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## The Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of the New Europe: The European Ecumenical Movement

*Ioan BRIE, Mircea BRIE*

**Abstract:** *The new Europe will bring together a plurality of religions, traditions and cultures. The process of European integration has not only political implications, but also economic, political, social and religious implications. In this context, the building of a New Europe requires a coherent interreligious dialogue. 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 Bible, John, 17, 22) There is a visible tendency towards the realization of a unity in diversity, at the same time seeing the obstacles that exist in front of this vision. 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.*

*The ecumenical dialogue is practically based on the phenomenon of the concentric circles. What is important is in fact how much the parts have in common or how far a Christian denomination has gone from the doctrinal, administrative and juridical point of view. The dialogue is the ideal means in putting face to face the different points of view, in examining the divergences that separate Christians. In the ecumenical dialogue, the seriousness of the engagement and the depth of the problems that require a solution 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 reconcile”.*

**Keywords:** *ecumenical movement, dialogue, denomination, conflicts, peace*

The political events that took place in 1989, marked especially by the fall of communism globalization, emerged The European Union, which will incorporate all the other European states in the future.

The new Europe will bring together a plurality of religions, traditions and cultures. The process of European integration has not only political implications, but also economic, political, social and religious implications. A political structure can not exist without religious consensus. (Moşoiu, 2006: 312)

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 secularization. The Europeans are less and less interested in the 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 (Remind, 2003:10).

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, we can no longer assert this nowadays. On the European continent, there are millions of Muslims; only in Great Britain, Germany and France there are more than twelve million Muslims (Remond, 2003:217). Besides the Muslims, we could also mention Judaism and the Oriental religions.

In this context, the building of a New Europe requires a coherent interreligious dialogue. The problem of the importance that Christianity had in forging the „European identity” has recently come to the fore, in conjunction with the pressing institutional crisis

created by the much disputed European constitution which was rejected by the French and Dutch referendums (Kalinowski, 2008: 297-298).

### **1. 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) (Buda, 2006:87) and expresses the idea of Christian unity. According to the latest definition given to the ecumenical movement, ecumenism „covers the search for Christian unity realized by theological study, common testimony for the benefit of the universal task of mission and evangelism, but also by promoting justice and peace” (Apud Moşoiu, 2006: 60<sup>1</sup>).

At the beginning of the 20th century, following the efforts of the Archbishop of Uppsala, Nathan Soderbloms, „the ecumenical movement” became typically known (Buda, 2006: 87) for its efforts to unite the Christian churches. The term „ecumenism” was first used by Yves Congar in his book „Chrétiens Desunis” (Buda, 2006: 87).

The world ecumenical movement can be divided into three main periods (Buda, 2006: 89-90):

- the beginnings of ecumenism from the middle of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century.
- The development of the interconfessional and intercontinental ecumenical movement initiated by the church, in order to offer the world a common Christian message and a common testimony of unity – in the first half of the 20th century.
- The conscience of the human unity has become more and more obvious – since 1950 to the present day.

#### **1.1. Movements that existed before the ecumenical movement**

The contemporary European and international interconfessional and interreligious dialogues are founded on a series of movements. Under the influence of globalization, determined by the creation of the United States (1776) and of the French Revolution (1789-1790), continued by the institution of some continental alliances, the churches became more and more open to dialogue and ecumenism. The first interconfessional contacts took place in the missionary domain.

Worth mentioning here are the Evangelical Alliance and the Bible Movement which had its beginnings in 1846, in London, and which united around 900 evangelical Christians. A great influence was manifested by the The Young Men's Christian Association ("YMCA") was founded on June 6, 1844 in London followed in 1893 by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (Hawkey, 2005: 2). The purpose of the organization was to put together those young people who „according to the Holy Scripture, acknowledge Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour”. The contribution of these movements was decisive, as it made possible the growth of the young people in an ecumenical spirit. These young people later developed the world ecumenism.

The Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity (APUC) was established in 1857 in London. By bringing together members of the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox churches, its purpose was to pray daily for the unity of the Christians (Buda, 2006: 92).

The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 had a decisive role in the maturation of the European interconfessional dialogue. During this conference the idea of forming a strong ecumenical ecclesial organization was launched. Three main principles were put forward (for more details, see Buda, 2006:92-95), principles which became landmarks for

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolae Moşoiu includes in his work *Elemente de istorie, doctrină și practică misionară: din perspectivă ecumenică* (Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga” Sibiu, 2006) 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, p. 95-106).

the ecumenical movement over the next decades. The missionary conferences<sup>2</sup>, followed by the world conferences for faith and constitution<sup>3</sup> quickly became the steps which led to the organization of The World Council of the Churches.

## 1.2. The World Council of the Churches (WCC)

The WCC was founded in August 23rd 1948 in Amsterdam, including 147 Evangelical and Orthodox churches. The declared purpose was not to create a „super-church” or a „World Church” (Buda, 2006: 103), but to be an instrument in the hands of the churches, to enable the churches to make their message better known to the world and offer the world the picture of the visible unity among Christian churches (Hawkey, 2005: 1). The Catholic Church refused to be part of this ecumenical organization. In Amsterdam, a Central Committee made up of 150 people was formed. They were to meet every year and ensure the management of the WCC. The supreme authority of the WCC was to be the General Assembly which was to meet every 6-8 years.

So far, nine General Assemblies have taken place: (1) August 22nd -September 4th 1948, in Amsterdam, with the main topic for discussion „The Untidiness of the World and God’s Plan of Salvation”; (2) August 15th-31st 1954, in Evanston, Illinois, USA, with the main topic „Christ – The Hope of the World!”; (3) Nov 19th-Dec 15th 1961, New Delhi, India, with the topic „Christ, the light of the World”; (4) July 4th-20th, 1968, Uppsala, Sweden, with the main topic „Here I make everything new”; (5) Nov 23rd-Dec 10th 1975, Nairobi, Kenya, with the topic „Jesus Christ Frees and Unites”; (6) July 24th-Aug 10th 1983, Vancouver, Canada, with the main topic „Jesus Christ – The Life of the World”; (7) Feb 7th-21st 1992, Canberra, Australia, with the topic „Come, Holy Spirit and Renew All Creation”; (8) Dec 3rd-14th 1998, Harare, Zimbabwe, with the topic „Come Back to God, Rejoice in the Hope” and (9) Feb 14th-23rd 2006, Porto Alegre, Brazil, with the topic „God, Change the World in Your Grace!”<sup>4</sup>

In Nairobi (1975), The General Assembly mentioned the purposes (Buda, 2006: 104) and the roles of the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, as follows:

- To call the churches to the realization of the visible unity in faith and Eucharist
- To create the conditions for the common testimony in any place
- To support the churches in their missionary and evangelistic activity
- To support the churches in serving the people in need, to eliminate the misunderstandings that exist among people and to support the people to live in justice and freedom
- To encourage the renewal of the churches in unity, ministry and mission
- To sustain the relationships between the national Church Conferences, international confessional organizations and other ecumenical organizations.
- To promote the efforts of the international movements for the Faith and constitution and for a Practical Christianity and of the International Missionary Council and of The International Federation for Christian Education.

At present, 348 churches are part of the WCC and the following committees are active (Buda, 2006: 105):

- Commission of the Churches on Diakonia and Development
- Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation
- Commission of the Churches on International Affairs
- Commission on Justice, Peace and Creation
- Commission on World Mission and Evangelism

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<sup>2</sup> The most important conferences were organized in Jerusalem (1928), Tambaram, in India (1938), Whitby, Canada (1947).

<sup>3</sup> The main contacts took place in Geneva (1920), Lausanne (1927) and Edinburgh (1937).

