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CONTEMPORARY ECUMENISM BETWEEN THE THEOLOGIANS' DISCOURSE AND THE REALITY OF INTER-CONFESSIONAL DIALOGUE. CASE STUDY: BIHOR

Religious freedom in Romania after 1989 has contributed decisively to changes in the religious structure in the country. From a religious point of view, the fall of the communist regime meant the end of abuse or interdictions for many people and communities. Discussing about ecumenism and inter-religious or inter-confessional dialogue in Bihor is, according to the current demographic realities, a need entailed by the ethno-confessional diversity and multiculturalism specific to the area. The religious diversity has led not only to inter-community tensions but also to better mutual knowledge, a phenomenon that has finally led to dialogue and the establishment of relationships. There is a visible tendency towards the realization of a unity in diversity in full awareness of the obstacles ahead. Beyond the energetic discourse of high Christian clericals, contemporary ecumenism has been met with several impediments imposed by the reality of some "minor" local issues that have remained unsolved over the years. At times, underlying theological issues have been a hindrance to a genuine ecumenical dialogue.

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Beyond the energetic discourse of high Christian clericals, contemporary ecumenism has been met with several impediments imposed by the reality of some "minor" local issues that have remained unsolved over the years. There have been at times underlying theological issues that have blocked genuine ecumenical dialogue. Debates such as the one between the priest of the Sfânta Treime Orthodox Church in Oradea and Bishop Laszlo Tokes over the sports grounds of the Lorantffy Zsuzsanna Secondary-school coordinated by the "Piatra Craiului" Reformed Bishopric (that lasted for over four years) turned into a local and national media argument leading to the boycott of the Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu (September 2007) by the Reformed Bishop. The Reformed Bishop made serious allegations as to the "discrimination against minority churches in Romania." The allegations of the Bishop were a consequence of the fact that he and other representatives of the Reformed Church were

sued by the Orthodox priest Aurel Puşcaş[1] and were subpoenaed to the Supreme Court for trial. On the other hand, the Reformed official was accused of "stirring anti-Romanian feeling" and of "making God a private concern"[2]. Tensions were encouraged while the local media elaborated on them; thus, the natural process of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional dialogue in the Bihor area was sabotaged. Beyond these tensions, mostly isolated ones, and the ecumenism partisans' discourse, we can, nevertheless, see an opening to dialogue. More often than not, this dialogue has been easy to establish given the daily human and mundane dialogue of the Christian parishioners of varied confessions. Such a trend has been enabled by the secularisation and globalisation peculiar to our times. Interreligious dialogue is also entailed by the process of European construction, of establishing a European identity (a process that goes beyond the mere respect for European law in terms of minority rights).

The Need for Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of European Integration

In the aftermath of the political events of 1989, marked especially by the fall of global communism, there emerged The European Union, which will incorporate all the other European states in future.

The new Europe brought together a plurality of religions, traditions and cultures. The implications of the process of European integration have not been merely political but also economic, social and religious, even while a political structure can not exist without religious consensus[3].

But what kind of religious consensus is required nowadays? What will the religious identity of the New Europe be like? These questions need to be answered in the context of postmodernism and secularisation. The Europeans are less and less interested in church and in religion in general. René Rémond talks about Christianity being abandoned in Europe. In England and in the Scandinavian countries, only 1-2% of the population go to church regularly[4].

On the other hand, we can also notice an ideological and religious division between Western and Eastern Europe. The Catholics and the Protestants live in the West, while the Orthodox live in the East. Moreover, if in the past Europe used to be considered a Christian continent, the same does not hold today. On the European continent there are millions of Muslims; in the UK, Germany and France alone there live more than twelve million Muslims[5]. Besides the Islam, we could also mention Judaism or other Oriental religions.

In this context, the building of a New Europe requires a coherent interreligious dialogue. The importance of Christianity in forging the "European identity" has recently come to the fore in conjunction with the pressing institutional crisis created by the much debated European

constitution, which has been rejected by the French and Dutch referendums[6].

A continuation of the process of European construction demands that important progress be made as regards inter-cultural dialogue, alongside building bridges between the religious confessions and movements extant now in Europe. The significance of the matter stems from Europe's spatial legacy. The renegotiation of the socio-cultural status and the guarantee of juridical acknowledgement of the religious phenomenon at European level is, in this respect, a collective wish which will warrant a European identity and its natural borders[7].

On the other hand, the idea of the "Christian unity" of Europe has been promoted at least at the level of discourse (given the "No" to the European constitution voted in the French poles, for example, where, apparently, anti-Muslim discourse had spread among the population too), in the course of various projects of reformation and extension of the European Union[8]. Moreover, Christian ecumenism is seen as a crucial factor for European unity. Starting from Christian unity, attempts have been made at tracing the "ideal" borders of the European Union[9].

The partial dissolution of some frictions among the European confessions, or the first signals addressed to politicians, or even advocating environmental issues – all these are important if we are to turn faith into the cornerstone of society.

Christian unity lies beyond the walls of buildings, rituals, or dogmas – it lies in Jesus' being itself: it is the phreatic water and the essence that unites us, whether we want it or not, whether we already know it or we are yet to find out. The need for ecumenism is synonymous with the need for spiritual maturation[10].

The European Union decided that the year 2008 would be The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The objectives of this initiative are manifold:

- Enhancing the importance of dialogue in Europe
- The encouragement of mutual values and of the notion of dialogue
- The encouragement of cultural exchanges and debate

Special attention will be paid to inter-confessional dialogue.

During this thematic year, a series of events will take place on a budget of 10 million Euros. The European Union will also initiate some studies and consultations which will allow for long-term monitoring. The thematic year will end with an intercultural forum that will engage the civil society, representatives of various confessions, and politicians.

After the American tragedy of September 11, 2001, European governments "discovered" the importance of the inter-confessional and interreligious dialogue, eventually accepting the fact that parallel and purely theoretic approaches cannot substitute the dialogue between those who make political decisions and those who represent the religions of the world, starting with the exponents of the three monotheisms. The

secretary general of the Council of Europe has set up an extended group in charge of the dialogue. Romania itself will contribute an embryonic project[11] [the creation in Bucharest of a European observatory for multicultural and interreligious dialogue, accepted by both parties - the Council of Europe and the Romanian Government - whose mission will be to organize a dialogue between the politicians and the religious leaders rather than monitoring the religious facts of the South-Eastern region].

The new evolution promises an improvement of the dialogue between the churches and the European institutions, but the secular modesty regarding the Christian subject will linger on just as the temptation of the Church to demonize postmodernism will persevere vigorously and manipulatively.

The European dignitaries are mainly Catholics or Protestants (the Orthodox only come from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus). It is desirable that their personal or family links with their churches (important until recently) should not "influence" their professional discourse or official statements[12].

The ecumenical movement has been the target of many Christians' hopes and illusions. Some talked about manipulations, while others considered it devilish. The noble, generous aspects of the ecumenical movement and the Christian, spiritual dimensions have been many a time forgotten. Moreover, at the third European Ecumenical Assembly, there was a notable presence of representatives belonging to other religions (the Islam, Judaism), so that one may talk about a door open to what is called "extended ecumenism."

