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LIVING WITH THE LEGACY OF THE REFORMATION: CONFSSIONAL IDENTITIES AND ECUMENISM IN TESTIMONIES OF GERMAN-SPEAKING WOMEN

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Abstract

In Germany, after World War II flight and expulsion of about 12 million Germans from the eastern territories brought an end to a relatively stable, small-scale denominational landscape, where contrasts between denominations moulded the religious identity of Christians. The eyewitness reports of German-speaking Catholic and Protestant women tell stories about denominational identities serving as a means for discrimination and exclusion but also stories about learning processes that may serve as a model for transgressing boundaries in today's increasingly multi-religious society. According to

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the narratives, the commitment for ecumenism is usually stimulated by biographical momentums like encounters or a personal crisis originating from denominational division. Ecumenical experiences will lead to theological reflection – with respecting the differences between denominations as an integral part of ecumenism on the one hand, and a transformation of the participants on the other hand. For the future, however, the vision and longing of the authors is a common Christian testimony in today's world.

Keywords: Catholic Women, Communicative Memory, Confessional Identities, Ecumenism, Mixed Marriages, Protestant Women, Reformation

1. A Religious Landscape

Since the Augsburg Settlement in 1555, Lutheran and Catholic princes could profit from the principle of denominational territorial sovereignty, which was later to be formulated with the succinct formula *cuius regio, eius religio*.¹ The reverse side of political peace proved to be the establishment of confessional identities and cultures within the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 ended the provision that an elector's, prince's, or count's change of denomination was automatically to be followed by his subjects and thus brought a relatively stable, small-scale denominational landscape, where contrasts between denominations moulded the religious identity of Christians. "Doing differences" became an integral part of the respective confessional identities.²

This denominational landscape of Germany was later to be transformed by migration movements, their motivation being either religious or economic: When King Louis XIV officially sanctioned the persecution of French Huguenots they were encouraged to immigrate to certain Protestant dominions within the Holy Roman Empire. Since the end of the 19th century, labour migration into Germany contributed to religious diversity. The biggest shift, however, was to take place after 1945, with the flight and expulsion of about 12 million

¹See Regina Heyder, "Ecumenism in Germany," *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo* 13 (2016) 255-271. For the history of the Council of Christian Churches (ACK) in Germany see Karl Heinz Voigt, *Ökumene in Deutschland. Von der Gründung der ACK bis zur Charta Oecumenica*, Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015. A theological initiative is the "Ökumenischer Arbeitskreis evangelischer und katholischer Theologen": see Volker Leppin/Dorothea Sattler (eds.), *Reformation 1517-2017. Ökumenische Perspektiven*, (Dialog der Kirchen, 16), Freiburg-Göttingen: Herder and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2014.

² See Stefan Hirschauer, "Un/doing Differences. Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten," *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 43, 3 (2014) 170-191 (https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/undoingdifferences/files/2013/06/2014_Hirschauer_Undoing_Differences_ZfS.pdf, 5.5.2017).

Germans from the eastern territories. Regions that had formerly been characterised by a confessional homogeneity then were faced with an influx of believers of different confessions. Konrad Adenauer, the first post-war Chancellor in the Federal Republic of Germany, is said to have fostered this denominational mixing intentionally. Today, increased mobility, globalisation tendencies, and recent migration are bringing non-European Christianities into the country. Especially significant are the increasing number of oriental orthodox communities on one hand, and the rapid rise of neo-Pentecostal congregations on the other hand.

