Raising a Christian or an Orthodox Christian? Parents' experience of their ecumenical reality and minority status in religious upbringing of Finnish Orthodox children and youth

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the effect of parents’ ecumenical reality and their minority position on the religious upbringing of children in the special context of Finnish Orthodox Christians, as described by the parents themselves in letters collected for this study. Family has a decisive role in religious socialization. Children growing up in mixed-marriage families, however, tend to diverge from religion more so than those with a homogenous religious family background. The chapter indicates that in the Finnish Orthodox context, both the minority position and ecumenical family setting of Orthodox parents compel them to simultaneously demarcate and assimilate when bringing up the new Orthodox generation. Since most Orthodox Finns grow up in mixed marriages, solving the challenge of religious diversity is often a complex family matter, strongly influencing parents’ experience of religious socialization in families. Outside of the family, a lack of peers is a major issue that complicates Orthodox religious upbringings. If Orthodox family support is available, the responsibilities of religious parenting are easier to bear.

Keywords religious upbringing, religious socialization, mixed marriages, ecumenism, Orthodoxy

The »ecumenical family« as a challenge for religious upbringings

Sociologically, the family has a decisive role in transmitting religious traditions, beliefs and practices. Children are strongly influenced by the religiosity of their childhood home and their parents’ religiosity and beliefs (Edgell, 2009; for research references, see Benson and King, 2005). This is even more the case in the
developed world, where both family and religion have been strongly privatized (Wilcox, 2005, pp. 99–101). Some scholars have recently begun to speak of the »sanctification of family relationships« due to religion’s positive effect on family cohesion (Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; see also Howarth, Lees, Sidebotham, Higgins, & Imtiaz, 2008). In the complex case of a mixed marriage, instead of having a solely positive effect, the interconnectedness between religion and the family can complicate family relationships and weaken the commitment to and outcomes of a religious upbringing. In the elementary classic Handbook of Family Religious Education, McIntosh and Spilka (1995) indicate that mixed marriages tend to be less successful in terms of religious upbringings, at least when it comes to children’s identification with religious traditions and their participation in religious activities in adulthood.

Orthodox Christians are a small minority in Finland, with ca. 61 000 registered members of the Finnish Orthodox Church constituting approximately 1% of the population. In addition, there are at least 20 000 other Orthodox Christians (mainly Russians) living in Finland who are not registered in the Church. The Finnish Orthodox Church has legal status, and is recognized by the state as the second-ranking indigenous or national church of Finland, with the majority of Finns (72%) belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Mixed marriages have become more common among the Orthodox population since the Second World War. Currently, most Orthodox Finns (over 90%) marry a non-Orthodox spouse, who, in most cases, is Lutheran. Homogenous Orthodox families are a minority group within the Finnish Orthodox community. Consequently, mixed marriages are sociologically, religiously and ecclesiologically influential factors in Finnish Orthodoxy. At home and in church, Orthodoxy is practised within a framework that is thoroughly permeated by ecumenical reality and relations.

The focus in this chapter is on the effect of the specific dynamics of family religious education in a Finnish Orthodox context. From these dynamics, two research questions arise:

1) How is the ecumenical reality (within and outside the families) and belonging to a religious minority reflected in the parents’ goal of providing a religious upbringing for their children?

2) Do the parents feel that the ecumenical element in the family, or in the Finnish religious landscape, has complicated the religious upbringing of their children?
In a resource book (Jaanu-Schröder, Lehmuskoski, & Työrinoja, 1995) for «ecumenical families», published by the Finnish Ecumenical Council in 1995, the lived reality of the Finnish Orthodox Christian population was reflected in relation to mixed marriages and religious upbringings. The negative aspects arising from the Finnish context that were pointed out in the book include a lack of acceptance in terms of both practising the Orthodox faith and promoting an Orthodox upbringing in the family on the part of the non-Orthodox spouse, concealing Orthodox symbols (e.g. icons) at home, grief caused by disagreement between spouses over baptizing their children, the disappointment of grandparents when »losing« their grandchildren to another church and a weak awareness of the Orthodox tradition among those who have been raised in a mixed-marriage family. As positive descriptions, the book also gives witness to the harmonious coexistence of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christian traditions in one family, and the experience of mutual respect, reciprocal learning and a strengthening of the Orthodox identity in ecumenical family settings.