The interreligious and Pan-European dialogue: survey and perspectives

The term "ecumenical" was first used by the Evangelical Alliance and by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)[13], and expresses the idea of Christian unity. According to the latest definition given to the ecumenical movement, ecumenism "covers the search for Christian unity achieved through theological study, common testimony for the benefit of the universal task of the mission and evangelism, as well as through the promotion of justice and peace"[14].

At the beginning of the 20th century, following the efforts of the Archbishop of Uppsala, Nathan Soderbloms, "the ecumenical movement" became typically known[15] for its efforts to unite the Christian churches. The term "ecumenism" was first used by Yves Congar in his book "Chrétiens Desunis"[16].

The ecumenical movement across the world can be divided into three main periods[17]:

- The beginnings of ecumenism, from the mid-19th century to the beginning of the 20th century.

- The development of the inter-confessional and intercontinental ecumenical movement initiated by the church in order to offer the world a common Christian message and testimony to unity, during the first half of the 20th century.
- The conscience of the human unity has become more and more obvious, from 1950 onwards.

The European Ecumenical Movement

In Europe, there are two big ecumenical organizations: The Conference of the European Churches – CEC, and the Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae – CCEE[18].

The Conference of the European Churches – CEC**.** The Ecumenical Council of the Churches of Vancouver (1983) encouraged the formation of some regional or continental ecumenical organisations. This is how the Conference of the European Churches (CEC)[19] emerged in 1959. Europe was in the middle of the Cold War and was divided into two divergent political and military blocs. In 1959, the first Conference of the European Churches took place, with the participation of 40 European churches. The initial purpose[20] of CEC was to promote reconciliation, dialogue and friendship among the European churches and to build bridges between the West and the East. They insisted on the fact that, although there was a curtain which divided Europe, there was no curtain to divide the European churches. To prove this vision, the 4th Assembly of CEC was organized on board of a ship in the Baltic Sea[21], due to a desire to surpass the problems raised by the obtaining of visas. Today, the declaration of purpose of CEC seeks "to build bridges between minority and majority churches, between different generations and confessions and to encourage the Christians belonging to different confessions to live in an ecumenical spirit and reciprocal respect"[22]. That's why at the third Assembly, CEC devised a constitution of its own (1964) and, in April 1968, it set up its own permanent secretariat. In 2005, CEC was consisting of 126 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Catholic Churches. It also had 43 associated organisations[23]. Its headquarters is in Geneva. The supreme authority belongs to the General Assembly, who meet every 6 years. In-between meetings, CEC is run by a Committee, who meet every year. Since 1999, besides the Conference of the European Churches, there has been set up "The European Ecumenical Committee for Church and Society." Its main duty is to involve the churches in the process of European integration, maintaining permanent contact with the European Committees, but also with other international institutions such as the UNO or the OSCE[24].

Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae – CCEE[25]**.** Not being a member of CEC, the Roman-Catholic church founded a special committee for the ecumenical dialogue with the other churches that were members of the CEC. This Committee was called the Council of the European Bishop's

Conferences (CCEE) with its headquarters in Saint Galen, Switzerland[26]. The perspectives of the world and European ecumenical movement concern the realization of the unity among churches, in the spirit of the prayer „that Jesus addressed to His Heavenly Father for his disciples and for those who trusted in him to be one" (The Holy Bible, John, 17, 22)[27]. This Prayer, says Gennadios von Sassima, „needs to be understood not as a simple wish that the Lord had expressed, but as a mandate given to those who follow Him and, especially, to the churches ... Seeking the unity and the renewal of the church makes us feel deeply the huge responsibility which is placed on our shoulders, that of confessing the truth. Today's Europe needs to be led on an alternative way in order to reach a life of communion in diversity"[28]. The perspectives are those of hope, unity and renewal. There is a visible tendency towards the realization of unity in diversity, even while one is aware of the obstacles lying in the way of this vision[29]. A big step forward in Europe was made by the cooperation between CEC and CCEE to organize the European Ecumenical Assemblies and to elaborate the document entitled *Charta Oecumenica*.

From a Christian perspective the participation in the ecumenical movement results in, and leads to, shared faith in the Trinity and in common values. Before being crucified, Jesus prayed for his disciples and for all Christians to "be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John: 17, 21). "Therefore, we are persistently called to transform our egocentric mentality into an unconditioned love for the others and for the society that we live in. Just as Christ is one with the Father, we, Christians, are called for to unite. We have the duty to show that Christianity is a unity in which we all are one. Common affiliation is based on the unity of the action of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, the renewal of the ecumenical movement invites all those who have been enabled to cross the present borders to act together within the society"[30].

It is a known fact that ecumenism is regarded with suspicion in particular milieus of the churches participating in the dialogue. The advocated of the anti-ecumenical way of thinking fear that the ecumenical movement can degenerate into a pietistic sentimentalism, irresponsible in relation to doctrine, or into a syncretistic metaconfessional utopia, or, further still, into a pan-humanistic ideology, which is based on an egalitarian philanthropic concept, or even into a transactionist ethos, according to which the Truth of faith is relativised into a "human family" lacking any distinct profile. In such circumstances, ecumenism becomes the problem rather than the solution: it leads neither to Christian Unity, nor does it allow the followers of Jesus to discuss honestly about some issues which can not be turned into the object of political "negotiations."

Similar to post-war multilateral diplomacy, the ecumenical movement has standards, its own conceptual vocabulary and an institutional network

supported by subscriptions, but it has preserved some aloofness from the ecclesial "field" of the member churches[31].

After 1990, the theological dialogue has remained – as always – tributary to contingency. The fall of communism and the legalization of the churches united to Rome determined the withdrawal, self-suspension or waning of the level of representation of the Orthodox churches of Serbia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, which – confronted with inner problems related to the adjustment to the new democratic society – have slowed down the meetings agenda.

Since 2002, the dialogue has become unpredictable and characterized by an unstable balance between the preservations of the recent acquisitions and the discouragement of innovation. The two apostolic churches have realized a Pan-European attitudinal potential which has not been fructified: their common center-left position is reflected in dogmatic, canonical and cult matters, but also in the bio-ethic, social and political approaches, thus isolating itself from the Protestant positions – which spread out and is oriented towards a global, extra-European cooperation.

Decades of dialogue have defused the obsession of the Papal Primacy (in favour of conciliarism), have eliminated the ecclesiologic outlooks associated with Vatican I ("there is no salvation outside the Catholic church"), have declared that the unity is not hindered by the problem of the sacerdotal celibacy (mandatory for the Catholics, optional for the Orthodox), have rejected with traditional arguments the perspective of women ordination, have accepted the homology of the sacramental theology – independently of the variety of liturgical forms, they have reached a compromise by adopting texts on most sensitive topics such as uniatism and proselytism, and have established the practice of the ecumenical prayers in an Irenic spirit[32].

In spite of several significant evolutions, the dialogue between the Orthodox and the Catholics is stagnating, with no explanation from the Greek-Catholic patrimonial litigation and the ecclesial crisis of identity of "the uniate" communities. At the turn of the 3rd millennium – at the European level, too – it is still far from playing an important role on the agendas of the political and civil society. This dialogue, which started several centuries too late, distorted by post-war history, discouraged by the post-totalitarian confusion and though continuously nourished, has remained a semi-civilized territory, which the next generations will approach out of the same need for progress and "miracle"[33].

