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Rebooting Ecumenism - New Paradigms for the 21st Century

Edited by
Razvan Porumb

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Editor

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Article

Ecumenism as Hope: The Prophetic Role and the Eschatological Function of the Church

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Abstract: The article is structured around one of the questions that has been at the forefront of controversies in the orthodox church in recent years: why is ecumenical dialogue necessary and why "must" we engage in it? The answer can be simple: because it is the will of the Saviour Jesus Christ, who prays to the Father "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). Nevertheless, some Christians reject or even condemn ecumenical dialogue. To explain the presence of the orthodox church in the ecumenical movement, I proposed the concept of ecumenism as hope. In this article, I also offered a synthesis of the relations between the orthodox church and the other Christian communities from the perspective of teleology. I then tried to show that the re-evaluation of eschatology could oppose the "mechanical paradigm" of the historical–critical method, because eschatology contains the element of "hope". I concluded that "hope" in the eschatological sense could be understood as the eschatological inauguration of the unity of faith in the church.

Keywords: hope; orthodox church; ecumenism; eschatology; prophetism; modernity; postmodernity

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1. Introduction

In the orthodox theology, there are several ways of understanding the ecumenical dialogue. We find an ecumenism of return and conversion to orthodoxy (Florovsky 1989, vol. 13, p. 134), an ecumenical theology motivated by love and by wanting to share the spiritual treasures of the Orthodox Church with all those who seek to know Christ (Hart and Chryssavgis 2020, para. 51), and a theology of non-orthodox churches understood as "incomplete churches" (Stăniloae 1997, 2, p. 211), but also, more recently, an ecumenism as "*metanoia*-centred activity" (Porumb 2019, p. 92). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the orthodox church has been involved in ecumenical dialogue from the very beginning of its institutionalisation in ecumenical forums such as the World Council of Churches or the Conference of European Churches.[1] However, anti-ecumenical positions are still present in the orthodox church, as well as in evangelical communities or catholic ones, and the outcomes are not the ones expected. The following question arises: why should we become involved in the ecumenical dialogue? An immediate answer would be that it is Jesus Christ's wish that "all may be one" (John 17:21). Since this is the desire of the incarnate Son of God for all people, we understand that it is ultimately the work of God in which we are called to participate, and this is based on our "consubstantial humanity" (Porumb 2019, pp. 223–33). Even if we cannot yet see the end or resolution of the ecumenical dialogue, we should participate confidently, waiting for God to complete his plan for the world.

Thus, ecumenism can be defined as the profound hope for Christian unity that has always been widespread, both in the East and in the Christian West (Gargano 2005, p. 255). As an aspiration that seeks the fulfilment of the Saviour's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21), it also implies zeal and constant effort on the part of all Christians, but also the hope that the work will be accomplished at a point in time known only to God. The hope behind inter-Christian dialogue is nourished by the awareness that those involved in ecumenical dialogue are fulfilling God's will, even when the ecumenical dialogue is in crisis. For this reason, the Synod of Crete 2016, in the document on "Relations of the

Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World" states that "the Orthodox Church is aware that the movement to restore Christian unity is taking on new forms in order to respond to new circumstances and to address the new challenges of today's world" (Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World (2016), art. 24), but it is extremely important to be a witness of the apostolic tradition and faith in the face of a divided Christian world. (Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World (2016), art. 24b) Even if the ecumenical dialogue is to take new forms, hope remains the foundation for understanding its purpose properly.

This leads us to attach more importance to the value of hope or the Christian virtue of hope. The difference between the value of hope and the theological virtue of hope lies in their origin, nature, and purpose. Philosophical hope is a positive inclination or expectation about the coming future, based on reason and experience; it does not necessarily require a transcendent or divine basis and may be simply rooted in human nature or external circumstances. Theological hope is a God-given virtue that directs human will and desire towards God and the eternal good He promises. It is grounded in divine revelation and promise, not merely in human experience or reason.