Despite the impact of an ecumenical family life and a minority position in terms of the everyday lived religion, very little research has been undertaken on the family issues of the Finnish Orthodox population. Voitto Huotari (1975a; 1975b, pp. 62–69) has discovered a strong tendency in mixed marriages to support the Lutheran tradition at the expense of Orthodoxy, for example, by baptizing the children outside of the Orthodox Church. Research carried out among female Orthodox evacuees (who fled from Karelia, the Eastern Finnish territory ceded to the Soviet Union, in the 1940s), shows that social pressure directed women towards minimal exposure of their Orthodox tradition while navigating between Orthodoxy and Lutheranism in mixed marriages and ecumenical family life. Distinctively Orthodox practices (the sign of the cross, venerating icons, Orthodox prayers) were observed privately by them. (Kupari, 2014; 2015).

These findings on the lived reality from the 1940s to the 1970s cannot be applied as such to the current Finnish context. Since the 1960s, Orthodoxy has emerged from the margins, and has an established social, cultural, religious and ecumenical presence in 21st-century Finland (Huttunen, 2002; Laitila, 2009; Metso, 2016). Attitudes towards Orthodoxy in mixed marriages have also changed. A more recent study on Eastern Finnish parents’ commitment to religious parenting suggests that non-Orthodox parents also feel responsible for the religious upbringing of their Orthodox children. Ecumenical family reality may even enhance the overall observation of religious traditions. (Vatanen, 2001).
This chapter provides up-to-date information on the lived reality and phenomena of the religious socialization of the Finnish Orthodox population. Due to a consciously ecumenical approach, religious intermarriages or interfaith marriages are not discussed in this chapter.

Before engaging with the analysis, the phenomena of religious socialization, and the concept and context of the Finnish Orthodox family are briefly described.

Interplay between the domains in religious socialization

Childhood and adolescent religiosity is influenced by several factors. The main domains that contribute to the religious socialization of children and youth include the family, peers, religious education (RE) and the congregation. Based on research results, Benson and King (2005) itemize three main factors in religious socialization:

1. **Family influences**: children conform to their parent’s religion more often than switching to another denomination or abandoning their religion. Religious activity at home, both parents’ commitment to religious modelling and consistency in the religious message enhance positive religious socialization. The transmission of religious values and beliefs in the family is hindered by mixed marriages and parental discord.

2. **Congregational influences**: religious development is significantly influenced by parochial education, RE programs and involvement in activities in the congregation. In addition to committed teachers, learner-centred processes and meaningful educational content for children and adolescents, congregational religious socialization is influenced by the positive climate of the community.

3. **Other influences**: peers and peer groups have an impact on religious socialization, and inform religious attendance and religious importance. In relation to the family and other contextual influences, peer influence seems to have a less important role in religious socialization.

Orthodox scholars of religious pedagogy have emphasized the importance of the interplay between different factors in the development of religiosity. Ideally, family, church (congregation) and school (RE) interact coherently forming a foundation and structure for religious socialization. This constructive network
is termed integrative triangulation, in which a religious education and upbringing in its wholeness is equally carried out by each of the three domains (Tarasar, 1995; Aikonen, 1998; Penttonen, 2001).

The Orthodox appreciation of the linkage between the different domains in religious socialization is supported by results from the research on the interplay between different influences. Religious engagement is significantly increased when children and youth have been imbedded in a religiously coherent nexus of family, church and school (Benson, 1992; Gunnøe & Moore, 2002; Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004; see also Fowlkes, 1988; Benson & King, 2005).

In addition, the Orthodox understanding emphasizes the idea of life-long and holistic religious socialization: Religious growth and education is a continuous process connected with an overarching network of relationships in the domains of family and church (Koulomzin, 2004; Penttonen, 2013). As a result, religious formation and development are ecclesial, communal, holistic and life-long in nature (Boojamra, 1989).