The ecumenical movement is led today, at different levels, by churches which act through synodic organisms (the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, regional ecumenical organisations, sub-regional associations, and the National Committees of churches), world Christian communities, ecumenical communities, missionary organisations, faculties and theological associations, ecumenical institutions and secular training centres, as well as organisms or specialised ministries, international

ecumenical organisations and many other ecumenical organisations. It is obvious that the ecumenical movement has gone beyond any institution and includes all those who aspire to unity and dream of hearing a common Christian voice uttering the present important issues[34].

The ecumenical dialogue is practically based on concentric circles. What is important is in fact how much the parts have in common or how far a Christian denomination has advanced from the doctrinal, administrative and juridical points of view. Closest to one another are the sister churches that keep the doctrine, sacrality and spirituality in line with the unaltered apostolic tradition, going to the Christian groups and denominations that deny any traditional hierarchy or institutional aspects[35].

At a more local level, the legitimate religious pluralism of a certain cultural space makes the Roman-Catholics and the Protestants who live and work together, who belong to the same cultural environment, feel closer to one another than to the Catholic believers belonging to a different rite, or to the Orthodox, although from a theological perspective the situation is precisely the other way round.

The dimensions of ecumenism

There are three fundamental dimensions to the exigencies imposed on the ecumenical movement: theological ecumenism, secular ecumenism, and spiritual ecumenism. In addition, at the European level, we can notice another dimension of ecumenism: cultural ecumenism, displaying social practices and behaviour that converge towards globalization[36].

The theological ecumenism is the dialogue among theologians belonging to different Christian confessions, among different churches. "The way of ecumenism is the way of the church. All those who pray to God in the Holy Trinity and confess Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour are participating in this movement of union. Thus, the universal church is the people that find unity in the Trinity. "*De unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs, adunata,*" said Saint Ciprian. The importance of the ecclesiology of the communion is obvious. Back in 1947, Wisser Hooft stated: "If there were an ecclesiology accepted by all (Christians), the ecumenical problem would be solved and the ecumenical movement would be superfluous, because in matters of faith we are confronted with fundamental truths such as ministry, hierarchy and primacy." After 50 years, there has been some progress; there are common points, yet no consensus.

Secular ecumenism means the cooperation among Christians in various activities for the benefit of the people. The pluralist societies are less and less interested in dogmatic divergences. The credibility of Christians is measured by way of the quality of the common commitment to man and humanity. "The painful image of humanity today imposes on all Christians the mandatory task of making obvious the fact that technical and scientific

achievements are not enough to create a world society without the spiritual, religious and moral bases, without Jesus Christ, the one who gives the world love, peace and justice." (Patriarch Athenagoras, 1987) The reconciliation between man and God, between man and his fellows, between churches, is the main purpose of secular ecumenism.

The spiritual ecumenism is another dimension of the ecumenical movement. There is no genuine ecumenism without inner transformation, a renewal of the soul, self-denial, without humbleness, kindness and a wish to serve others. The soul of this renewal is the prayer. The "ecumenical" prayer, the community of prayer of the brothers and sisters in Christ expresses the evangelic truth of the statement "Your father is one, in heaven" (Matthew 23, 9). Although divided, they are united in Christ by strong hope, entrusting the future of their union and communion to Him[6]. The preoccupation for unity cannot be absent from the private dialogue between any Christian and God. Each prayer is the full and unconditional sacrifice offered to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

Interreligious dialogue is not only an exchange of ideas, but also an exchange of gifts, as it is founded on prayer. It means a mature way of thinking, the wish for reconciliation and the unity in truth. It is not only a renewal of the way in which you express your faith, but also of the way you experience it. It is the dialogue of salvation. When Christians pray together, the purpose of the unity is getting closer. Christ is present in this communion of prayer; He prays in us, with us and for us. The ecumenical prayer is in the service of the Christian mission and of its credibility. An example is the week of prayer for the unity of Christians[37]. "Dialogue is the last fibre of creation" – father Stăniloaie once said, and this dialogue is put into practice by all parties[38].

The octave of prayer for the unity of all Christians, celebrated between 18-25 January every year, is an invitation launched by all those aware of the uselessness of the division in the Christian community. They ask for the help of God for what is not possible for the people to make it possible for Him (cf. Mark:10, 27).

Dialogue is the ideal means of bringing face to face the different points of view, of examining the divergences that separate Christians. In the ecumenical dialogue, the seriousness of the engagement and the depth of the problems that require solutions are obvious. The force to end this long and difficult pilgrimage is in "this submission to the will of the Father, repentance and absolute trust in the power of the truth, which is Christ, to reconciliate."

Depending on the domains within which the ecumenical mandate is applied in the Protestant world, taking into account the diversity of the Protestant and Neo-Protestant denominations, an intra-confessional and an inte-rconfessional ecumenism come under debate.

The intra-confessional ecumenism represents the existence of pluralism in the same denomination. Karl Barth said: "We are not

unanimous in what we should be as a church, meaning in the substance itself of the Christian faith ... We are not united in Christ."

The interconfessional ecumenism is ecumenism in the traditional sense and is manifested at the national or international level.

So far, the inter-Christian dialogue has brought forth three hypothetical models of church unity:

- *The organic unity* (according to which the ultimate loyalty of each Christian concerns the whole body of the Church and not only parts of it). This model requires the consensual suppression of the separate confessional realities and the reformation of the local churches as members of the Universal Church.
- *The conciliar fellowship* – which claims that all local churches should confess periodically a common credo in a conciliar environment: from this perspective, the diversity of the Christian world is unnatural, a consequence of the fact that "the people of God" appear through the natural insertion of the Gospel into all the cultural texts on the Globe.
- *The communion of communions* – a concept proposed in the 1970s by cardinal Willebrands, who assumes that the present "confessions" are a bunch of "ecclesial types" reunited, in fact, by the dogmatic, sacramental communion and by a unique sacerdocy. In other words, "confessions are the forms and expressions of ecumenism," with the Bishop of Rome being only "the servant" and guarantee of this unity in diversity[39].

The European Ecumenical Assembly – Charta Oecumenica

The European inter-confessional dialogue has been strongly intensified through the tight cooperation of the CEC and the CCEE. The fruit of this cooperation consists in two important projects: the one is the European Ecumenical Assembly, and the other is the *Charta Oecumenica*. It is an important document both as constructive philosophy and as a test of the distance between the Christian vision on "the future of Europe" and the vision of the European political class: in fact, the level of address differs fundamentally, because the churches want communitary and personalist democracies, while the politicians envisage a pragmatic Europe, based on guaranteed civil rights and on secular moral standards[40].

The European Ecumenical Assembly is an ecumenical project with a calendar of three conferences: Basel (1989), Graz (1997) and Sibiu (2007). The European Ecumenical Assembly has been the greatest ecumenical event since the beginning of the 3rd millennium. The European Ecumenical Assembly reunites the traditional churches of Europe. Participants in the Conference of the European Churches are the Orthodox, the Protestant and the Anglican churches[41].