In terms of purpose, philosophical hope is directed towards an anticipated good in the future, whether a personal goal or a collective ideal. Its purpose may be temporary or tied to the realities of this world. Theological hope aims at union with God in eternal life. It is focused on salvation and eternal good. It leads us to trust in God and his promises, even in the context of suffering and trials. Although both terms refer to a positive expectation of the future, hope in a philosophical context is often based on reason and experience, whereas hope in a theological context is a God-given virtue that orients the human soul towards salvation and eternal good.

This article, therefore, aims to analyse ecumenism from the perspective of Christian hope, understood in an eschatological sense. The evaluation starts from the hypothesis that there is a deep connection between eschatology and hope, and that ecumenical dialogue in this eschatological perspective has a prophetic role. I aim to prove this by using contemporary orthodox theological sources as a support for my argumentation. The same sources will be used to then look at the postmodern context in which churches carry out their missionary work.

2. Eschatology and Hope

The fact that the eschatological discourse preoccupies theological circles should not be surprising. From the beginning, the church has had an affinity for preaching the fundamental transformations that humanity will undergo in the eschatological future. The eschatological perspective is in opposition to the Newtonian view of time and space. According to the latter, "absolute, true mathematical time, in itself and according to its nature, flows equally without any connection to anything external" (Luca 2018, p. 21). This view was assumed in the "mechanical paradigm" of the classical historical–critical view (Martin 1987, p. 373). Eschatology introduces the category of "hope" in relation to faith or the Christian virtue of hope. The Christian virtue of hope is all-encompassing; it does not have a specific object; that is, it is not the hope for something, but rather the disposition to see and receive the good that the Lord pours into the world through His Providence, according to His own reasoning. Just as despair is the loss of any hope, true hope is the recovery of an open and confident hope. Specified hope is often an illusion: the stubborn insistence that something will happen as one wishes; it is an overestimation of oneself and one's own abilities. The theological virtue of hope is the joyful readiness to receive everything from the hands of God (Siladi 2021, p. 164). Quoting the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, David Bosch writes: "Where there is hope, there is religion" (Bosch 1991, p. 499). He seems to be right, considering that the Enlightenment removed the category of hope by giving up the search for an ultimate purpose in creation. Rejecting teleology, society came to operate through a chain of causes and effects without any higher purpose other than the immediate one. The consequences of this view of reality can easily be seen today. The world has no ultimate

goal or purpose beyond the immediate. The denial of a human destiny that continues beyond death can cause the alienation of the whole of society and a distancing not only from God but also from one's existence. It is like a plunge into nothingness. This is why hope should be a more frequent theme in contemporary theology because it can provide those who are spiritually uprooted with a basis for their existence. By bringing a light of hope into the darkness of almost complete meaninglessness, the Christian mission enables our religious regeneration and our re-rooting in God. Hope in the ecumenical dialogue gives Christians today a sense of unity and belonging to the same theandric reality, the church of Christ.

D. Bosch understood that hope could give a two-way answer to a divided world. The first would be a classic one, formulated by Mircea Eliade as "the myth of eternal return": what we hope for is what was, but has been lost. Redemption means, in this context, regaining the unity of paradise. The Judeo-Christian tradition offers the second answer, where the future we hope for is not simply a repetition or a return to the origin (Bosch 1991, p. 499); it is instead a spiral into the future. The hoped-for future is a new beginning on a higher level than the past. The Son of God was sent into the world to restore and perfect the paradisiacal state. Thus, we understand that the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God enters into history through the Son of God as full reality, transforming time into a history of universal salvation and our lives into histories of personal salvation and perfection.

What George Florovsky calls "inaugurated eschatology" is thus something that is happening in history. According to G. Florovsky, it is premature to speak of a "realised eschatology" simply because the eschaton is not yet realised; sacred history has not yet been closed. He proposes the expression "inaugurated eschatology" since both the ultimate and the new reality have already entered history, although the final stage has not yet been reached. G. Florovsky was one of the others who used the term "inaugurated eschatology". The theologians Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) and Oscar Cullman (1902–1999), although they did not use the term "inaugurated eschatology", were notable supporters of this view in its essential characteristics (Cullmann 1950, 1959; Vos 2019).