Ideals and the reality of religious socialization in the Finnish context

Ideally, the family is, in the Orthodox teaching, a »miniature church«, whose life is organized liturgically and communally in relation to the congregation. As a rule, the Finnish Orthodox are a minority that lives scattered among an overwhelmingly Lutheran majority. People belonging to the dominant denomination – and, increasingly, to other religious communities as well – are members of most families of Finnish Orthodox believers. The status quo is that religiously homogenous miniature churches are rare exceptions, since in most cases, the other parent of a Finnish Orthodox child or youth is non-Orthodox. A mixed marriage does not necessarily mean that Orthodox »miniature churches« cannot be supported, yet their protection might be difficult (Merras, 1999, p. 77; Johannes, 2002, pp. 147–148; 2006, pp. 74–76). The general Orthodox view of mixed marriages is therefore disapproving (Metso, 2014).

The Finnish Orthodox Church is well aware of the ecumenical reality of most of its members’ family lives. In recent documents provided by the church, supporting mixed-marriage families is strongly endorsed. In 2011, the principles of early childhood education, Holy Noise (In Finnish: Pyhä melu), explicated the challenges brought about by the »ecumenical families« in terms of
religious upbringings and preschool RE. Supporting the Orthodox identity of children and their Orthodox parents in such families was designated as the main task of the church in the field of early childhood education (Pyhä melu, 2011). Similarly, the declared strategy of the church for 2010–2015 was that the church would stand by those Orthodox members living in »ecumenical families« (Kirkon strategia, 2009, chap. 6.1).

Research on the religiosity of Finnish adolescents (Mikkola, Niemelä, & Petterson, 2006; Niemelä, 2006) shows that religiosity with institutional structures and traditional forms significantly affects the transmission of religiosity, assuming that the parents are committed to the religious upbringing of their children in the family. Consequently, it seems that Orthodoxy, with its emphasis on tradition and objective forms of faith (e.g. the communal nature of Christian life, liturgy, fasts, and feasts), could provide a supportive structure for religious upbringings in the home.

Minority settings create a challenge, especially regarding the processes of secondary socialization. If the values and beliefs of the larger social surroundings differ significantly from the home environment, children are compelled to reflect on their choices in overlapping contexts: How should one navigate day care, the school or the peer group, when the norms, beliefs and rules of those domains differ from the ones prevailing at home? A study on the Seventh-day Adventist minority in Finland indicates that in situations where the home differs from the ruling culture, children repeatedly face situations in which they must make choices between different coexisting norms (Kuusisto, 2005, 2011). A similar situation most likely applies to Orthodox children as well. Concerning the roles in the sphere of secondary socialization, they are compelled to evaluate the meaning of their own religious tradition while making decisions on manifesting their identity in various social roles and situations.

Analysis

Data and method

The data for this chapter was collected through an open invitation in several major Finnish Orthodox magazines (Aamun Koitto, Ortodoksiviesti and Paimen Sanomat) in spring and early summer of 2014. In the invitation, the parents of Orthodox children and youth were asked to describe their under-
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standing, aims and forms of religious upbringing, as well as experiences and feelings related to religious parenting.

Letters were received from 41 parents who were, at that time, or who had been involved in the religious upbringing of Orthodox children and/or youth. Two letters were jointly written by both parents and the exact number of letters received was 39. Women were more active in responding; all but five informants were women, the data thus suggesting that Finnish women are perhaps more dedicated to religion than men are (on women’s religiosity, see Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012; Utriainen & Salmesvuori, 2014).

Methodologically, the research follows a micro-qualitative approach, and content analysis is used as the actual method in analysing the letters (Kyngäs & Vanhanen, 1999; Spickard, 2005; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2013). The analysis was carried out inductively, based on the content; the phenomenon was explored, and thematically and theoretically reconstructed from the data.

The ecumenical reality of mixed marriages emerged from the data in the following ways.

- Seven informants were married to a non-Orthodox, four to a Lutheran, two to a person with no church-affiliation and one to a Muslim (later divorced).
- At least five informants were Lutheran. This exemplifies that in mixed marriages, non-Orthodox parents may also take part in the religious upbringing of their Orthodox children. A bit surprisingly, perhaps, Lutheran parents were proud to raise Orthodox children. None of them brought up the negative effects or painful experiences around not sharing the same faith as their child.
- The phenomenon of the conversion to Orthodoxy emerges strongly in the data. Nine informants had converted to Orthodoxy at some point in their lives. In four such cases, the spouse had also embraced Orthodoxy. All in all, ten informants revealed that their spouse had converted to Orthodoxy at some point during their marriage. In the letters, it became evident that in many cases, Orthodoxy had been embraced in order to enhance religious harmony in the family. Thus, sharing one faith in the family is highly valued in the data.