The First European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA1) was organized in Basel, Switzerland, between 15-21 May 1989, with the theme "Peace and justice"[42]. More than 700 delegates from all over Europe participated in this event. The conference proposed three steps to follow for the continuation of the initiative of the assembly:

- establishing a period every year, from one week to ten days, to pray and discuss in order to promote justice, peace and the integrity of creation.
- organizing an ecumenical group to promote the process of reconciliation, after the meeting of Basel.
- organizing a second European Ecumenical Assembly within approximately five years.

The Second European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA2) took place in Graz, in Austria, between 23-29 June 1997. 700 delegates from 124 churches members of CBE and from Episcopal Conferences of the CCEE participated then. Among the participants, there were also about 150 representatives from the ecumenical and ecclesial movements, guests from other continents and from other religious communities and up to 10,000 guests from all over Europe[43]. The theme of the conference was "Reconciliation. A gift from God and the Source of New Life." Viorel Ioniţă, the representative of the Romanian Orthodox Church at CEC, says: "EEA2 elaborated a final document, a fundamental text," which consisted in the fundamental declarations related to the theme of the Assembly and developed ethical directions for reflection, a set of "Operative Recommendations." The second operative recommendation invited all the churches of Europe to "elaborate a common document containing a series of obligations and fundamental ecumenical rights. This recommendation represented the basis for the so-called *Charta Oecumenica*[44], which can be considered the most important initiative of the EEA2"[45]. The *Charta Oecumenica,* signed in April 22nd 2001 at Strasbourg, contains the premise for the development of cooperation among the churches of Europe. The *Charta Oecumenica* is the most important document of the European ecumenical movement and the clearest evidence of the interconfessional dialogue open to the Churches of Europe[46].

The Third European Ecumenical Assembly took place in Sibiu between 4-9 September 2007. The discussions initiated on this occasion are founded on the *Charta Oecumenica*. The Catholic church was represented at Sibiu by the Committee of the European Catholic Episcopal Conferences, which comprises all the Catholic Episcopal Conferences of all the European countries. Unlike the first two Assemblies, the third assembly was planned to have four stages:

- Rome: 24-27 January 2006, under the motto "The light of Christ shines upon all. Let's discover in Christ, the crucified one, the new light on the European Christians' road to getting closer." 150 delegates from Europe participated in the assembly.

- The local ecumenical events organised at the end of 2006 especially prayers under the motto: "The light of Christ shines upon all. Renewal and unity at local level."
- Wittenberg: 15-18 February 2007, organised with the purpose of presenting the Protestant heritage to Europe.
- Sibiu: 4-9 September 2007. 2,500 delegates from all Europe were present in Sibiu.

At Sibiu, the suggested theme was "The light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe." As to what was expected from EEA3, Pope Benedict XVI declared: "*We have set off together on a common road, we have prayed and worked together in order to create an atmosphere dominated by trust and reciprocal understanding. We have all tried to live a spirituality that is rooted in the word of God. We hope to re-arouse the enthusiasm for the ecumenical way through prayers and action*"[47]. Walter Kasper expressed his hope that ecumenical Christianity would become the nucleus of a renewed European culture[48].

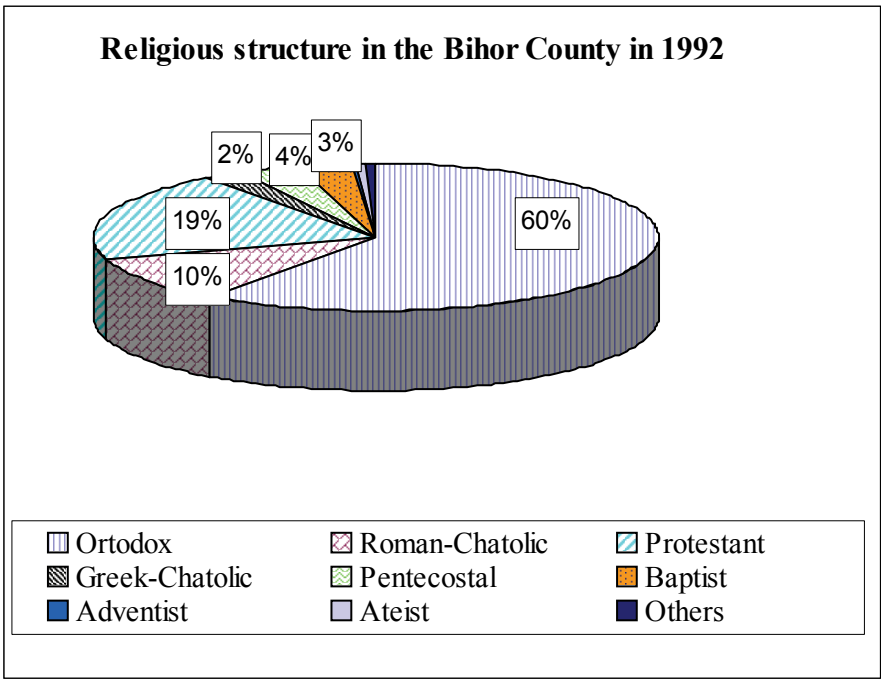
Vincenzo Paglia considers that "*the different European traditions – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – need to find new ways of working together in order to trace the means by which the Europeans may live the great humanistic values and offer them to the entire planet.*" The European Ecumenical Assembly, organised for the first time in an Orthodox country, developed under the sign of solidarity among the religious confessions.

"I remember with great satisfaction the atmosphere created in Sibiu in September 2007, where under the same roof or in the same square, the Christians belonging to different confessions declared Christ the Light of the World, Unique Lord and Redeemer," stated Lucian, Bishop of Alba Iulia and Făgăraş-Blaj, Major Archbishop of the Romanian Church united with the Greek-Catholic Rome[49] .

Premises of ecumenism and inter-confessional dialogue in Bihor. An urban vs. rural comparative approach

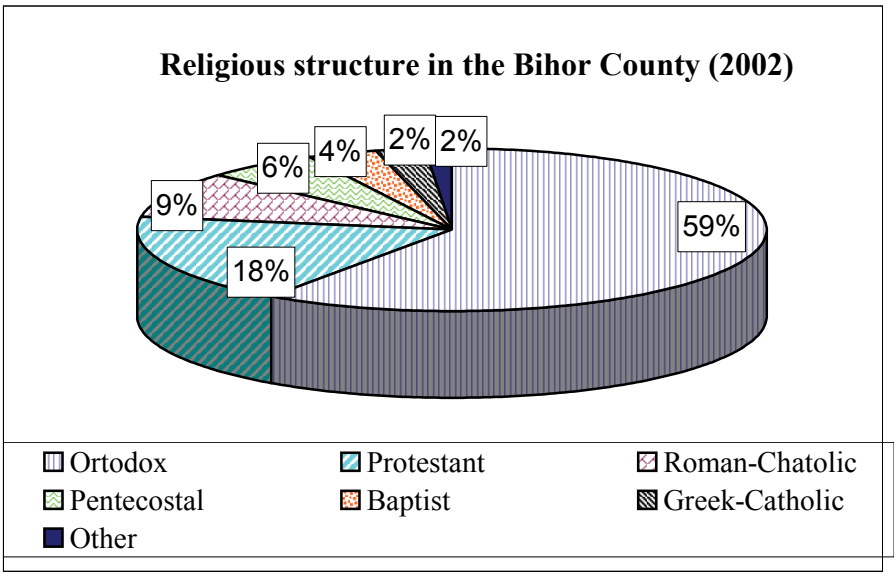
Discussing ecumenism and interreligious or inter-confessional dialogue in Bihor is, according to the current demographic facts, a need entailed by the ethno-confessional diversity and multiculturalism specific to the area. The great religious diversity has led not only to inter-community tensions but also to better mutual knowledge, a phenomenon that has finally led to dialogue and relationships. From a religious point of view, the fall of the communist regime meant the end of abuse or interdictions for many people and communities. Religious freedom after 1989 would contribute decisively to the changes in the religious structure. The Greek-Catholic church has been re-established, new confessions have appeared, certain religious practices have been revived; by and large, Romanians have become more religious thereafter. All of these have brought about important changes on the religious level.