Yet this increasing diversity among Christian communities is not represented within Statistics of religious affiliation in Germany. According to the census in 2011, 31.2% of Germans belong to the Catholic Church, 30.8% to the Protestant Church (“Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland”) and 38.0% to no denomination or “other” – that is they are Oriental Orthodox or Orthodox Christians, Jews, Muslims, members of other religions, or not religious at all. Both a clear North-South-divide (with a great deal more Protestant Christians living in the North and more Catholics living in the South) and a clear West-East divide are striking: while only 16.7% of Saarlanders in the West of Germany belong to other religions or none, this group is the biggest in the five new “Bundesländer” (states) in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, with figures from 67.6% to 81.2%.³

2. Living within the German Denominational Landscape: Testimonies of Women

But what does it mean to live within this denominational landscape, how are denominational identities formed today, and are they still relevant? And is ecumenism a concern of Christian believers? In preparation of the Reformation anniversary in 2017, the “Katholischer Deutscher Frauenbund” (KDFB; Catholic German Women’s Association) sought answers to these questions and launched a call for eyewitness reports. The association, founded in 1903 as a confessional counterpart to the bourgeois women’s liberation movement, today counts nearly 200000 women as its members and is committed to represent the specific concerns of women within politics, society, and the Church.⁴ Since decades,

³ See https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/Bevoelkerung/Zensus/ZensusBuLa5121101119004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile (04.05.2017).

⁴See Regina Heyder, “Christliche Frauenverbände,” in: *Staatslexikon: Recht-Wirtschaft-Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2017, 1066-1074.

many of its members have been interested and engaged in ecumenism.

Almost 40 women, couples, and one man responded to the KDFB's invitation to write an eyewitness report on personal experiences concerning the division between denominations as well as ecumenical commitment. The authors range from women of the older generation to students; from women of all German regions to individual women from Austria and Switzerland; from couples living in so called "mixed marriages" and committed lay woman to female theologians and experts in ecumenical dialogues. Even though the invitation was originally published within a distinctly catholic context, a significant number of Protestant women, representing Lutheran, Reformed, and Baptist believers, sent in their memories.⁵ Indeed, the editors had hoped for such a broad range of accounts, which in itself demonstrates the ecumenical networks of Christian women. The contributions also illustrate a shift in meaning of the term "ecumenism": In the decades before and after Vatican II, ecumenism, according to a popular understanding, was a bilateral preoccupation of Catholics and Protestants. In today's globalised world and Christianity, the notion of ecumenism has also become broader, including diverse Christianities and explicitly opening a path towards interreligious dialogue.

This article is based on these memories of women: We will start with two narratives, will then dwell on the characteristics of the Catholic and Protestant denominations as seen by the authors, and finally provide an analysis of the motivations and crucial factors that lead to ecumenical commitment and beyond.

3. Two Case Studies

3.1. Flight and Expulsion: "I Know What Discrimination Feels Like"

Elfriede E., born in 1939, had to flee with her family in 1946 from the small village Stadln in the Bohemian Forest. After endless days in a dark and overcrowded cattle truck, the family finally arrived at the destroyed train station in Würzburg and later moved to the district of Deggendorf, where prior to 1933 Catholics accounted for more than 99% of the inhabitants. There the Catholic family met Protestant expellees from Bratislava, and Elfriede made friends with their son Kurti. When the children started to attend school, experiences of exclusion prevailed: "I didn't know the term discrimination then, but

⁵See Maria Flachsbarth, Regina Heyder, Ute Leimgruber, ed., *Ökumene, die das Leben schreibt. Konfessionelle Identität und ökumenisches Engagement in Zeitzeuginnenberichten*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2017.

I know what it feels like. [...] Other pupils teased me because of my foreign name, and Kurti was teased because of his dialect. I couldn't understand why, one day, he was excluded from the lessons in religious education. He was the only Protestant child in our grade."

Sometimes, Elfriede attended celebrations of the Lord's Supper in the Protestant Church of Deggendorf together with her friend Kurti and his family. She—and other contributors—was impressed by the pastor's human closeness: he never forgot to greet the children, he addressed them in his sermon and he allowed them to sit around the altar. In Catholic services, in contrast, the dominant impression was distance and discipline: complete silence was expected during the liturgy; the children saw only the priest's back, listened to a mass in a foreign language, and considered the communion rail as a means to keep the congregation at a distance from the altar.