Demographical statistics do not seem to apply to the data, since the majority of informants live in homogenous Orthodox marriages. They are represented to an extent that exceeds their prevalence in the overall Finnish Orthodox population (which is less than 10%). Also, conversion to Orthodoxy is strongly represented, while the majority of the Orthodox population are »cradle Orthodox« (i.e. baptized into Orthodoxy in their infancy). Nevertheless, a high number of converts in the data gives witness to the fact that mixed marriages
have been experienced by most informants as a prevalent setting at some point in their marital and family life.

The aims of a religious upbringing

How is the minority position and ecumenical reality of Orthodox Finns reflected in the aims of a religious upbringing? To begin with, the idea of the nature of a religious upbringing among the parents of Orthodox children and youth varies considerably. Even though half of the informants (21) explicitly identify with transmitting the Orthodox tradition as an essential aim of a religious upbringing (the other half of the informants describe processes of transmitting the tradition without explicitly naming it as the goal of a religious upbringing), there is no agreement as to what this actually means. Some parents perceive transmitting the Orthodox tradition practically as a part of the general upbringing of their children, the aim of a religious upbringing being simply to raise good and decent people and citizens. Others put more emphasis on the cultural aspect of Orthodoxy, the focus being on the festal tradition and the cultivation of characteristic habits and forms of Orthodox practices (such as the sign of the cross and the veneration of icons). Religious or convictional aspects of religious parenting are not displayed much. Naturally, there are also parents with stronger religiosity with a lucid Orthodox identity. Roughly speaking, the informants can be categorized into three groups:

- **Insecure parents**, who belittle their role and duty in terms of religious parenting. They describe themselves as passive in the religious cultivation of their children, and tend to leave the religious upbringing of their children to teachers of religion in primary school. Only four parents fall into this category.
- **Moderate parents**, who appreciate the beliefs and practices of Orthodoxy, and deliberately aim to pass on the Orthodox tradition to their children. In practice, the religious upbringing of their children is focused on the practical expressions and cultural forms of Orthodoxy rather than on the formation of personal religious convictions. The majority of the informants are moderate parents.
- **Passionate parents**, who are strong in their faith. They wish for their children to adopt an explicit Orthodox identity and for them to become active in practising their faith. Three parents belong to this category.
The data highlights that belonging to a minority and the need to integrate with the majority both culturally and socially have shaped the parents’ ideas of religious upbringings. As for the results concerning the aims of a religious upbringing, as expressed by the parents, two dominant themes came up: value goals and religious identity construction.

The theme of value goals is heavily shaped by their minority position. Being in the minority has clearly given most parents the ability, firstly, to cope with their own difference and, secondly, to deal with difference in other people. This is witnessed in the fact that many parents link this kind of coping ability with their idea of religious parenting. Of the values transmitted through a religious upbringing, tolerance is referred to most frequently (6) as a value that the children are expected to adopt. Four parents describe tolerance specifically as religious tolerance. One such parent characterizes respect for other people’s religions and values as one of the most important goals of a religious upbringing. Similarly, another parent questions the status of Orthodoxy as the true faith, and wishes that her child would »grow to be religiously tolerant. It would be quite a jackpot to be accidently born into the one and only true religion; the world is filled with religions, though.« Yet another parent finds it important to be tolerant, especially towards Lutherans. Despite the fact that in many letters there are references to cultural, religious or attitudinal confrontations experienced with representatives of the Lutheran majority, the parents of Orthodox children are committed to promoting tolerance in Finnish society, and especially among different denominations and religions.

Alongside tolerance, and with more than one occurrence in the data, other values set as goals for a religious upbringing include: respect of other people (4), taking others into account (4), environmental protection (4), love of one’s neighbour (2) and equality (2). Such value goals indicate that parents link an Orthodox religious upbringing with peaceful coexistence with people of different faiths and ideologies.