We are already in an eschatological reality, but still under the sign of the Cross. The Kingdom has already been inaugurated but still needs to be fulfilled (Florovsky 1987, p. 36). In his understanding of eschatology, G. Florovsky emphasises the tension between "already fulfilled" and "not yet fulfilled"; that is, the Kingdom enters into time and will be fully realised at the end of time, and there is tension between present reality and the Second Coming. Thus, the Kingdom of God involves a Christological and a Trinitarian interpretation. The Kingdom is present in Christ alone, and the source of Christian unity is the intra-trinitarian communion (Bria 1982, p. 3). The same communion also underlines the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit after the Resurrection and Pentecost enters history through the Holy Spirit. It is an eternal reality that is "among us" in the world, through divine grace and the Holy Sacraments, and its fulfilment represents both the goal and the end of history.

The present time poses various challenges for the church, and this is why we need the eschatological perspective in the ecumenical dialogue, oriented towards the future and the here and now. It is eschatology that maintains a creative and redemptive tension between already and not yet.

The Christian hope for unity is based on God's unfailing love and promise and comes from a deep faith in God and his revelation. The mystery of Christ includes the reconciliation of man with God and with himself. In his prayer in John 17:21, Jesus says: "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." This verse encapsulates the essence of the Christian hope of unity. It is not just a future utopian dream but is anchored in a historical event and person: Jesus Christ. Hope is based on the conviction that God has already begun the process of unity and reconciliation through Christ, and this divine initiative fuels Christian hope for its full realisation.

We hope because of what we sense for ourselves and are strengthened by what the saints have already experienced. Christian hope finds its place both in what we experience in the present and in the desire to experience the future. It is both rest and activity, an endpoint, and a journey. Because God's victory is certain, believers can work patiently and firmly in the ecumenical dialogue, combining careful planning with obedience.

The fact that the disciples are sent on a mission to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is the only answer to the question about when the Kingdom of God will be inaugurated. Therefore, one does not need to choose between being involved in salvation or secular history. Salvation history is not a distinct or separate thread within secular history. There are not two histories but two ways of understanding history. Therefore, the distinction has only a *noetic* meaning. Christians do not deal with different historical facts but have a different perspective. The secular historian will turn salvation history into secular history, while the believer will see the hand of God in secular history as well. This does not imply that the meaning of history will always be transparent to the believer. History has paradoxes, gaps, discontinuities, challenges, and unknown elements. For Christians, salvation history is revealed and hidden, transparent and opaque (Bosch 1991, p. 512).

Because God already rules and because we await the public inauguration of His rule, we are here and now ambassadors of His Kingdom. Christians should not struggle to simply maintain the status quo. They pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven!" and they interpret this as a request to God and as a "challenge" to themselves, in the sense of it driving their persistence in fulfilling God's will on earth, which is "that all may be one".

3. Ecumenism and the Challenges of Modernity and Postmodernity

If it is the will of Jesus Christ that "all may be one" (John 17:21) and we have a consubstantial humanity, how can we explain the fact that some orthodox Christians not only avoid this dialogue but even discredit it, while considering themselves faithful followers of Christ's teachings. Why are there such divergent opinions about ecumenical dialogue? One possible answer could arise from the complicated relationship the orthodox church has with modernity, especially in the countries that were under Ottoman rule and later under Communist rule. In these countries, in the 20th century, communism, a creation of modernity, tried to eliminate any influence of the church in society (Preda 2009, p. 33). On the other hand, Pantelis Kalaitzidis argues that the orthodox church has not yet fully adapted to modernity, which requires a "paradigm shift" in terms of spirituality, intellectualism, human rights, religious freedom, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity. According to the Greek theologian, fundamentalism, with its anti-ecumenical actions and discourses, is, in fact, a reaction to the challenges of modernity, which stimulated its emergence and generated a revolution in all spheres of life (religion, politics, sacred, profane, etc.). This is why fundamentalism can only be understood in the modernist context (Kalaitzidis 2013, p. 145).