<sup>4</sup> For more details concerning the General Assemblies of the WCC see [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org); [www.cec-kek.org](http://www.cec-kek.org); Daniel Buda, *Un scurt istoric al mișcării ecumenice moderne*, in Nicolae Moșoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 86-120.

- Faith and Order Plenary Commission and the Faith and Order Standing Commission
- Joint Consultative Group with Pentecostals
- Joint Working Group WCC – Roman Catholic Church (Vatican)
- Reference Group on the Decade to Overcome Violence
- Reference Group on Inter-Religious Relations
- Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC

### **1.3. Ecumenism in Europe**

In Europe, there are two big ecumenical organizations: The Conference of the European Churches – CEC and Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae - CCEE (Gueit, 2003, 98).

#### **1.3.1. The Conference of the European Churches – CEC**

The Ecumenical Council of the Churches from Vancouver (1983) encouraged the formation of some regional or continental ecumenical organizations. This is how the Conference of the European Churches (CEC)<sup>5</sup> appeared 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, where 40 European churches participated. The initial purpose (Ecumenism, 2007: 26) 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 that this was how things were regarded, the 4th Assembly of CEC was organized on board of a ship in the Baltic Sea (Buda, 2006: 117), and this was due to a desire to surpass the problems associated with obtaining the visas. In the present, 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 (Buda, 2006: 117).

That's why when the third Assembly took place, CEC had their own constitution (1964) and starting with April 1968 they had a permanent secretariat. In 2005, CEC consisted of 126 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Catholic Churches. It also had 43 associated organizations (Ecumenism, 2007: 26). The headquarters are in Geneva. The supreme authority belongs to the General Assembly who meet every 6 years. In the period between the meetings, CEC is run by a Committee who meet every year. Since 1999, besides the Conference of the European Churches, there has also been „The European Ecumenical Committee for Church and Society”. Its main duty is to involve the churches in the process of European integration, realizing the permanent contact with the European Committees, but also with other international institutions like UNO or OSCE (Buda, 2006: 118-119).

#### **1.3.2. Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae – CCEE<sup>6</sup>**

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) and has its headquarters in Saint Galen, Switzerland (Ecumenism, 2007: 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 Bible, John, 17, 22) (Sassima, 4). 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

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<sup>5</sup> See the official website of this organization ([www.cec-kek.org](http://www.cec-kek.org)).

<sup>6</sup> See the official website of this organization ([www.ccee.ch](http://www.ccee.ch)).

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" (Von Sassima, 4). The perspectives are those of hope, unity and renewal. There is a visible tendency towards the realization of a unity in diversity, at the same time seeing the obstacles that exist in front of this vision (Von Sassima, 4). 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*.

## **2. The Ecumenical Movement**

From a Christian perspective, the participation to the ecumenical movement results and leads to the shared faith in the Trinity and in the 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. As Christ is one with the Father, we, as Christians, are also called to unity. We have the duty to show that Christianity is a unity in which we are all one. Their common affiliation is based on the unity of 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 and with the society" (Moşoiu, 2006: 61).

It is known that ecumenism is regarded with suspicion in certain milieus that are in the churches that participate to the dialogue. The supporters of the antiecumenical 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 into a pan-humanistic ideology, which is based on an egalitarian philanthropic concept, or into a transactionist ethos, according to which the Truth of faith is relativized into a „human family" lacking a distinct profile. In such circumstances, ecumenism becomes not a solution, but part of the problem: 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 an object of political „negotiations".

Like the postwar multilateral diplomacy, the ecumenical movement has some standards, its own conceptual vocabulary and an institutional network supported by subscriptions, but it has remained quite far from the ecclesial „field" of the member churches (Baconsky, 2007: 47-48).

After 1990, the theological dialogue has remained – as always – tributary to the immediate history. 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 from Serbia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, which – confronted with inner problems related to the adjustment to the new democratic society – have slowed down the current agenda of the programmed meetings.