The following is the confessional structure of the county in 1992:



Source: The National Statistics Institute, *Population census in 1992*

The following period brought about even more changes on a confessional level in the Bihor County. The 2002 census showed the following structure of the population in Bihor as regards religion:



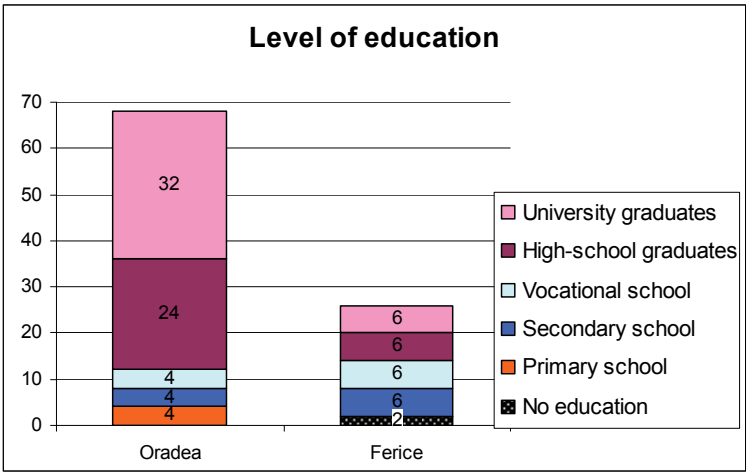
Source: The National Statistics Institute, *Population census in 2002*

If we analyse both charts, it is easy to notice that this was a time of expansion for the Neo-Protestant confessions (mainly Pentecostal and Baptist) and of decrease for the Orthodox, Roman-Catholic, and Protestant confessions.

In order to size up Oradea's inhabitants availability for interreligious dialogue, we have started our own research by carrying out a comparative investigation in the urban and rural environments. We, therefore, resorted to an investigation based on an interview applied to people (lay parishioners or ecclesiastics) of different religious creeds. From a methodological point of view, we chose to compare Oradea and the village of Ferice (commune of Buntești) for a snapshot of the latter's acute conservatism.

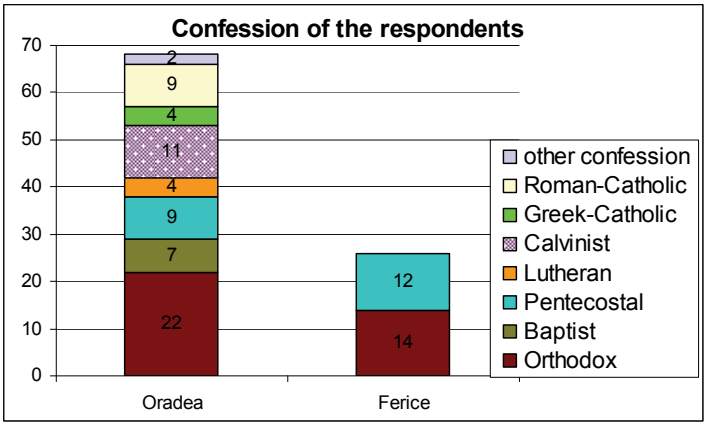
We started in our investigation from the premise that in a city like Oradea, with its complex population in terms of ethno-confessional structure, modernism and even post-modernism, there is greater flexibility in perceiving religious behaviour. On the other hand, in the village of Ferice, located in the hilly area of the Beiuş Depression, the population is less receptive to contemporary changes. The diminished community here is "compelled" to dialogue irrespective of their confessions even while they respect the conservatory traditional norms characteristic of each confessional group. Another aspect worth mentioning is the fact that in Oradea there is a much higher religious diversity than in Ferice, the latter featuring only two confessions (Orthodox – 2/3 and Pentecostal – 1/3).

68 interview guides were handed out to individuals in Oradea and 26 in Ferice. They were relatively equally distributed in terms of the respondents' age and sex.

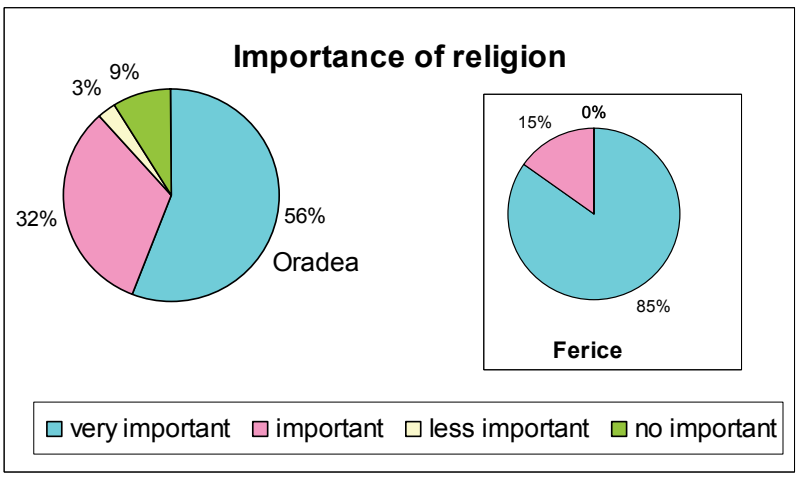


We think we have identified a correlation between the respondents' level of education and certain trends concerning the respondents' openness to interreligious dialogue. Whereas in the case of Ferice there is a relatively balanced distribution, in Oradea higher education is predominant (in line with the reality of the city in the first place: a much higher number of tertiary education graduates). From this point of view, we expected attitudes to religious issues, particularly the "litigious" ones, to differ in the two locations.

The nationality of the interviewed people is also relevant to the analysis: in Ferice, all inhabitants are of Romanian nationality, while in Oradea, the population is more ethnically complex (on account of this, the interview guides were applied to the representatives of the main ethnic groups).