Indeed, there are various historical reasons why the orthodox world has yet to be directly involved in modernisation. Unlike the West, the parts of the world under the influence of the orthodox church did not go through the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, religious wars, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, or the Industrial Revolution. All of these seem alien to the orthodox. The common perception is that orthodoxy is traditionalist, conservative, and resistant to modern influences. Often, any attempt at innovation is considered contrary to the orthodox spirit. In reality, the orthodox church is concerned with the transmission of the faith and may be considered "traditional" in this sense, but it does not do so in a static way; rather, it struggles to pass on a *living* Tradition (Meyendorff 1978). The orthodox church is indeed conservative, but in the sense of preserving and promoting the eternal values of the Gospel.

In Vladimir Fedorov's view, "inculturation" could be a good starting point for resolving the relationship between the orthodox church and modernity. Inculturation, which refers to the process of Christianizing philosophical and social currents that have emerged

in human history and culture, could be a way for the church to respond to the challenges of modernity (Fedorov 2013, p. 156). According to Aristotle Papanikolaou, the Russian school of theology, especially the works of Soloviev and Bulgakov, offered a distinct response to modernity while preserving the orthodox principle of divine–human communion. In discussions between the Russian and the Greek neo-patristic schools of thought, the former is seen as rooted in tradition but with an innovative approach, while the latter prefers the dogmatic language of the classics and is opposed to reinterpretations of tradition (Papanikolaou 2007, p. 533).

So, although modernity and orthodoxy seem on different trajectories, the orthodox church cannot ignore modernity, nor can it pretend to live in the traditional, pre-modern society imagined by the fundamentalist movements in the church. To do so would mean denying the essence of incarnational theology. The church is called to fulfil its mission and to embody the Christian truth about God, the world, and the human being.

As far as postmodernity and the ecumenical movement are concerned, things are even more complex. Postmodernity aims to criticise and question the concepts and paradigms of modernity; thus, it brings about profound implications in various fields. By promoting relativism and contesting the existence of the objective truth, postmodernity continues to challenge Christian witness. In a sense, it seems to legitimise the ecumenical dialogue, which is perceived by some orthodox circles as accepting compromise and dogmatic relativism.

Postmodernity makes a critique of the universality of knowledge. The claim that all knowledge is conditioned by the cultural and historical contexts in which it is produced may favour ecumenism in that it encourages the dialogue among different Christian traditions and denominations. Diversity of knowledge and understanding can provide a broader perspective on Christian teachings and practices without claiming a single correct and universally valid interpretation. The fact that postmodernity supports the idea of pluralism and accepts the idea of fluid identities can translate into ecumenism by accepting the diversity of Christian denominations and promoting unity in diversity (Cooke 2009, pp. 1029–32). Challenging the idea of an objective truth via postmodernity may mean that ecumenism acknowledges that biblical and theological interpretations can vary, and that no Christian tradition holds the full truth. The orthodox position is of course famously in disagreement with this.

However, it must be said that postmodernism is not synonymous with absolute relativism, whereby all opinions, beliefs, or values are equally valid without distinction. Such an interpretation of postmodernism often leads to the assumption that postmodern thinkers believe that there is no difference in value or validity between two opinions. For example, under this misperception, believing that "the earth is round" would be seen as equally valid as believing that "the earth is flat". So, postmodern thinking does not propose an "anything goes" approach. Instead, it emphasises the importance of context. In postmodernism, knowledge, values, and beliefs are not seen as absolutes, but are understood in relation to their specific contexts. This is an important nuance. It means that while a postmodernist may not believe in an objective and singular truth, he or she recognises that some views are more appropriate, valid, or valuable in certain contexts than others. For postmodern thinking, human knowledge is produced in relation, not in isolation or purely individually; rather, it comes from interaction with other people, with cultures, with historical moments. For Christians, the incarnation has a universal value but is also a deeply relational event. God enters a relationship with humanity in the most intimate way imaginable. This relational nature of the Incarnation can provide the framework for an interesting dialogue with the postmodern emphasis on context and relationship, on the nature of truth, or on the interplay between the universal and the particular.

Indeed, the Christian tradition presents truth not primarily as a conceptual proposition or philosophical abstraction, but as a person: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life", says Jesus in John 14:6. This is a radical departure from many philosophical conceptions of truth, which often treat it as a static concept to be defined, argued about, and circumscribed.