When Elfriede was preparing to receive her First Holy Communion, the parish priest came to see her parents. Somehow he had learnt about her attending Protestant services, and he threatened to exclude her from First Communion, if she wouldn't stop going there. Her parents were appalled—and "of course obliged." During the mass, Kurti sat in the last pew, but during the reception in the family he was treated as a guest of honour, sitting next to his friend Elfriede.

Elfriede E. is telling a story of denominational inclusion and exclusion, which is interwoven with experiences during flight and expulsion. Both children, Elfriede and her friend Kurti, were the victims of exclusion on different levels: their mates teased them because of their foreign name and dialect, whereas the adult authorities—teachers and the parish priest—established denominational boundaries. Kurti's "other" denomination came in handy to distinguish and literally separate him from his mates, whereas Elfriede's "right" denomination did not help her to make friends in her new surroundings. It seems that for the locals, denominations served as a convenient reason for discriminating against the refugees but it could have easily been replaced by other criteria.

Rather enlightening is the family's reaction to the prohibition of Elfriede further attending Protestant services. Formally her parents obliged, and within the church building Kurti was banned to the last pew. Yet during the reception in the family, this order was subverted and Kurti was treated as a special guest. When ecumenism—here merely understood as encounters between denominations—is at stake, this attitude of formally obeying to the requests of the clergy

and privately looking for subversive solutions may be noticed within many contributions. Usually this attitude has its starting point within the context of a “crisis,” like flight and expulsion, mixed marriages, the death of a child, or the denominationally separated celebration of Christmas within a family. At least for most catholic women, this subversive activity stands at the beginning of an emancipation process also concerning their status as lay women and often to be accompanied by theological reflection.

3.2. Living in a “Mixed Marriage”: “The Devil on the Pillow”

“When two denominations rest on one pillow, the devil lies in between.” Maria H.H., born in the Catholic southern Netherlands in 1947, already as a young girl knew about the dangers that resulted from so called “mixed marriages” between Catholics and Protestants, and never intended to marry one of these “heretics,” who deserved her pity because “they would not go to heaven.” Yet during a holiday she met her future husband, a Lutheran from Bavaria. Her parents, who had a vivid memory about the German occupation in the Netherlands, resented him more for being a Lutheran than for originating from Germany. In 1972, the couple celebrated their wedding in the Netherlands, and Church officials proved to be very helpful and understanding: bride and groom could honestly promise a “Christian education” for their future children, and the involved Catholic priest and Protestant vicar “concelebrated” during the wedding service. Maria H.H. explicitly states the impossibility of such a service: “I know, that doesn’t exist, but then, in my small village of Loon op Zand, this took place. In 1972, only a few years after Vatican II, they simply did it.” That the couple was able to start married life without a theological or denominational burden is interpreted by Maria H.H. as a “gift of ecumenism”; it is part of the “blessings” she received during her life.

However, the ceremony was not free from obstacles. In Catholic regions of the Netherlands, the newlyweds usually “laid their lives at the feet of Mary,” who was to be represented by a statue put on the altar especially for this occasion. In order to avoid superfluous problems—Maria knew “that Protestants generally had no relationship with Mary”—the forward-looking bride had begged to forgo this ritual. But when she arrived at the wedding church, she found the statue on the altar, and although she still was a “well-behaved Catholic girl,” she resisted the “temptation” to “let it happen.” The statue was brought back to a chapel, and Maria H.H. could celebrate “a small triumph.”

Because the couple then moved to the Lutheran region in Bavaria her husband originated from, the children were baptized and brought up within the Lutheran Church—the decision just “felt right.” The couple then started to work actively for the unity of Christians. Both of them took positions of leadership within their respective parishes and “steered both parishes on the path to unity.” Together Maria and her husband went to services in the Catholic and Lutheran parish, first without receiving Holy Communion in the “other” Church. But when the Lutheran vicar repeatedly invited Maria to the Communion Service, she finally participated and “receiving the Eucharistic bread and wine felt as ‘valid’ as in my own Roman-Catholic Church. I let myself be invited by Jesus, and it felt right.”

