intermarried spouses, couples and their families will have and encounter.

Two Examples

Listing and discussing all the potential needs and challenges that participants described is impossible in a short article. Nevertheless, the following two examples, together with related commentary, should suffice in helping the reader begin to understand both the value and utility of this theory. As the reader considers the information that follows, he or she might observe how this theory functions to organize and make an otherwise complex area of interest more understandable. The reader might also contemplate the utility of this theory for (a) intermarried couples and their families, and (b) clergy and lay leaders who seek to minister to this population of faithful.

Balancing Individual and Couple Needs

Martha (31) and Gus (33) have been married for about six years. Martha is Mexican Catholic and Gus is Greek Orthodox. Gus does not consider himself nominally religious, but is firmly connected to his ethnic background. Martha has higher levels of religious commitment and an equally high level of connection to her ethnic background.

Moreover, almost from the beginning of their marriage, this couple admits that they have both constantly and unsuccessfully argued about their religious and cultural differences. Issues such as where they should worship, their future children's names, where they should baptize, and which ethnic and religious traditions they should include in their family life have remained unresolved.

As a result, out of frustration, Gus unilaterally decides that the couple should belong and pledge to the Greek Orthodox Church, and submits a pledge. When Martha hears about this, she becomes angry and resentful because she views herself as "the religious one." She confronts Gus, and demands an explanation. In response, Gus retorts, "I'm Greek, and I can't deny that about myself any longer," but refuses to engage in further conversation. Martha becomes angrier and makes some insulting remarks. Gus leaves the house, and does not return for several hours. By then, Martha's interest in arguing wanes, but her resentment lingers. Gus is somewhat relieved because he does not have to hear Martha yell, but he remains discouraged with the religious and cultural differences in his marriage.

Martha continues to celebrate most religious feast days alone. Both spouses also celebrate ethnic holidays alone. Their decision to start a family is also postponed.

Some Observations

Participants from the IRP frequently stated that their religious and ethnic connections fulfilled numerous spiritual, moral, psychological, and social needs at a personal level. Moreover, these individual needs were often described as being compelling and important enough to cause them to find ways of fulfilling these needs.

Respondents also stated that if they desired marital stability and satisfaction, they could not simply consider their own personal religious and cultural needs to the exclusion of their partner's needs in their efforts to cultivate a healthy, functional marriage. Furthermore, to the extent that participants were successful in striking a balance between their personal and marital needs, couples were able to meet their personal religious and cultural needs, as well as achieving marital stability and satisfaction. When spouses either ignored their own needs, their partner's needs, or their relationship's needs, then one or both spouses would generally experience some internal conflict which often translated into some external marital and family instability and dissatisfaction.

Given these first two observations, what can be stated about the challenges that Gus and Martha appear to be encountering. First, both spouses appear to have certain definite religious and, or ethnic needs. Second, the strategy they have employed to meet their personal needs has had a toxic effect on (a) individual well-being, (b) couple stability and satisfaction, and (c) their future plans to start a family. Third, this couple appears to be caught in an unresolved stalemate. Moreover, the longer they remain stuck, the greater the likelihood more damage will be inflicted on their individual, marital and family well-being. Fourth, this couple's individual distress and marital conflict will negatively impact their religious and spiritual development. Fifth, if this couple could be helped to see what is occurring between them, there may be a possibility that individual and couple satisfaction could be improved. Specifically, if they could be helped to see that in their efforts to meet their personal religious and cultural needs, they have ignored their needs as a couple, this could give them a different perspective of the impasse in

which they are ensnared. In addition, if this couple can be convinced to strike a balance between their needs as individuals and a couple, chances are good that the stalemate will loosen and disappear.

Balancing Nuclear Family Needs with Extended Family Needs

Balancing nuclear family needs and extended family needs is a skill that couples must also master. When couples are unsuccessful in accomplishing this task, individual, couple, nuclear family and extended family well-being can suffer. The following example illustrates how this can happen.

John and Mary

John (27) and Mary (25) have been married for about one year. John is a first generation Greek Orthodox Christian, and Mary is a non-practicing Roman Catholic from a mixed ethnic background. This couple is happily married, but also admits to encountering some serious challenges. Some of the reasons to account for this last statement are chronicled below.

When John and Mary began dating, John's parents were quick to point out that "it was fine that you date a non-Greek for fun and games sake, but you should only permit himself to become serious with a Greek girl, since marriages with non-Greeks do not work out." John politely listened to his parents, but because of his increasing affection for Mary, he quickly found that he could not live up to this advice and continued to date her. John also determined to hide his parent's dissatisfaction from Mary, fearing that if he shared this information, it would somehow compromise their relationship. Even though John hid his parent's displeasure, Mary sensed his parents' disapproval, and remained mildly concerned.