In postmodern thought there is a reluctance to define truth as a fixed point. It recognises the fluid and multifaceted nature of truth, dependent on different perspectives and contexts. Christian and postmodern views are opposed to an overly simplistic or reductionist view of truth. For Christianity, truth is more than a simple statement—it is the very person of Christ. In postmodernism, truth goes beyond objectivity—it is interwoven with context, narrative, and perspective.

To "abide in" Christ is to inhabit the space of truth, to live it in everyday relationships, rather than merely agreeing with it intellectually. It highlights the relationship between rigid doctrinal experience and pure ideology. Applied to the discussion of postmodernism, this relationality can suggest that truth is something lived and experienced in relationship—with others, with the world, and with the divine—rather than something to be debated or defined.

David Bentley Hart argues that the proper Christian response to postmodern discourses on difference is that the Christian interpretation of difference is more appealing because of its inherent beauty. Difference in Christian thought is not an act of violence but one that generates peace as it arises from the Trinitarian difference, from the unity in diversity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The fullness of God's Trinitarian being precedes the creation of the world. The ontological separation between God and creation allows for a genuine difference that transcends division and creates communion. In this sense, difference as a form of divine–human communion does not totalise or cancel otherness but maintains it. The difference that evolves into distance is the consequence of violence; in contrast, the distance that evolves into authentic difference is a manifestation of peace, made possible by the prior gift of God's love for the created being (Hart 2004, p. 52).

4. The Prophetic Function of First Theological Principles

A possible essential contribution of the orthodox church to the ecumenical movement is the reminder that God created the world for genuine communion with Himself through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. This does not imply that one can draw a simplistic equivalence between the divine realm and earthly structures, but instead supports the orthodox worldview as sacramental, filled with God's presence (Papanikolaou 2007, p. 545). Christians are often tempted to find out as precisely as possible God's plan with the world in general and with an individual in particular and this temptation sometimes generates heresies and apocalyptic ideologies. Instead of seeking God's concrete plan for the world, one should ask after the Christian's role is in the world. In this way, the world is no longer seen as an obstacle but as a place where one can fulfil one's calling. Christ is risen, and nothing can remain as it was before. It was a victory against evil that led some to believe that this world's historical structures and conditions would change completely. We see, however, that a social and political order, one that is in keeping with God's will, is an almost utopian project. In fact, it is specific to the essence of Christian teleology to doubt that the eschatological vision can be fully realised in history. Nevertheless, history remains subject to the critical prophetic voice of the Gospel.

In this regard, John Behr argues for a return to first theological principles and their application as fundamental principles of the church's prophetic function is necessary. The first principle refers to the fact that God's word and will are made known through Scripture. The second is related to the church canon, the harmony between the law and the prophets in the covenant made at the coming of the Lord. The third is the triadological principle, and the fourth is the Christological principle (Behr 2010, pp. 31–33). All these principles show the importance of the truth revealed in the Scriptures, the harmony between law and prophets, the Trinitarian relationship in the Godhead, and the centrality of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. These elements are common to all Christian traditions and constitute a solid ground for dialogue and cooperation. The ecumenical dialogue must aim at identifying and acknowledging these truths that they have in common and exploring how they can be lived and manifested in society. In this sense, the hope for honest ecumenical dialogue also implies an awareness that the challenge is to build relationships

that reflect this participation in a divine–human communion, both at the individual and community levels.

The triadological principle, as a primary principle, refers to what Dumitru Stăniloae called the reflections of the Holy Trinity in creation. According to this principle, the mystery of the unity of the divine and the hypostatic plurality is found in creation. It is recognised even in the unitary–pluralistic constitution of the atom. The constitution of the atom has succeeded in providing the whole of existence with a "logical" basis, assumed in an antinomic sense, by which it brings together the principle of difference and the principle of unity in the understanding of reality. It is a "generally accepted fact today that plurality does not break unity and unity does not cancel plurality. It is a fact that plurality is necessarily internal to unity or that unity manifests itself in plurality. It is a fact that plurality maintains unity and unity plurality and that the weakening or disappearance of one of these means the weakening or disappearance of the other" (Stăniloae 1996, vol. 1, p. 199).