The theme of religious identity construction concerns the desired religious profile of the children’s identity. Some parents emphasize a general Christian identity rather than a pronounced Orthodox Christian identity. Raising an Orthodox child does not necessarily indicate that a conscious Orthodox identity should be set as a primary goal. This was already indicated above when a parent challenged Orthodoxy as being »the religious jackpot«. This effort to promote a Christian identity over a labelled Orthodox one can be described as a non-distinctive attitude towards a religious upbringing. Two moderate parents describe this kind of attitude:
I do not either emphasize to my children that they are Orthodox, I just speak generally, for example, of the church and Christianity. If the children ask, I tell them that they are Orthodox. (Mother of three children, 36 years old, Orthodox)

I am not sure that I try to raise my children specifically as Orthodox. I aim to raise them as persons who respect other people and are merciful to themselves and others. (Mother, Orthodox, number of children and age unknown)

In addition, one passionate parent has a strong ecumenical conviction. Even though she is fully committed to Orthodoxy, and wishes her children to be convicted Orthodox Christians, she criticizes the feeling of superiority that she has detected among the Orthodox towards Lutherans, Catholics and Pentecostals. She explicitly denotes her unwillingness to pass on a feeling of Orthodox superiority to her children. Instead, she rejoices in her children’s active denomination-crossing interaction with Pentecostals and Catholics.

This non-distinct attitude matches with parents’ reactions to their children’s detachment from Orthodoxy in their adolescence or adulthood. In several letters, some parents describe their feelings when their children have become alienated from Orthodoxy due to them becoming passive in their faith or abandoning the church altogether, for example through conversion to Islam or by proclaiming that they are atheist. The following description reveals the sometimes-diffuse outcome of committed religious parenting:

In my opinion, I have succeeded in transmitting tradition and providing knowledge. [ – - ] What about the results, then? Quite right. Our oldest daughter is a devoted and very religious Muslim. Our second daughter is irreligious and still belongs in the church. Our youngest daughter is socially and culturally attached to Orthodoxy, not believing in God, though. She goes to church anyway. All of them appreciate traditions and – except for the Muslim daughter – celebrate Easter. They think about fasting and dye eggs for Easter night liturgy. Quite a mishmash, but, according to my mind, thinking with your own brains is important. (Mother of three children, 52 years old, Orthodox)

Despite all the grief these separations may have caused, the mood of all the descriptions of the children’s alienation from Orthodoxy is approving and loving. There were not even any hints of disappointment or condemnation regarding the children’s religious choices reported in the letters.

Alongside the evident non-distinct attitude in the data, a minority status may direct parents towards a totally opposite view in terms of religious identity construction. Five parents emphasize that forming a solid Orthodox identity is the ultimate goal of a religious upbringing. This approach can be designated as having a distinctive attitude. One parent with such an attitude reveals the
painful aspect of her minority situation, while reflecting on her own childhood experiences in her current parenting:

I would like my child not to feel ashamed of being an Orthodox (I became distressed attending different classes in religious education), but to feel proud of being different, and of having a strong faith. (Mother of one child, 30 years old, Orthodox)

Several other parents with a distinct attitude find it important that their children are, since early childhood, aware of being Orthodox, and that Orthodoxy will become an inseparable part of their identity. There is, however, only one truly exclusive opinion found in the entire data: for one mother, Orthodoxy is the only true world view, and she hopes that her children can proudly express it. Also, being a convert to Orthodoxy, she defines Orthodox religious formation as being opposed to Lutheran education, which she found harmful and even erroneous. Such a strong negative ecumenical attitude is not represented by any other parent in the entire data set.

Parenting Orthodox children and youth in Finland gives rise to situations where minority values, beliefs and practices are challenged and questioned at the different levels of socialization. It seems, however, that most parents can relate to Finnish society without problems. For them, belonging to a religious minority is not a significant divider. In other words, macro-level socialization of Orthodox children and youth (i.e. socialization processes and realities outside of the micro-level socialization within the family) does not seem to bother the parents that much. This is witnessed in the fact that there are only two references in the entire data set to a harmful influence of the surrounding Finnish culture and society on Orthodoxy: one parent from Ostrobothnia, the western coastal region, finds the local non-Orthodox Easter traditions (e.g. witches and bonfires) greatly disturbing, and another one lists influences of atheism, other religions and materialism as hazardous to Orthodoxy.