Since 2002, the dialogue remains in an unpredictable state and is 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 approach, thus isolating itself from the Protestant positions – which were spread or oriented towards world extra-European cooperation.

The decades of dialogue have defused the obsession of the Papal Primacy (in favour of conciliarism), have eliminated the ecclesiological outlooks associated with Vatican I („there is no salvation outside the Catholic church"), have asserted that the unity is not hindered by the problem of the sacerdotal celibacy (obligatory 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 – independent of the variety of liturgical forms – they adopted texts of compromise on the most sensitive topics like uniatism and

proselytism and have established the practice of the ecumenical prayers in an irenic spirit (Baconsky, 2007: 50).

In spite of the many significant evolutions, the dialogue between the Orthodox and the Catholics stagnates, without explanation from the Greek-Catholic patrimonial litigation and the ecclesial crisis of identity of „the uniate” communities. At the start of the 3rd millennium – at a European level too - it is still far from playing an important role on the agenda of the political and civil society. This dialogue, which started several centuries too late, distorted by the postwar history, discouraged by the post-totalitarian confusion and though always nourished, remains a semi-civilized territory, which the next generations will approach from the same need for progress and „miracle” (Baconsky, 2007: 50).

The ecumenical movement is led today, at different levels, by churches which act through synodic organisms (like the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, the regional ecumenical organizations, sub-regional associations and the National Committees of the churches), world Christian communities, ecumenical communities, missionary organizations, faculties and theological associations, ecumenical institutions and training centres for the secular, as well as organisms or specialized ministries, international ecumenical organisations and many other ecumenical organizations. 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 questions (Moşoiu, 2006: 61).

The ecumenical dialogue is practically based on the phenomenon of the concentric circles. What is important is in fact how much the parts have in common or how far a Christian denomination has gone from the doctrinal, administrative and juridical point of view. The closest to one another are the sister churches that keep the doctrine, sacrality and spirituality in the line of the apostolic tradition unaltered, going to the Christian groups and denominations that deny any traditional hierarchy or institutional aspect (Buzalic, 2005: 22).

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.

## **2.1. The dimensions of ecumenism**

There are three fundamental dimensions in the exigencies imposed on the ecumenical movement: the theological ecumenism, the secular ecumenism and the spiritual ecumenism. Beyond these, at the European level, we can also notice another dimension of ecumenism: the cultural ecumenism which has social practices and behaviours which converge towards globalization (Kalinowski, 2008: 308).

**2.1.1. *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 Lord and Saviour participate to 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 an 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 the fundamental truths like ministry, hierarchy and primacy”. After 50 years, there has been some progress; there are common points, but not yet a consensus.

**2.1.2. *The 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 the dogmatic divergences. The credibility of Christians is measured by way of the quality of the common engagement in the service of man and humanity. „The painful image of humanity

today imposes on all Christians the mandatory task of making obvious the fact that the technical and scientific achievements are not enough to create a world society without the spiritual, religious and moral basis, without Jesus Christ, the one who gives the world love, peace and justice.” (Patriarch Athenagoras, 1987)<sup>5</sup> The reconciliation between man and God, between man and his fellows, between churches are the main purposes of the secular ecumenism.

**2.1.3. *The spiritual ecumenism*** is another dimension of the ecumenical movement. There is no genuine ecumenism without an inner transformation, a renewal of the soul, a self-denial, without humbleness, kindness and a desire to serve others. The soul of this renewal is prayer. The „ecumenical” prayer, the community of prayer of the brothers and sisters in Christ expresses the evangelical truth of the statement „Your father is one, in heaven” (Matthew 23, 9). Although divided, they are united in Christ with a strong hope, entrusting the future of their union and communion to Him<sup>6</sup>. The preoccupation for unity cannot be absent from the intimate 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.

The 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, a desire for reconciliation and unity in truth. It is not only a renewal of the way in which you express your faith, but also of the way you live it. It is a dialogue of salvation. When Christians pray together, the purpose of the unity is 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 (Vasilescu, 2000).