Then, the Christological principle, which is based on the hypostatic union of the divine nature with the human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, has, beyond its dogmatic consequences, concrete consequences for our life. According to D. Stăniloae, the personal humanity of Jesus Christ is a medium through which the incarnate Son experiences the sorrows of all humanity, past, present, and future. Through His humanity, all human kind can share in the divine life (Stăniloae 1997, vol. 2, p. 38). This happens in the Sacraments, through which God the Word takes all our senses and transforms them. "He renews them, He reshapes them, He restores them as functions of His own body" (Stăniloae 1997, 2, p. 37). Following St. Nicholas Cabasila, Stăniloae refers to "two kinds of senses in man, the natural senses and the spiritual ones". According to the natural senses, "all human beings function in a unique way. Thus, the natural man's way of living is fragmented. However, one's senses can be concentrated through the Mysteries, and they are united in Christ and with Christ's senses" (Stăniloae 1997, vol. 2, p. 37). We may therefore conclude that social transformation should be grounded triadologically in the unity of God the Trinity and Christologically in the divine–human Person of Jesus Christ, who unites all humanity in His humanity. A social transformation centred on God is, in this sense, different from one initiated by humans alone. In an eschatological understanding of reality, the ultimate triumph is God's gift to us; he is the One who makes all things new (Rev 21:5). By attempting to design humanity's future on our own, the beacon of eschatology will soon be extinguished, and then humanity will be left groping in darkness and despair.

The message of the eschatological triumph of God's glory gives us the necessary distance from the world and the prophetic hope to engage in its transfiguration. It is precisely the prospect of the glory of God that makes it impossible to seek perfection on earth. That is why one should not choose to remain neutral or withdraw from the ecumenical dialogue in order to preserve such an imagined perfection. Maybe we do not overestimate our capacity and maybe we do trust the direction in which history moves. However, there is a distinction to be made between what is meant by hope for an end of this world, in which the Kingdom of God is inaugurated, and the existential hope of the prophetic kind that we are moving towards that consummate end. Hope and eschatological triumph—God's final victory and transfiguration of the world—is a principle that gives us hope amid the crisis of the ecumenical dialogue because it reminds us that despite present difficulties and divisions, God is sovereign, and the final triumph belongs to God. In this context, ecumenical dialogue is not just a human task but part of God's plan to bring all things together in Christ.

However, it is crucial to recognise that before the church can serve as a beacon of hope and change in the wider world, it must undergo introspection. The church has been and continues to be a dynamic organism, a divine–human reality in which the human element has sometimes made mistakes. The prophetic voice, traditionally seen as one that speaks truth to power and challenges social injustice, also needs to be turned inward. It should address institutional, theological, and community issues within the church.

This self-examination is not a sign of weakness but embodies a commitment to authenticity and transformative power. Moreover, by addressing its internal challenges, the church strengthens its ecumenical commitments. A church that is coherent, introspective, and aware of its strengths and weaknesses can participate in ecumenical dialogues with a clearer vision and a humbler spirit. This internal reflection ensures that the church's engagement with other communities or religions will be more authentic, open, and fruitful. For the church to approach the world with a prophetic voice of hope, it must first turn inward. It must listen, reflect, repent if necessary, and grow. Only then can its mission be truly effective and resonate with the profound truths it holds.

5. Ecumenism as Hope and Prophetic Eschatology

As we have seen, eschatology introduces the category of "hope" into faith and implicitly into the ecumenical movement. Following G. Florovsky, whom I mentioned above, I believe we can talk about an eschatology inaugurated in the life of the church, to which, however, we should relate prophetically. In other words, I propose a prophetic eschatological vision. In short, an ecumenical dialogue as hope is based on a prophetic eschatological vision. In order to clarify what I mean by a prophetic eschatological vision, I will use the metaphor of the world as an ark, frequently found in biblical and patristic discourse.

Let us imagine we are on a ship at sea. Although the ship, particularly in the form of Noah's Ark, implies a division between the saved and the lost, it is worth noting that in other situations ships can symbolise a journey, an adventure, or an exploration. For many, Christian faith is a journey towards understanding, enlightenment, and closeness to God—this is the kind of understanding we want the ship to provide. The ship is open to all who wish to embark on this journey.

