

The Reception of Receptive Ecumenism

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Dare we still speak of a virtuous virus?

The current pandemic has made everyone – not just microbiologists – familiar with terms such as super-spreader and R-factor, and our churches are no exception to this. Not only do we see concerns across traditions as to what Christian practice might look like in a post-pandemic world, but some missional initiatives have been quick to ask “how well are we infecting people for Christ?” and what is our evangelistic R-factor? I’m not sure that this language is entirely helpful but it did remind me that in RE III at Fairfield University in 2014, Prof Paul Murray proposed a novel way of describing Receptive Ecumenism: A ‘virtuous virus’.

Now, on understanding Receptive Ecumenism as virtuous, we need look no further than Antonia Pizzey’s work, but why virus? At Fairfield, Paul was reflecting on the way that RE had adapted since its inception, mutating as it were into “new variants”. But there is a bit more that can be said. A 2015 article in the journal of virology lists numerous characteristics of a “mutually beneficial virus....”

So, going deeper into Paul’s metaphor in the light of this nicely illustrate how Receptive Ecumenism not only mutates and adapts but does so through responding to its stresses in its environment – that is, wounds and dysfunctions - and in forming *mutually* beneficial - relationships with its host – in which not only does the host tradition benefit but Receptive Ecumenism as a tool is developed and refined. I’m not going to labour the point here, but this slide illustrates the kind of things I’m talking about, and it might be useful to keep this in mind as we look at the reception of Receptive Ecumenism.¹

The key question here was asked by Paul Avis in 2012: Are we receiving Receptive Ecumenism?²

¹ An extended exploration of this metaphor was given as the conference reflection for RE IV: Gregory A. Ryan, ‘A Virtuous Virus?’, presentation at the Fourth International Receptive Ecumenism Conference, ‘Leaning into the Spirit: Discernment, Decision-making and Reception’, Canberra, Australia (9 November 2017), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352705604_RE_IV_Conference_Reflection_A_Virtuous_Virus.

² Paul Avis, ‘Are We Receiving “Receptive Ecumenism”?’, *Ecclesiology* 8 (2012), 223–34.

I've given a detailed response in a recent article which looks at reception in the churches, academy, and ecumenical bodies, but for today's purposes, I will talk more generally about the reception in different Traditions before asking "where next?"

So, which traditions have taken notice and brought Receptive Ecumenism into their thought and practice? In 2012 Avis stressed how important it was for this to be more than a Catholic movement. Since then, it has become clear that it has indeed been adopted across a range of traditions, in teaching, practice, and scholarship.

Catholic Receptions are by no means lacking: From Avery Dulles to Walter Kasper, and including two popes: Benedict XVI and Francis

But also we see receptions that in origin or application are Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, evangelical, free church, Pentecostal... and whilst there is no formal reference, so far as I am aware to RE in Orthodox ecumenical statements, individual orthodox theologians have certainly engaged with it, with some scholars noting a resonance with concepts such as open sorbonicity.³

Encouragingly, therefore, this reception has not been restricted to churches with strong global, regional, or national ecclesial structures and a corresponding history of formal ecumenical dialogues.

Certainly, it's significant when Archbishop Justin Welby, in his address to the 70th Anniversary of the WCC, talks of "One of the most important of recent ecumenical developments" and less dramatically, but more significantly, the Catholic church quietly recognises a development in its understanding of ecumenism beyond a simple exchange of gifts to a more self-critical willingness to learn, in keeping with Pope Francis' understanding of the *whole* church as a learning church.

But equally there have been impressive receptions by churches with more localised church structures and sometimes without a history of formal ecumenism. The former is well-illustrated in the work of Paul Fiddes for example or Steven Harmon's *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*.

At the second RE conference in 2009, Bishop Joe Aldred asked "where are my brothers and sisters from the Black Pentecostal Churches?", a question echoed more generally by Larry Miller, then secretary of the Global Christian Forum, in 2014 when he asked who was missing from the Receptive Ecumenical table. Nonetheless Miller recognised the potential of this approach, not just for churches traditionally involved in ecumenism, and has very recently praised Gabrielle Thomas's work – which we'll hear about later – commenting that it "points a way forward for many of the conversations in the forum's unfolding journey of mutual love".⁴ Pentecostal movements can of course be found in all kinds of ecclesial structures – from new churches to historic free churches to global Catholicism and other writers in this broad tradition have recognised Receptive Ecumenism as "particularly appropriate for Pentecostal ecumenism" (Andy Lord) not least in the central place it affords the Holy Spirit.

I've focussed here on individual traditions in part because RE is orientated first towards addressing problems in one's own tradition, rather than directly looking to overcome the

³ For an overview of the impact of Receptive Ecumenism in these different contexts, see Gregory A. Ryan, 'The Reception of Receptive Ecumenism', *Ecclesiology*, 17/1 (2021), 7–28.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GlobalChristianForum/videos/547275149990176/>

things that impair communion with each other. But Receptive Ecumenism is not only being received by individual traditions. It is also playing a developing role in all kinds of ecumenical relationships: the most high-profile example is its adoption into ARCIC III but it is also noted as a useful tool in a range of local and international conversations...

And although there isn't time to go into them in detail, it's important not to miss some significant pastoral receptions—particularly in Australia, Sweden, and the UK.

Briefly then, where next?

Geographically, there have been significant reception in English-speaking countries: the UK, Australia, Canada, the US, and South Africa. And increasingly in Europe, especially Scandinavia.

However, reception in the Global South is in its infancy. Despite some initial reflections by African, Asian, and Latin American scholars, the distinctive “variants” of that might flourish in these environments have not yet matured.

That said, even where reception goes back a decade or more, the praxis of integration and transforming at different levels of the church remains a challenge.

In the Catholic church, for example, synodality is recognised as a highly visible and pressing concern, but despite the literature on RE regularly citing this as an area of potential ecumenical learning – e.g., in *WTW* - substantive engagement with ecumenical learning has not yet made a significant mark in the emerging Catholic literature or practice (of synodality) to date.

More widely, if Receptive Ecumenism is about wounds and transformation, not just directly “Ecumenical”/ church-dividing issues”, then needs to be reading the signs of the times – race, gender, climate, to name just three – and developing the virtue needed to respond in the light of the gospel.

But also (and not unrelated) to this is the ecclesial learning needed in the wake of the present “vicious” not “virtuous” virus? In the aftermath of Covid-19, churches need not only instrumental learning, but healing of systematic wounds which have been uncovered– the people we don't reach, the underlying power structures revealed when liturgy is switched online, the need for genuine local presence and ministry- perhaps in new forms and understood in new ways? Here are new questions, new opportunities for RE to show its mettle as a virtuous virus in a changing world.