„The dialogue is the last fibre of creation” – father Stăniloiaie once said and this dialogue is put into practice by all sides (Adevărul, 2007.04.30).

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 in what is not possible for people to become possible for Him (cf. Mark:10, 27). The theme of the octave of the year 2008 is the prayer which the apostle Paul recommends to the Christians in Thessalonica (Vestitorul, 2008: ianuarie 27).

Before the year 50 A.D., when the Epistle was written, there was a revolt of the Jews in Thessalonica. Because of this revolt, Paul was forced to leave the city, leaving behind a lively Christian community about which he was worried. Receiving good news from his two disciples, Timothy and Silas, news concerning the capacity of the Christians in Thessalonica to resist trials, Paul writes to them a letter of joy and hope. Among the urges concerning the life of the community is the following: „Do not stop praying!”

Noticing the progress of the ecumenical movement today – although a slow process – we are overwhelmed with joy and hope that what Jesus, the true God and perfect man wanted, will be fulfilled, even if the concrete actions of the churches and of the ecclesial communities continue to be delayed. (Vestitorul, 2008: ianuarie, 2).

The dialogue is the ideal means in putting face to face the different points of view, in examining the divergences that separate Christians. In the ecumenical dialogue, the seriousness of the engagement and the depth of the problems that require a solution 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 reconcile”.

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 intraconfessional and an interconfessional ecumenism are brought into discussion (Vasilescu, 2000).

The intraconfessional ecumenism represents the existence of a pluralism in the same denomination. Karl Barth said: „We are not unanimous where 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 interchristian dialogue has brought forward 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 some 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, as 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 that was suggested in the 1970s by the 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”- the Bishop of Rome being only „the servant” and guarantee – of this unity in diversity (Baconsky, 2007: 51).

## **2.2. The European Ecumenical Assembly – Charta Oecumenica**

The European interconfessional dialogue was strongly intensified through the tight cooperation between CEC and CCEE. The fruit of this cooperation consists in two important projects: the first project is the European Ecumenical Assembly and the second is Charta Oecumenica. It is an important document both as a constructive philosophy but also 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 politicians envisage a pragmatic Europe, based on guaranteed civil rights and on secular moral standards (Baconsky, 2007: 52-53).

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. Part of the Conference of the European Churches are the Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican churches (Gueit, 2003, 98).

**2.2.1. *The First European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA1)*** was organized in Basel, Switzerland, between 15-21 May 1989, with the theme „Peace and justice” (Buda, 2006: 120). More than 700 delegates from all Europe participated to this event. The conference proposed three steps to be followed in order to continue the initiative of the assembly:

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

**2.2.2. *The Second European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA2)*** took place in Graz, in Austria between 23-29 June 1997. 700 delegates from 124 churches, that were members of CBE and from Episcopal Conferences of the CCEE, participated. 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 10000 guests from all Europe (Buda, 2006: 120). The theme of the conference was “Reconciliation. A gift from God and Source of New Life”. Viorel Ioniță, 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*<sup>7</sup> which can be considered the most important initiative of EEA2” (Buda, 2006: 120). *Charta Oecumenica*, signed in April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2001 at Strasbourg contains the premise for the development of the cooperation among the churches of Europe. *Charta Oecumenica* is the most important document of the European ecumenical movement and the clearest evidence of the interconfessional dialogue open among the Churches of Europe<sup>8</sup>.

**2.2.3. The Third European Ecumenical Assembly** took place in Sibiu between 4-9 September 2007. The discussions initiated on the occasion of this meeting are founded on *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 way of the European Christians’ getting closer to one another”. 150 delegates from Europe participated to the assembly.
- The local ecumenical events organised at the end of the year 2006, especially prayers together under the motto: “The light of Christ shines upon all. Renewal and unity at the local level”.
- Wittenberg: 15-18 February 2007 organised with the purpose of presenting the Protestant heritage to Europe
- Sibiu: 4-9 September 2007. 2500 delegates from all Europe participated to Sibiu.