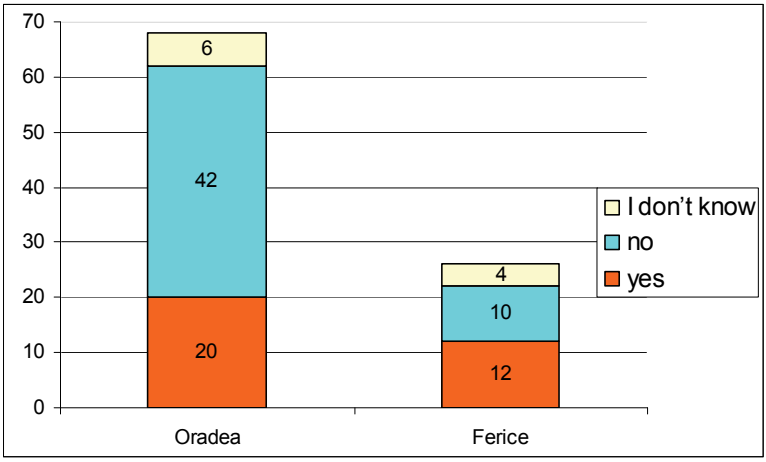


The confessional distribution of the interviewed people shows to a certain extent the confessional structure of the population. This distribution is important to our survey for it records the degree of openness and acceptance of dialogue from a confessional point of view (irrespective of their means of expression). The answers to the question: *How important is religion to you?* differed with the location (urban vs. rural), as well as with the respondents' confession, age and level of education.



The level of acceptance of other confessions is highly important in building an inter-confessional dialogue. The extent to which the inhabitants of Bihor are willing to communicate and "accept" contemporary ecumenism is provided by the answer to the question:

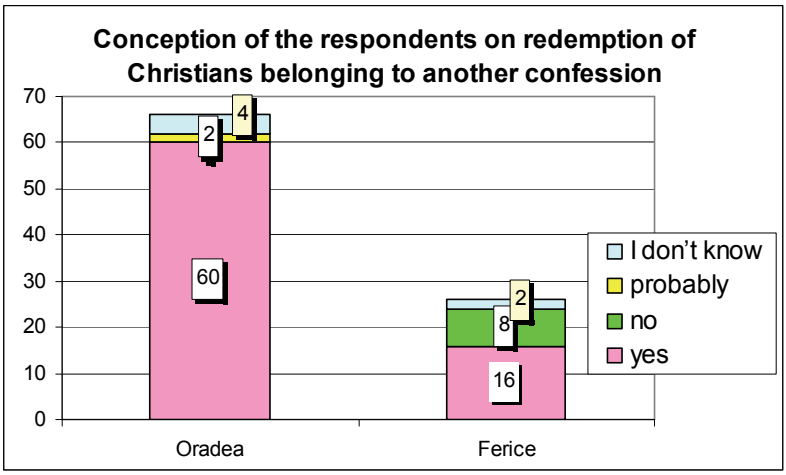
Do you consider that Truth exists only in your religion/confession?



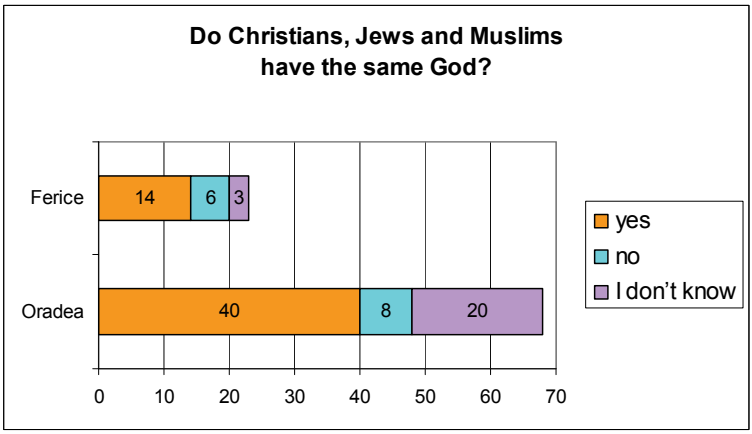
The answers to the abovementioned question, as shown in the chart above, marks a greater openness of the inhabitants in Oradea to accepting the fact that "Truth" is not the monopoly of their own confession. Such a premise is highly important in the equation of building a real dialogue between confessions. Orthodox and Pentecostals in both Ferice and Oradea proved to be the most exclusive about detaining the monopoly on the "Truth." The most open proved to be the Lutherans and the Calvinists, as well as the Baptists (100% of them accepted that the "Truth" did not belong to their own confession alone).

As far as the question *Are you willing to give up your confession/religion to adopt a newly created universal religion?* is concerned, most respondents (97% in Oradea, 92.3% in Ferice) were willing to give up their own confession in favour of an ecumenical one.

An interesting question showing the mechanism of accepting the other is: *Do you think that a Christian of a confession (or belonging to a religion) other than yours can be redeemed?* Most respondents acknowledged the possibility that another Christian could be redeemed. However, we can notice a stronger conservatism in Ferice: 30.7% of the respondents here gave a negative answer to this question (of which 75% were Pentecostals and 25% were Orthodox).

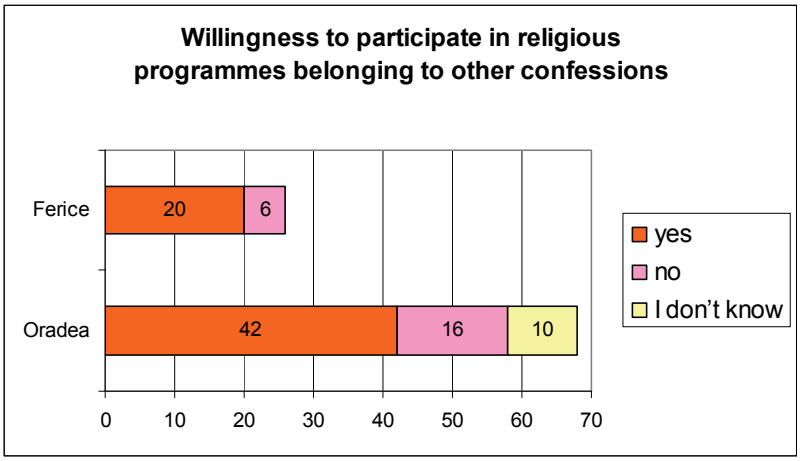


From the perspective of worldwide ecumenism, an interesting question is the following: *Do you think that Christians, Muslims and Jews pray to the same God?*



Over half of the respondents in both the rural and urban areas believe that there is only one God for all the three great religions. Such a fact may constitute the premise for a real and constructive ecumenism from the perspective of good cooperation and information.

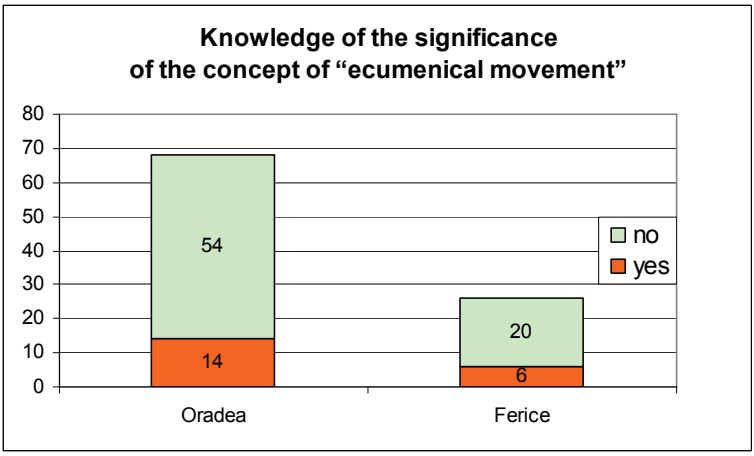
The answers to the question: *Are you willing to participate in religious programmes with adepts of other confessions/religions?* confirm that most respondents are willing to participate in religious programmes specific to other confessions.