Reasons that complicate religious upbringings

Even if the parents raise their Orthodox children more or less in harmony with the superstructure of Finnish society, the spheres of primary socialization (family and friends) and secondary socialization (school and parish) include complicating minority – majority dynamics. Based on the information emerging from the data, there are three main domains that cause problems in
religious upbringings: 1) family, home and friends; 2) school and RE; and 3) parish life.

*Family, home and the circle of acquaintances*

Due to the reality of mixed marriages and more minority – majority dynamics affecting family life, primary socialization at home brings forward factors that make the experience of religious upbringings hard for some Finnish parents. According to the analyses, the complicating issues are:

- A lack of support for an Orthodox religious upbringing from the non-Orthodox spouse. Non-supporting spouses’ attitudes vary from passivity and indifference towards religious parenting to hostility towards a religious upbringing.
- Hesitancy by the Orthodox parent in practising Orthodoxy in front of their non-Orthodox spouse. At least some accounts indicate that cautiousness in expressing Orthodoxy is a result of the Orthodox spouse’s insecurity rather than of complicating religious tensions in the family.
- A lack of support and negativity towards Orthodoxy from non-Orthodox relatives. In all such cases, such problematic relatives were kin to a non-Orthodox spouse.
- A lack of a strong Orthodox family tradition. This was voiced by converts to Orthodoxy, who had not themselves been raised as Orthodox. One converted mother wrote that she missed her non-existent Orthodox Grandma.
- A lack of Orthodox peers for the children and youth. Most parents simply state that the lack of other Orthodox children in their social life makes it hard to raise their children. A different worldview of the non-Orthodox friends of their Orthodox children was also reported as a complicating factor.

Many parents experience their family setting as complicating their capability to cultivate a religious upbringing. In most cases, these distractions result from religious tensions caused by a mixed marriage; the attitude of the non-Orthodox spouse or the insecurity of the Orthodox spouse worsens the ability to sustain a coherent religious upbringing in the family. A lack of Orthodox social contacts also makes a religious upbringing difficult.

Deprivation in terms of support is, however, only the other side of the coin. Many parents report that they get support especially from extra-family social structures and networks. This depends, however, on whether there is an Orthodox presence in connection to and outside of the family or not. Religious
parenting is easier when there are at least some other Orthodox around supporting religious parenting (e.g. other family members, relatives, godparents, parents of other Orthodox children, Orthodox friends). The crucial importance of other Orthodox being present for the religious upbringing of Orthodox children is captured in a comment by one mother: »I would not have made it alone, I think.«

School and RE

Some parents report that there are elements in school, mostly in connection with RE, that hinder their children's religious upbringing. These elements include:

- Teachers’ lack of respect towards children's Orthodox convictions. Presumably, some parents have experienced their children's class teacher’s attitude as disapproving towards Orthodoxy.
- Poor arrangements for RE. Even though Orthodox RE should be arranged by the municipality with equal standards, several parents report that there are problems in organizing the classes. For example, Orthodox RE classes might have an unequal timetable and there are issues in how students’ transport to RE classes is organized.
- Poor quality of RE. Unqualified teachers, teachers’ lack of understanding of Orthodoxy and teachers’ small-mindedness or strictness are among the complaints. Of the parents that experienced RE as a hindrance to their children's religious upbringing, one moved her children to Lutheran RE classes and another one completed a master's degree on Orthodox theology just to patch up the RE flaws at home.
- A lack of Orthodox peers in the classroom or in the entire school.

Based on these accounts, there clearly are some defects in how Orthodox RE is organized in certain cases. The criticism towards RE arrangements indicates that parents expect the RE at school to contribute to their children’s religious upbringing. Especially insecure parents seem to expect that RE will take total charge of the entire task of their children's religious upbringing. Both criticism towards RE and insecure parents’ tendency to entrust RE with the responsibility of their children’s religious upbringing reveal that the pedagogical ideal of integrative triangulation does not, in truth, necessarily become concrete in the lived realities of family and school. On the other hand, the data shows that half of the parents (20) expressed their unconditional satisfaction, and even
extreme gratefulness, to RE and RE teachers. It seems that in most cases, RE fulfils whatever expectations the parents may have towards it.