As “a woman, as a foreigner in Germany, and as an ecumenist,” Maria found a strong support of this “right” sentiment in Jesus’ talk to the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4): Jesus’ answer to the woman’s question *where* to worship is *how* to worship—“in the spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:23f). Maria understood that “it is less relevant to which denomination I belong or *where* I attend the service but it matters *how* I pray, *how* I get into contact with God, and this can be done anywhere in a valid and right way.” This theological reflection “solved my ecumenical problem” and proved to be “a great liberation and an ecumenical gift.”

Again, it is a certain momentum in Maria H.H.’s biography that leads the path to ecumenism. Her “ecumenical” marriage causes her to develop from an obeying girl to an autonomous and theologically reflecting woman. “Mixed marriages” were suspected by Catholic and Protestant clergy of fostering “religious indifference,” but Maria and her husband tell a different story about commitment and theological reflection. Repeatedly, Maria uses terms with a distinct religious connotation in order to describe her attitude towards ecumenism within her marriage: the (devil’s) “temptation” does not consist in marrying a Lutheran but in consenting to the Catholic, non-ecumenical tradition, and to her gender role as a “well-behaved girl.” On the other hand, “blessings” respectively “gifts” result from an ecumenical attitude and the activities of the couple and the clergy. Whereas Maria and many of the Catholic female authors tend to underline the important role of the clergy as representatives of ecumenism, Protestant female contributors seem to be less impressed by such symbolic communication.

Practical rather than theological reflections led the couple to have their children baptised within the Lutheran Church—they simply

chose the denomination of the region they were living in. Again several authors tell similar stories, and the effects are already to be noticed in statistics and church attendance: Church buildings erected by expellees in denominationally homogenous regions during the post-war period are no longer required today because the partners within mixed marriages usually orientate themselves towards the confession of the majority.

Maria's and her husband's decision concerning the baptism and the reception of Holy Communion within both parishes just "felt right." Whereas most authors describe how they at least within their families gradually gave up a denominationally different practise, Maria and her husband explicitly decided to work within their different parishes towards the unity of Christians. Ecumenical experiences and activities were to be supported by theological reflection, and Maria developed a Christocentric spirituality. In the end, it is not a denomination but Jesus who invites her to his table.

4. Denominational Identities

4.1. Catholicism and Protestantism in the View of Catholic Women

A broad range of denominational characteristics is mentioned by the authors, and a comprehensive systematic analysis would not only comprise the features of the different confessions but also coordinates like in the past/to date, or dividing/integrating denominational criteria. Within this contribution we will at least analyse some significant features.

In their youth, some Catholic contributors experienced their religion as a "strict regime," that found its most prominent expression in the celebration of Holy Mass, as was described by Elfriede E. On the other hand, some women loved and still love the sensuality of Catholicism with its rites: "holy water, incense, sign of the cross, genuflections, the altar servers, processions, liturgical colours, gave me a feeling of belonging and comfort." Maria F. therefore understands herself as "feeling in a Catholic manner" but "reflecting in a Protestant way." A similar divide between the denominations is to be noticed within Roswitha D.S.'s narration of an ecumenical pilgrimage initiated by the Schwanberg Sisters, a community of Protestant Benedictine nuns in Bavaria. When the sisters asked the surrounding parishes to cooperate in the planning, Roswitha noticed "significant differences in the understanding of a pilgrimage." She could rely on her own parish's "century-old tradition of pilgrimage" and, over the years, contributed some distinct features to the ecumenical pilgrimage: "to abstain from

unknown hymns” and “to have refreshments as an integral part of a proper pilgrimage.” The Catholic partners yet had to accept a comparatively short walking distance and the shared reading of spiritual texts, which however should not be “over-intellectual.” Roswitha summarises that “we learn from each other.”