On the other hand, we have also identified an important number of persons who do not wish to participate in the religious programmes of other confessions (23.5% out of the total number in Oradea and 23.07% in Ferice), showing reticence towards the specificity of other confessions. God is unique, there is a possibility of redemption for all; however, we do not accept this dogmatically – is what seems to be confirmed by the investigation.

Concerning the question *Which is the Christian confession/religion you feel closer to (other than the one you belong to)?* the answers differed depending on the confession of the respondents. Generally, the Orthodox, the Catholics and the Greek-Catholics feel close to one another. The same can be noticed in the case of the Neo-Protestants (Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists) or the Protestants (Lutherans, Calvinists).

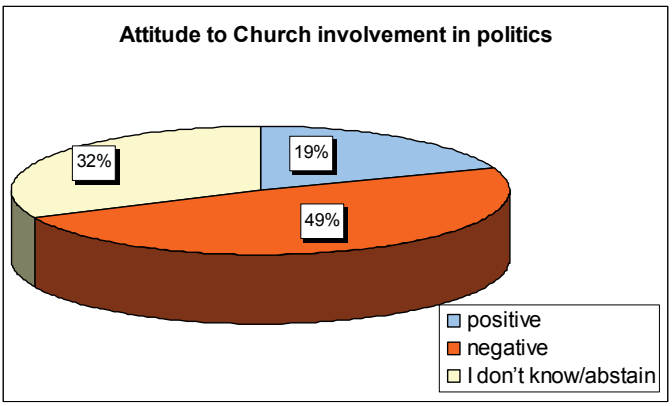
The extent to which the inhabitants of Bihor are willing to accept ecumenism is not totally related to the acceptance of dialogue amongst confessions. Most respondents do not even know the significance of the term *ecumenism*. Such a reality makes us believe that the ecumenical movement, at least in the area of Bihor, is the subject of debates amongst theologians rather than the wish or interest of the parishioners belonging to different confessions.



The following questions: *What do you know about the European ecumenical movement? Do you consider that the ecumenical movement is a good thing? What do you know about the Charta Oecumenica?* showed there is a lack of knowledge and information among the population of Bihor on the issue of the ecumenical movement. Despite the fact that religion is considered highly important, people in Bihor do not show concern for issues relating to religion in the given context. On the other hand, these topics are "avoided" by the respondents' confessional conservatism.

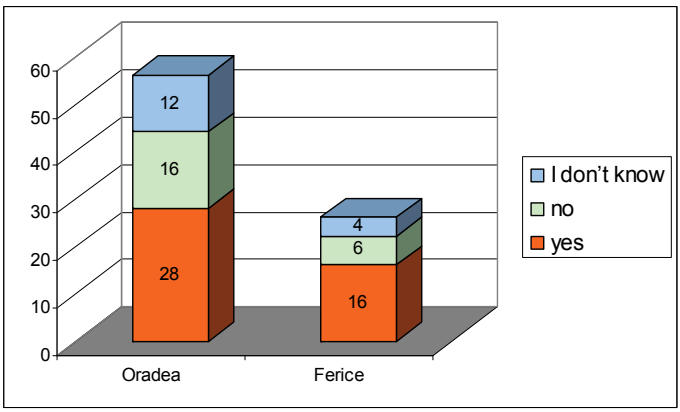
They know next to nothing even about the Third European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu in September 2007: if 17.6% of the respondents in Oradea have heard of the event, none of the respondents in Ferice did. On the other hand, most agreed to participate in a charity action in the company of parishioners of other confessions.

As far as the involvement of the Church in politics is concerned, the initial reaction of the respondents in Bihor was that they were mainly against the presence of the Church in politics; then, they abstained from answering this question feeling they were neither *for* nor *against*.



As far as the involvement of the State in funding the Church is concerned, the people in Bihor were in favour of the State funding the activity of religious cults. The respondents in Ferice rejected the idea of women being ordained in church, while 26.5% of the respondents in Oradea accepted this option. Another question with different answers in the two areas was the following: *What do you think most separates the Christian confessions?* If in the countryside most answers related to spiritual, dogmatic issues, in the city most respondents chose material things as the source of confessional "litigation."

Are you willing to have your child learn in a confessional school in future?



The people in Bihor were also open to introduce subject matters promoting the ecumenical movement in the curriculum. In the spirit of ecumenism, the people in Bihor blame to a great extent the fact that parishioners belonging to other confessions only help each other within their own group.

Some relevant conclusions can be drawn from our survey:

- God is unique, everybody has the opportunity for redemption; yet parishioners from different confessions won't accept one another dogmatically.
- Generally speaking, the Orthodox, the Catholics and the Greek-Catholics feel close to one another. The same holds true in the case of the Neo-Protestants (Pentecostals, Baptists and Adventists) or the Protestants (Lutherans, Calvinists).
- The extent to which people in Bihor are willing to accept ecumenism is not totally related to accepting dialogue amongst confessions. Most respondents are not aware of the real significance of the term ecumenism. Considering the facts, we may think that the ecumenical movement, at least in the Bihor area, is mostly an issue of debate amongst theologians rather than the wish or interest of parishioners belonging to different confessions.
- Despite the fact that religion is considered highly important, people in Bihor do not show concern for issues relating to religion in the given context. On the other hand, these topics are "avoided" by the respondents' confessional conservatism.
- People in Bihor are primarily against the presence of the Church in politics, yet they manifest an overall approval of the State funding the activity of the religious cults.
- Respondents in the rural area are clearly against women being ordained in the church, while inhabitants of the urban area are more open to such an option.
- People in Bihor know next to nothing about ecumenism, but they and their children are willing to find out more.

Conclusions

There are three fundamental dimensions in the exigencies imposed on the ecumenical movement: the theological ecumenism, the secular ecumenism and the spiritual ecumenism. In addition to these three, at the European level, we can also notice another dimension of ecumenism: cultural ecumenism, with social practices and behaviours converging towards globalization.

The ecumenical movement is led today, at different levels, by churches which act through synodic organisms (such as the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, regional ecumenical organisations, sub-regional associations, and the National Committees of the churches), global Christian communities, ecumenical communities, missionary organizations, faculties and theological associations, ecumenical

institutions and training centres for the secular, as well as organisms or specialised ministries, international and many other ecumenical organisations. It is obvious that the ecumenical movement goes beyond any institution and includes all those who aspire to unity and dream of hearing a common Christian voice uttering the present important issues.

At a more local level, the legitimate religious pluralism of a particular cultural space drives the Roman-Catholics and the Protestants who live and work together, who belong to the same cultural environment, closer to one another than to the Catholic believers belonging to a different rite, or to the Orthodox, although from a theological perspective the situation is precisely the other way round.