Several months passed, and John and Mary became very serious, until one day when John proposed marriage, and Mary accepted. The next day, John shared this news with his parents privately, because he was unable to predict how they might react, and did not want his fiancée to hear any negative remarks regarding their decision to wed.

Predictably, John's parents did not take this news well. They began to issue threats and ultimatums like the following, "If you marry this girl, we will disown you."

After a few days, as they began to notice that John was pulling away from them, their tone softened, and they began to state that they would tolerate his decision, but would also "not be surprised if this marriage did not survive."

Since John knew that Mary was a non-practicing Catholic, he asked her if she would agree to get married in the Greek Orthodox Church, stating that "this would please his parents." He did not, however, share the full extent of his parent's reservations and disappointment with their decision to wed. Mary also failed to ask any questions, even though she continued to be concerned about John's parents' feelings about their decision.

Wishing to improve her rather distant and cold relationship with John's parents, Mary consented to this suggestion, and the couple was married in the Greek Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, to Mary's chagrin, after the marriage her in-laws continued to remain distant, but cordial toward her.

About six months after the marriage, John's parents would approach him, strongly urging him to ask Mary to join the Greek Orthodox Church. They also told him that he "should convince Mary to convert, since this would be good for their children and family." As a result of these and other similar remarks, John went home that night and awkwardly began making the following proposal, "I think we should have a family

church - the Greek Church. It would also be nice if you thought about converting. I think this would be good for our future children."

Dumbfounded and surprised at these suggestions, Mary responded, "Where in the world has this come from John? You've never suggested to me that religion was important to you before this day. I don't know, that's a lot to think about."

Not wishing to disclose who prompted him to make this statement, John defensively responded, "So what's wrong with having a family church and being the same religion? And what's to think about. It's no big deal. We go once in a while and everyone's happy."

Upon hearing this last statement, Mary then states, "Now I get it. It's your parents who put you up to this. And now your siding with them. Aren't you?"

"And what if it's true," stated John more defensively.

"Do you know how that makes me feel when you talk to them about things that concern us, before you talk to me. It makes me feel betrayed, John. And another thing, how can I trust you, if I think your withholding information or siding with them."

That night was a long and emotional evening for both John and Mary. Fortunately, John would finally tell Mary the truth about his parent's feeling for them. He would also ask for Mary's forgiveness, and promise never to withhold information from her again. The couple would also formulate some new boundaries of the type that would not allow John's parents to divide the couple again.

Some Observations

Participants' comments from the IRP clearly stated that members from both partner's extended families have needs - particularly parents. For example, parents have a need to

see their adult married children and future grandchildren actively practicing their religious and ethnic traditions. In an effort to meet this need, parents may apply overt or covert pressure on intermarried couples and families. As such, balancing nuclear family needs and extended family needs is a talent that couples must master.

Participants also repeatedly stated that it was necessary for them to learn how to draw healthy boundaries between themselves and their extended families to protect their nuclear families from unwanted extended intrusions. As couples learned how to love and honor their parents, while also drawing clear boundaries between themselves and their parents, this approach made things easier for everyone concerned.

Participants also observed that when intermarried couples were unsuccessful in drawing clear boundaries between themselves and their extended family, some respondents were forced to subordinate and/or ignore their nuclear family needs in an effort to meet extended families expectations and needs. Furthermore, this tended to have a negative impact on marital satisfaction and nuclear family religious well-being.

In light of these observations, what can be stated about John and Mary? First, in John's desire to honor and attend to his parent's needs, he lost sight of (a) Mary's needs, and (b) his developing relationship's needs. These omissions distressed Mary, and created marital conflict. Second, while Mary's contributions are not as clear, a strong case could be made that she also made similar mistakes. Even though Mary sensed that John's parents were displeased, she did not request any clarification from John. All of which suggests that Mary's silence also inhibited this couple from meeting their individual and couple needs. Third, only after some serious discussion, is this couple able to make the necessary adjustments, and strike a balance between their individual

needs, their needs as a couple and John's parent's needs. Until then, these needs remain unattended and serve to negatively impact both spouses.