At Sibiu, the suggested theme was “The light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe”. Concerning what was expected from EEA3, the 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.*” (Ecumenism, 2007: 31) Walter Kasper expressed his hope that ecumenical Christianity would become the nucleus of a renewed European culture. (Ecumenism, 2007: 31).

Vincenzo Paglia considers that „*the different European traditions – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – need to find new ways of working together in order to trace a way on which the Europeans to 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 religious confessions.

„I remember with great satisfaction the atmosphere created at 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 Făgăraș-Blaj, Major Archbishop of the Romanian Church united with the Greek-Catholic Rome (Vestitorul, 2008: ianuarie, 2).

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/charta.shtmlch>

<sup>8</sup> The main ideas expressed in *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>.

### **2.3. The Ecumenical Movement and the „little schisms”**

About three quarters of the Synod boycotted the European Ecumenical Assembly from Sibiu. Moreover, the Catholics, the Orthodox and the Protestants present there demonstrated that ecumenism doesn't really work.

Among the 2500 participants to the third European Ecumenical Assembly, representatives of all the denominations in Europe, at Sibiu came only 16 members of The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox church (that is, very few of them). Most of the Romanian Orthodox hierarchs decided not to participate to the most important event concerning Christian unity of the last decade.

Although the Assembly was organised by the Conference of the European Churches and by the Conference of the European Catholic Bishops, the actual host of the event was IPS Daniel, the Metropolitan Bishop of Moldova and Bucovina. His status of deputy of the Patriarch matched perfectly, in the context of the event, with that of promoter of the ecumenical movement in Romania. But the event that took place in Sibiu demonstrated that few of his colleagues from the Holy Synod shared his convictions. IPS Laurentiu Streza, Metropolitan Bishop in Sibiu, was one of the few hierarchs who stood by his side. According to the Patriarchate, among the participants to the first day of common activities, there were only IPS Teofan, Metropolitan Bishop of Oltenia, IPS Andrei from Alba-Iulia and IPS Teodosie from Constanța.

IPS Bartolomeu, Metropolitan Bishop of Cluj is the only hierarch who motivated his absence from the event dedicated to ecumenism. The date and place of the third European Ecumenical Assembly had been known for several years, as the second took place in Graz, in 1997. Moreover, IPS Bartolomeu didn't commission his two dean bishops from Cluj to participate, sending only the dean of the Orthodox Faculty of Theology and the advisor on cultural problems of the Metropolitan Seat.

The Patriarchate denied that there would be any „antiecumenical” trend in the Holy Synod, although no one can deny that there are some antiecumenical accents in the monastic milieu. But they represent around 5 per cent, the priest Constantin Stoica, the spokesman for the Patriarchate, declared a day before the start of the assembly. By the speech he delivered, IPS Daniel tried to hide this division of the BOR, invoking the name of the late Patriarch, who, in May 1999, „had enjoyed listening to the Bishop of Rome, saying the credo in Romanian in Bucharest.” Three years later, in the St Peter Basilica, he had the occasion to say the prayer of the year 381 „to confess the common thesaurus of the Christian faith”.

Not only the majority of the members of the Holy Synod showed that they didn't share the ecumenical ideas, but also some important representatives of the most important churches in Europe. IPS Kirill, Metropolitan Bishop of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, president of the department of foreign affairs of the Metropolitan Seat of Moscow, was the most categorical of all. During a press conference, where he was present together with the representative of Vatican and the representative of the German Protestants, IPS Kirill said that he was not sure if he would sign the resolution that would put an end to the Assembly at Sibiu. “We are confronted with a crisis in the ecumenical movement, with a new split in the Christian family. This is due to the fact that we do not have a common view over the Christian morals. Which is the Christian message regarding sin? This is a major concern that I would like to share with you”, pointed out IPS Kirill (Cotidianul, 2007, septembrie, 06).