The new evolutions promise an improvement in the dialogue between the churches and the European institutions, but the secular modesty regarding the Christian subject will linger on the same way the temptation of the Church to demonize postmodernism will persevere in its manipulative vigour.

The ecumenical movement has been the horizon on which many Christians with their hopes and wishes have set their sights on. Some have talked about manipulations, others have considered it devilish. The noble, generous aspects of the ecumenical movement and the Christian, spiritual dimensions have been all too often forgotten. Moreover, at the third European Ecumenical Assembly, we noticed the presence of representatives belonging to other religions (Islam, Judaism), so that we may now speak of a door open to what we call "extended ecumenism."

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Notes

[1] Laura Gal, "Episcopul Tokes Laszlo va boicota Conferinţa Ecumenică Europeană", in *Adevărul*, 2007.08.30, http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/2007/episcopul-tokes-laszlo-va-boicota-conferinta-ecumenica-europeana.html (accessed February 27, 2009).

[2] Tatar Zoltan, "Veninul lui Tokes Laszlo îi contaminează şi pe alţii", in *Crişana*, 2007.07.04, http://www.crisana.ro/stiri/controverse-23/veninul-lui-tokes-laszlo-icirc-i-contamineaza-si-pe-altii-21387.html (accessed March 12, 2009).

[3] Nicolae Moşoiu (coord.), *Elemente de istorie, doctrină şi practică misionară: din perspectivă ecumenică*, (Sibiu: Editura Universităţii "Lucian Blaga", 2006), 312.
[4] Reen Remond, *Religie şi societate în Europa – secularizarea în secolele al XIX-lea şi XX, 1780-2000*, (Iaşi: Polirom, 2003), 10.
[5] Remond, 217.
[6] Wojtek Kalinowski, "L`imaginaire religieux dans la construction européenne", in *Religion(s) et identité(s) en Europe. L`épreuve du pluriel*, ed. Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean, Patrick Michel, Enzo Pace, (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2008), 297-298.
[7] Kalinowski, 298.
[8] Patrick Michel, "Religion, identité nationales, identité européenne", in *Religion(s) et identité(s) en Europe. L`épreuve du pluriel*, ed. Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean, Patrick Michel, Enzo Pace, (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2008), 315.
[9] Jean Gueit, "L`œcuménisme chrétien comme facteur décisif de l`unité européenne?", in *Géopolitique du christianisme*, ed. Blandine Chélini-Pont, Raphaël Liogier, (Paris: Ellipses Édition Marketing S.A., 2003), 89-91.
[10] Marius Vasilescu, "Nevoia de ecumenism", in *Adevărul*, 2007.09.05, http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/2007/nevoia-de-ecumenism.html (accessed March 12, 2009).
[11] Teodor Baconsky et. al., *Pentru un creştinism al noii Europe*, vol. III, (Bucureşti: Editura Humanitas, 2007), 53.
[12] Baconsky et. al., p. 54.
[13] Daniel Buda, "Un scurt istoric al mişcării ecumenice moderne", in *Elemente de istorie, doctrină şi practică misionară: din perspectivă ecumenică*, ed. Nicolae Moşoiu, (Sibiu: Editura Universităţii "Lucian Blaga", 2006), 87.
[14] *Apud* Moşoiu, 60. Nicolae Moşoiu includes in his work the text *Raportului final al consultării referitoare la "Ecumenismul în sec. XXI"*, translated into Romanian by Aurel Pavel (in the original "Rapport final de la consultation sur "l`oecuménisme au XXI ème siècle" *(30 novembre-3 décembre 2004)*", in *Istina*, L, 2005, 95-106).
[15] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 87.
[16] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 87.
[17] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 89-90.
[18] Gueit, 98.
[19] See the official website of this organization - www.cec-kek.org (accessed February 20, 2009).
[20] Daniel Buda, "A Treia Adunare Ecumenică Europeană, 4-9 septembrie 2007. Istoric, etape, speranţe, asteptări", in *Actele Seminarului 8-9 noiembrie 2006 Ecumenism în pregătirea Adunării de la Sibiu 4-9 septembrie 2007*, (Sibiu: 2007), 26.
[21] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 117.
[22] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 117.
[23] Daniel Buda, "A Treia Adunare Ecumenică Europeană", 26.
[24] Buda, 118-119.
[25] See the official website of this organization - www.ccee.ch (accessed February 20, 2009).
[26] Ecumenism, 26.
[27] Gennadios von Sassima, "Speranţă de reînnoire şi de unitate în Europa", www.ecum.ro/dokumente/adunarea/sassima.doc, 2007, 4 (accessed March 12, 2009).

[28] Von Sassima, 4.
[29] Von Sassima, 4.
[30] Moşoiu, 61.
[31] Teodor Baconsky et. al., 47-48.
[32] Teodor Baconsky et. al., 50.
[33] Teodor Baconsky et. al., 50.
[34] Moşoiu, 61.
[35] Alexandru Buzalic, *Ekklesia*, (Blaj: Editura "Buna Vestire", 2005), 22.
[36] Kalinowski, 308.
[37] Lucreţia Vasilescu, *Ecumenismul la început de mileniu trei – istoric, provocări, speranţe*, www.crestinism-ortodox.ro/html/04/4m_ecumenismul_la_ince put_de_mileniu_trei.html, 2000 (accessed March 12, 2009).
[38] Marius Vasilescu, *Potentialul de dialog*, Adevărul, 12.11.2005, http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/2005/potentialul-de-dialog.html, (accessed March 12, 2009).
[39] Teodor Baconsky et. al.,51.
[40] Teodor Baconsky et. al., 52-53.
[41] Gueit, 98.
[42] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 120.
[43] Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 120.
[44] See http://www.cec-kek.org/content/charta.shtmlch (accessed February 20, 2009).
[45] Buda, 120.
[46] The main ideas expressed in the *Charta Oecumenica* are: (1) We believe "in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church", (2) Called together to unity in faith, (3) On the way towards the visible fellowship of the churches in Europe, (4) Proclaiming the Gospel together, (5) Moving towards one another, (6) Acting together, (7) Praying together, (8) Continuing the dialogue, (9) Our common responsibility in Europe, (10) Participating in the building of Europe, (11) Reconciling peoples and cultures, (12) Safeguarding the creation, (13) Strengthening community with Judaism, (14) Cultivating relations with Islam. See http://www.cec-kek.org/content/charta.shtml.
[47] Daniel Buda, "A Treia Adunare Ecumenică Europeană", 31.
[48] Daniel Buda, "A Treia Adunare Ecumenică Europeană", 31.
[49] "Cuvântul PF Lucian la încheierea octavei de rugăciune", *Vestitorul. Revista lunară de cultură creştină* "*Vestitorul*", edited by Episcopia Română Unită cu Roma Greco-Catolică, (Oradea: 2008, 27 ianuarie, Seria I, Anul XVI, Nr. 8) http://www.bru.ro/documente/cuvantul-pf-lucian-la-incheierea-octavei-de-rugaciune/ (accessed March 20, 2009).