In many contributions, the regular reading and the love and the estimation for the Bible are seen as the most important characteristic of Protestantism. Half a century ago, even within a completely Catholic context, the Bible in itself could represent Protestantism: When Vatican II sought a new “balance between the Word of God and the Bread of Life,” the bishop of Rottenburg, Carl Joseph Leiprecht, gave a New Testament to all participants of the Katholikentag (German Catholic Congress) in Stuttgart (1964). Brigitte B. welcomed this as a “wonderful sign toward ecumenism”; in her eyes, the Council, the Bible and ecumenism are related topics. On a theological level it is the “freedom of a Christian” (Luther) which Catholic women explicitly adapt for themselves from the Protestant tradition.

Catholic women are admiring how their Protestant sisters have gained positions within their community, especially as professionals. At the same time they try to differentiate and emphasise the “decades of theological struggle,” which only finally led to the “public ministry of preaching the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments.” According to Dorothea S., these ordained women encourage their Catholic sisters to scrutinise the official theological argumentation within their own Church. While she admits that since Vatican II women are playing a larger role within synodal consultations, she regrets that they are still excluded from the process of decision-making. Iris M.S., a Catholic academic theologian married to a Protestant priest (pastor/vicar), is repeatedly impressed by “competent and spiritually strong women priests, deans, and prelates.” Yet she is sceptical about the traditional role of a priest’s wife, who was and sometimes still is limited to the private sphere – answering telephone calls, helping at parish feasts, leading the service on the Women’s World Day of Prayer.

Among the above mentioned denominational characteristics there are some features like the love for the Bible or the recourse to the freedom of a Christian which Catholic women define as being historically rooted in Protestantism yet long being adopted by themselves. Catholic women however claim as part of their spiritual tradition a sensual competence which they gladly share with their Protestant sisters and brothers, for example in the context of

pilgrimages. The different status of women within their respective Churches has only in recent decades developed as a dividing denominational feature and to date is the deepest gap.

4.2. Catholicism and Protestantism in the View of Protestant Women

“Our family obtained a strong Protestant belief that always was centred on the Bible and the freedom of a Christian—without the Mother of God, the Pope, or the emphasis on tradition.” Ingetraud K. mentions distinctive theological features of Protestantism and Catholicism. Centuries ago, her mother’s Huguenot family had fled from France to Prussia, and after World War II Ingeborg’s family was expelled from Eastern Pomerania. Within this family dividing denominational attributions formed an important part of the communicative memory: Catholicism was not only characterised by theological features, but also by a certain habitus. Catholics were said to be “false” because, especially in moral questions, they always knew a loophole like the annulment of marriages “even for families with children,” or a certain tolerance towards priests who did not live up to the standards of celibacy. After 1920 when the “Polish Corridor” was established close to their home, Catholicism was furthermore interwoven with a certain national identity, and Catholic, Polish, and inimical became synonyms. Yet the crisis of World War II shattered the traditional identities: when, at the age of twelve, Ingetraud’s brother was abducted by Russians, her mother even asked Mary for her intercession who, “being a sorely afflicted mother herself, would understand” (Ingetraud learnt this story only twenty years later, when she herself married a Catholic). After World War II her father developed a fervent hope for Christian unity: “during the war and the subsequent captivity, the Christian comrades had always celebrated joint services without any differences.” He was convinced that “after such a fate there could be only one Christian Church.”