Some Implications of this Theory's Usefulness

- As a result of intermarried couples religious, cultural, and in some instances, racial differences, they encounter challenges that differ from the challenges that homogamous couples experience. Pastoral approaches that seek to attend to these unique challenges will likely be more successful than pastoral approaches that ignore them. This theory allows pastors and lay workers this latitude, since it is inherently concerned with how these spousal differences can impact individual, marital and family stability and well-being.
- As the two above examples clearly suggest, interfaith couples' social environment can create some unique challenges for them. The many conflicting layers of subsystem needs can function to negatively impact individual, marital and family stability and well-being. Moreover, diminished marital satisfaction and family stability can inhibit religious and spiritual development. By acquiring a working knowledge of this theory, clergy and lay workers can develop a more sophisticated understanding of these challenges. This knowledge should also function to positively impact the manner in which they minister to this population of faithful.
- A working knowledge of this theory can assist intermarried spouses and couples in their efforts to understand the social ecological challenges they face. This knowledge can assist couples in their efforts to prayerfully resolve the conflicting subsystem challenges they encounter.

- Results from the IRP also suggest that intermarried couples' challenges change as they pass through the individual, marital and family life cycle. As such, this theory can assist clergy and lay leaders to account for developmental life cycle changes, and encourage them to consider how these changes may be impacting individual, marital and family stability and religious and spiritual well-being.
- This theory can also provide intermarried couples with a clearer understanding of how maturation impacts individual, marital and family stability. A familiarity with the developmental challenges they will face can positively impact individual, marital and family well-being.
- Interfaith couples can also differ from one partner to the next and from one couple to the next with regard to their level of religious commitment. In some instances, some couples may have equal amounts of religious commitment, while in other instances spouses may have unequal levels of religious commitment. Since this theory considers individual needs, spouses' religious differences are indirectly considered, as well as how these differences might be impacting marital and family stability and well-being.
- Interfaith spouses can differ from one partner to the next and from one couple to the next with regards to their level of attachment to the dominant American culture. In some instances, spouses may have equally high or low levels of attachment to the dominant American culture and weak attachments to their ethnic backgrounds. In other instances, one partner may have a stronger attachment to his or her ethnic background, while their partner may have a high connection to the American culture, and relatively no connections to an ethnic background. This theory allows pastors

and lay workers to account for these differences. It also allows clergy and lay workers to examine how conflicting dominant American cultural attachments and ethnic attachments may be adversely impacting these marriages and families.

- One of the challenges facing the Orthodox Church in America is to discern how it can minister to the growing numbers of intermarried couples without compromising its theological integrity. Since this theory is grounded on intermarried couples' observations, it is maintained that an understanding of the developmental and ecological challenges that these couples face can facilitate the church's efforts in ministering to this population of faithful. Specifically, this theory can assist the church in developing a higher level understanding of the effects (both negative and positive) that its current pastoral approaches are having on intermarried spouses, couples and their families. And where possible, it can assist the church in making adjustments. These adjustments will require the prayerful collaboration of the church's best and brightest.
- Participants from the IRP repeatedly stated that pastoral approaches that were more respectful and collaborative were preferred to those that were directive and judgmental. It is thus asserted, that as priests and lay workers utilize this theory in their work with intermarried spouses, couples and their families, they will acquire a more respectful appreciation of the challenges that these faithful encounter. Moreover, this understanding can facilitate a pastoral approach that is more respectful and collaborative in nature, and by extension, more effectual.
- Participants from the IRP constantly observed that their attendance, commitment and participation in the Orthodox Church was directly connected to how welcome they

felt. When they felt as if the congregation welcomed them and was sensitive to their needs, this positively impacted attendance, commitment and participation. Given this observation, it is maintained that when clergy and lay leader understand this theory, this will assist them in their efforts to help their congregations become more sensitive to intermarried couples' unique needs. Moreover, this should have a direct, positive influence on this population's attendance, commitment and participation.

Conclusion

In our efforts to address ourselves to the interfaith marriage challenge, we should remember that “God desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), and that the church’s message is inherently inclusive and evangelical in nature. Furthermore, numerous examples of the inclusive, evangelical nature of the church’s ministry can be given. For example, from its inception at Pentecost (At: 2), up until our present day efforts to deal with the interfaith marriage challenge, the church continues to be inclusive and evangelical.

We might also take heart in our Lord's promise that “all things are possible to him who believes” (Mk 9:23). Viewed from this blessed perspective, the interfaith marriage challenge simply requires us to do our part and be faithful.

The information presented in this paper has been inspired by these Divine dictates. This paper has sought to introduce the reader to a theory that can assist the church at all levels in its efforts to prayerfully address itself to interfaith marriage challenge. This paper has maintained that an understanding of this theory can assist clergy and lay leaders - at all levels of the church's structure - to reach out more effectively to the interfaith couples who choose to worship in one of the churches in the GOA, to God's glory. Amen.

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