As we travel along our route, there are several things to consider. The first is the ship itself and the person at its helm, then the route, the destination chosen, and the sailing itself. A good sailor will always choose a well-built ship, the work of the best craftsman. Before setting sail, the sailor prepares the boat according to the builder's instructions, but he also prepares himself and mentally sets his destination. A skillful sailor will always look ahead to his destination but sail by paying attention to the landmarks around him. For example, in coastal navigation, the captain will consider specially designed landmarks such as lighthouses, beacons, buoys, buildings, towers, or natural topographical features: rocks, small islands, headlands, etc. In celestial navigation, the sun, moon, planets, or stars were used as landmarks to determine the ship's position and course. More recently, with the development of technology, we are talking about electronic navigation, in which electronic means are used to determine the ship's position concerning its starting point and destination (Stanca and Pînzariu 2001, p. 12). In all these cases, we are talking about landmarks or signs that indicate the way to the destination in the "endless" sea or ocean.

We can look at the current missionary situation in a similar way: we are part of the church, the divine–human reality built by God to lead us to our destination, which for us is the Kingdom of God. By embracing what we believe to be the true church, we move towards this final goal. Already embarking on the road to the destination, understood as eschatological fulfilment, places the church's mission in an anticipated eschatological reality. One of the church's missions is to seek the "unity of all" for which it prays in every liturgy. If the path is the right one, it leads to the destination and the ultimate reality is already anticipated along the way. Navigational landmarks are prophetic signs that indicate the right route and warn of dangers along the way. There may be several ways to reach the same destination. The salvation for each of us is a unique path in the sense that it is a personal response to the universal call of the one God. Therefore, we need prophetic signs pointing the way to our destination, even if our route is unique. The prophetic task of the church is to point to the values of the Kingdom of God and to encourage prophetic discernment.

Returning to the ecumenical dialogue, we note that there is a certain creative tension—or, as Brandon Gallaher calls it "creative antinomy" (Gallaher 2020, p. 66)—between Christian communities in dialogue, but also, more generally, between the church and the world

or between eschatology and history. On the one hand, the church judges the world and history by applying the eschatological criterion, and on the other hand, it consecrates them to God and prepares them for transfiguration. Thus, the church embraces the world with all its aspects—materiality, civilisation, a successful or less successful history of the ecumenical dialogues to date, and culture, even in its secularised form in postmodernity—and embraces them in and with humility. In this sense, a Christian prophetic view does not suggest escaping from our materiality to save our souls, but transfiguring the present time, society, and the whole world in the spirit of the Gospel of Christ. All these aspects (discernment, creativity, good judgement, embracing the world and transforming it) are prophetic functions that point the way to the Kingdom of God at the personal level, at the community level, and at the level of ecumenical dialogues.

6. Conclusions

In the broadest sense, ecumenism refers to efforts to achieve a visible unity among different Christian denominations. However, the ecumenical movement faces several challenges, including the anti-ecumenical attitudes present in all Christian denominations, and the orthodox church is not an exception in this respect. Nevertheless, the official position of most of the orthodox churches is to maintain their membership in the various ecumenical forums as a sign of commitment to dialogue and unity.

Ecumenism as hope refers to efforts to promote understanding and cooperation between Christian traditions and denominations. Ideally, ecumenism can be seen as a call for unity and reconciliation in the hope of overcoming the divisions that have separated the church over time. As Gillian Evans notes in *Method in Ecumenical Theology*, hope is essential in this endeavour, complemented by love and faith. We must also recognise that to a certain extent, ecumenical approaches must operate in the darkness of uncertainty, trusting that God will reveal solutions that are currently beyond our sight (Evans 1996, pp. 225–26).

Ecumenism as hope can also be seen as a reflection of the church's prophetic role, which seeks mediation and guidance following Christian values. It also aligns with an eschatological vision of unity and ultimate fulfilment in the Kingdom of God. Ecumenism is also linked to eschatology, as the hope for unity and reconciliation reflects an eschatological vision of one church in the Kingdom of God. It is based on the conviction that divisions caused by sin will be overcome at the end of time.