To date, also within the stories of Protestant women, the most dividing issue is the ecclesiological status of women. “For me, the Catholic Churches’ treatment of women is absolutely unacceptable. I know some really good Catholic female theologians. They are doing really good pastoral work, and at the same time are struggling untiringly. I admire their dedication, but my own character prevents me—or, better, liberates from such a dedication. [...] The Reformed Church enables me, as a woman, to work without limitations within the Church.” Swiss Monika N., who in connection with her first marriage converted from Catholicism to the Reformed Church, is extremely annoyed how women are treated within the Roman-

Catholic Church. She herself is a special education teacher, and her classes in religious education are attended by Christian, Muslim, and Hindu pupils: "It became important to me to speak about a liberating God." "Reformed identity" according to Monika includes "commitment for the good of all" and for human rights, and it is important to notice that she does not mention the ordination of women but rather "leadership positions" and the "participation in decision making." The idea of a "liberating God" and a commitment "without limitations" seem to be closely entangled. In the end this perspective means that the status of Catholic women within their Church not only affects their status within the society but their relationship with God as well.

Again, some features of Catholicism like the Virgin Mary, the pope, and tradition, are spoken about in a historicising manner. For the Protestant authors, these features have – sometimes rather secretly – lost their segregating effect; for the Catholic contributors they are not particularly relevant. According to the testimonies of Protestant women, their denomination contributes positively identified notions like the Bible or the freedom of a Christian to a shared Christian experience, and it could also contribute to a new position of Catholic women within their denomination.

5. Narratives of the Past, Visions for the Future

"Enrichment" or "gifts" are the most prominent terms the authors use to characterise the importance of ecumenism for their spiritual life as a Christian. The terms refer to shared learning and the healing of memories: "Ecumenism is not only the exchange of information, but also a learning process, that will lead to a mutual enrichment" (Brigitte B.). Indeed, nearly every author identifies an encounter or event that eventually motivated her private or public ecumenical involvement. Therefore the implicit definitions of ecumenism within the stories cover a large variety, including personal encounters, mixed marriages, visiting a service of "other" denominations, joint spiritual activities like reading the Bible or celebrating the Women's World Day of Prayer, repeated visits to ecumenical "lieux de mémoire" as Taizé or the Schwanberg, belonging to ecumenical communities like the "Iona Community," and, of course, commitment within ecumenical dialogue and theology.

To date, the narratives and stereotypes of the past are still told: the discriminating against the partners of a mixed marriage belongs to the communicative memory within families. Stories about Catholic farmers spreading manure on Good Friday, and Protestant farmers

respectively on the Feast of Corpus Christi⁶ imply that discriminating against the “other” confession was even worse within rural regions. Yet in the reports, all these narratives signal a “background” in contrast to the current and improved ecumenical situation, with the denominational characteristics often functioning as symbols of ecumenism: only because the believers know about and value their own traditions, unity among Christians may be experienced. Ecumenism today needs a respect for differences. “A vivid ecumenism consists in the option to reflect one’s own belief, and to let oneself be questioned by the other,” says Miriam L., a student of psychology. According to her, the “surplus value” of ecumenism surpasses an additive understanding of the single confessions: it is the fulfilled longing to include all people who believe in God’s self-communication in Jesus Christ. Yet she and many authors of the younger generation long for a shared Christian testimony within a secularized world. For them, in the end ecumenism will lead the path towards interreligious dialogue.

Why is it important to listen to stories about traditional boundaries between denominations and the enriching experiences of ecumenism in the year of the Reformation anniversary? In today’s Germany, migration and secularisation are again changing the religious landscape, and “doing differences” is especially related to Islam. Analysing the mechanics of exclusion, or the experienced intersection of religion and migration in the past on the one hand, and analysing the conditions for an enriching living together—for example encounters as incentives, a shared spiritual experience that will lead to theological reflection, and a real respect for differences—on the other hand may help in developing ideas how to strengthen togetherness. To identify these stories as part of the collective, identity shaping memory is of importance within an increasingly multi-religious society.

⁶In Germany, during the 19th and the first half of the 20th Century Good Friday was considered the highest Protestant feast day, whereas some Catholics showed an anti-Protestant attitude by neglecting its character as a holiday. Working on Good Friday or Corpus Christi respectively – and especially spreading fresh malodorous manure – manifested the farmers’ disrespect for Protestant churchgoers or the Catholic Corpus Christi procession.