The Church and parish life

In the data there were somewhat normal rumbles of discontent with parish life (e.g. the behaviour of priests and fellow parishioners). When dissatisfaction with no particular link to ecumenical reality or minority – majority dynamics is left aside, only one major fault emerged: a lack of Orthodox peers in the church. Several parents grieved for the absence of other Orthodox children and youth when attending the church. This lack of peers made their children ask why they were different from the other children and if other Orthodox children existed at all.

A lack of peers was an especially visible fault in the areas where there is no Orthodox cluster. The Orthodox population is dispersed throughout the country, and with the exception of some parts of the metropolitan area of Helsinki and certain municipalities in Northern Karelia, the easternmost province in Finland, the Orthodox population is low. There is also a small enclave of Orthodox indigenous Sami people in Lapland, the northernmost part of Finland. On that account, parish clubs (if there were any), summer camps and the church youth magazine Candlelight (in Finnish: Tuohustuli) were appreciated by many parents. Through these social and communal means, parents can enhance their children’s feeling of belonging to a community of other Orthodox peers – even though it exists somewhere outside their ordinary family and parish circles.

The data indicates that there are vast geographical differences in parish life within the Finnish Orthodox Church. Some parents can share their experiences with other Orthodox parents, and participate in an active parish life with offers of supporting structures for their task of their children’s religious upbringing. There are also parents who suffer from a lack of such contacts and structures due to different realities in their place of residence and parish.

Conclusions

In this chapter, the factors that contribute to and hinder parents’ commitment to the religious upbringing of their children have been examined. The theme has been addressed in the context of the Finnish Orthodox population: How do the parents experience the religious upbringing of their Orthodox offspring
in the dominant setting of mixed marriages, and more broadly, when in a religious minority position?

While some parents set a distinctive Orthodox identity for their children as the desired aim of a religious upbringing, the majority of them were more tolerant and promoted a non-distinctive attitude. Consequently, tolerance and peaceful coexistence were emphasized by most parents when describing their attitude towards their children's religious upbringing.

For most parents of Finnish Orthodox children and youth, raising a child is a positive duty, and is something natural for them to do in the prevalent religious setting of Finnish society. Yet, parents reflect on the importance and meaning of a religious upbringing and on the difficulties concerning it in a way that gives grounds to the claim that raising an Orthodox child unavoidably includes some sort of awareness of unusualness and particularity in comparison to the majority of the Finnish, non-Orthodox population.

At the level of primary socialization, the nucleus of the family and home, the most complicating factors for a religious upbringing were brought to the fore. This is exemplified in mixed marriages by experiencing a lack of support from non-Orthodox spouses and relatives for a religious upbringing at the level of primary socialization. At the level of secondary socialization, small or non-existent peer groups both in the parish and school are another major complicating issue. The absence of other Orthodox families, parents, children and youth fortifies feelings of solitude and difference. Therefore, an Orthodox presence in support of their children's religious upbringing in the family is valued greatly by many parents. Even though some parents feel that RE does not contribute to the religious upbringing of their children, most parents are happy with it, and emphasize RE's importance in supporting their religious parenting.

Depending on the parent and family situation, different strategies and actions of demarcation and assimilation are applied to religious upbringings. For many parents, the goal of an Orthodox religious upbringing is to raise good citizens and broadminded Christians. Parents with the explicated and pronounced aim of raising Orthodox Christians are not that many in number. These two differently articulated aims are not necessarily in conflict, since all the parents seem to be consistent in terms of their appreciation of the Orthodox tradition and heritage.

Based on the accounts by Finnish Orthodox parents and their spouses, the ecumenical reality and mixed marriages affect the religious life in the family and the upbringing of Orthodox youth and children in many ways, experienced both negatively and positively. The lived reality with its specific minority po-
situation and ecumenical encounter dynamics has a significant effect both on the religious socialization of Finnish Orthodox children and youth, and on parents’/spouses’ capacity to express their beliefs and practise their faith in the network of family relationships and in the broader social sphere.

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