Although he emphasizes the fact that diversity does not necessarily mean difference, the bishop Wolfgang Huber, the president of the Committee of the Evangelical Church in Germany, did not hesitate to find a common expression, assumed by all and which to attract all those who wanted to get closer to the Christian faith”, said Bishop Huber (Cotidianul, 2007, septembrie, 06).

In line with a recent document issued by The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, considered by some members of the BOR as an attack to orthodoxy, Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Committee for the encouragement of Christian Unity, pleaded for a sincere attitude of the participants. “We don't have to be just nice to one another”, he said. In the speech he gave in front of more than 2500 participants, the cardinal pleaded for the unity of

Europe explained the document that appeared to be an obstacle in front of ecumenism. “We wanted to prove the truth, which we expect from all the other churches. The differences are not related to Christianity or salvation, but to the correct presentation of salvation to the visible church.” (Cotidianul, 2007, septembrie, 06).

### **3. The interreligious dialogue as a necessity**

The continuation of the process of European construction imposes the realization of some important progress in what the inter-cultural dialogue is concerned, meaning at the same time the realization of a bridge between religious confessions and movements that exist in Europe. The importance of this matter results from the „heritage” of the European space. The renegotiation of the socio-cultural status and the guarantee of the juridical acknowledgement of the religious phenomenon at the European level is, in this respect, the collective wish which guarantees the European identity, but also its natural borders (Kalinowski, 2008: 298).

On the other hand, the idea of the „Christian unity” of Europe has been promoted at least at the discourse level (if we are to take into account the „no” given to the European constitution by the French for example, then we notice that the anti-Muslim discourse has been extended over the reaction of the population too) during the various projects of reformation and extension of the European Union (Michel, 2008: 315). Moreover, Christian ecumenism is seen as a crucial factor of European unity. Starting from Christian unity, they try to trace the „ideal” borders of the European Union (Gueit, 2003, 89-91).

From the partial dissolution of some frictions existent among the European confessions, to the first signals addressed to the politicians, or the pleading in favour of environmental problems – all are important if we are to set faith at the foundation of the society.

Christian unity is beyond the walls of buildings, beyond rituals, beyond dogmas – in Jesus’ being itself: it is the phreatic water and the essence that unites us, even if we want it or not, even if we know it and will find it out sometime. The need for ecumenism is synonymous with the need for spiritual maturation (Vasilescu, 2007).

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 common values and of the notion of dialogue
- The encouragement of cultural changes and of the debates

A special attention will be given to the interconfessional dialogue.

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

After the American tragedy of September 11, 2001, European governments „discovered” the importance of the interconfessional and interreligious dialogue, finally accepting the fact that the parallel and purely theoretic approaches cannot replace 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 organised an enlarged group that will deal with this dialogue. To this, Romania will participate with an embryonic project (Baconsky, 2007: 53) (the creation in Bucharest of a European observatory for multicultural and interreligious dialogue, accepted by both sides (The Council of Europe and The Romanian Government) whose mission will not be to monitor the religious fact in the South-Eastern region, but rather the organization of a dialogue between politicians and religious leaders).

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 remain for a long time, in the same way as the temptation of the Church to demonize postmodernism will preserve for a while its manipulative vigour.

The European dignitaries are mainly Catholics or Protestants (we could not talk about the presence of the Orthodox, except for those from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus). It

is desirable that their personal or family links with their churches (until recently important) should not „influence” their professional discourse or official statements (Baconsky, 2007: 54).

The ecumenical movement has been the horizon to which many Christians’ hopes and illusions headed. Some talked about manipulations, others considered it devilish. The noble, generous aspects of the ecumenical movement and the Christian, spiritual dimensions have been too often forgotten. Moreover, at the third European Ecumenical Assembly, some could notice the presence of representatives belonging to other religions (Islam, Judaism), so that we could talk about a door open to what is called „extended ecumenism”.

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