The eschatological function of the church is to live in anticipation of the Kingdom of God, and the values of the Kingdom are foretasted and experienced in the present. This brings a creative tension between the church and the world, between eschatology and history, in which the church judges the world and its history through the eschatological criterion and, at the same time, consecrates them to God and prepares them for transfiguration. Ecumenism, in this context, can be seen as an effort to navigate these often-difficult waters to achieve a visible unity of the church. However, it must be an ecumenism rooted in the authentic identity of the church and the eschatological perspective on reality. Thus, it should not be an ecumenism that compromises the fundamental teachings of the church to achieve a superficial unity, but one that helps each Christian community to discover and live the apostolic faith within its own ecclesial framework.

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Note

[1] Alongisde other reasons offered for the participation of the orthodox church in various ecumenical organisations, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew notes that we can now talk about a "new ecumenism", a circumstantial type of cooperation which seeks the unity of the Christian churches around "traditionalist" values. This leads to unexpected alliances between churches. Churches previously reluctant to endorse ecumenism now support it based on the fact that they share the same traditional values. For example, some American evangelicals, who in the past saw Catholics and the orthodox as idolaters, are now open to a collaboration with the latter as they have similar values (Bartholomew 2023).

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Article

Reimagining Ecumenism for the 21st Century—Stăniloae's Theology as a Source and Inspiration

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Abstract: There are many competent voices who estimate that in recent years ecumenism has been going through a crisis. Concern for ecumenical dialogue is becoming secondary for many theologians or members of the clergy, including hierarchs, who are preoccupied almost exclusively with addressing the problems facing their local and confessional communities. As a result, receptivity to ecumenical dialogue and cooperation is even lower among the faithful, who are preoccupied with assessing their own Christian identity in a socio-cultural context marked by rapid change and unprecedented challenges, of which secularism is only one of many. The disappointing assessment of the state of contemporary ecumenism, has led some ecumenists to an effort of identifying solutions for reimagining interconfessional dialogue in an ever-changing world. Theologians from all Christian traditions seek to contribute to identifying ways to unblock the current situation and to propose concrete approaches for rethinking ecumenism for future generations of believers. One of the ways suggested in the literature is to think of ecumenism less in terms of theological agreements, and more in terms of a process of mutual learning, considering that we can receive and offer our gifts in a mutual process, being aware of the need for each community to be open to such a perspective. In this paper, we argue that the constant receptivity to Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae's theology, and to his anthropology in particular, that exists in Western traditions can be an opportunity for revitalising the ecumenical dialogue through the gift exchange model described above. We start from the premise that Fr. Stăniloae's work represents an important gift not just for the Orthodox, but also for many Protestant and Catholic theologians, and we suggest that this direction can produce a reciprocal effect on Orthodox theologians to open up and receive the gifts of Western theology.

Keywords: ecumenism; Stăniloae; gift exchange; anthropology

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the ecumenical movement reached a crisis moment, that some described as an "ecumenical winter". This decline related both to past approaches to interconfessional dialogue and to the results achieved. In the face of this impasse, a growing number of competent voices have pointed out that ecumenism needs a different approach for the 21st century (Meyer 1999; Kasper 2004; Murray 2010; Kinnamon 2014; Pizzey 2019; Porumb 2019).

These new approaches appear to move away from the apparently illusionary goal of regaining the lost institutional unity of the Church, as noble and legitimate a purpose as that may be, towards one that would be focused much more realistically on the ability of each Christian tradition to define itself coherently and to uphold its own identity, while at the same time to be increasingly more open to collaboration with other denominations in order to receptively learn from their experience. The foundational premise of these new approaches is that, to a greater or a lesser degree, each Christian tradition would have things to give, as "gifts" to the others, and things to learn and receive from them.

Understanding ecumenism as a gift exchange involves the idea of mutual openness of Christian communities to give and receive the gifts of experience and the understanding gained by each of them (O'Gara 2010). But for believers to be able to go beyond a formal institutional approach to what can be given and received, this model of ecumenism would benefit from engaging with the depth of Christian theology on the theme the gift. This conversation could be further enriched by an interaction with contemporary philosophical reflections on this topic (in authors such as Mauss, Derrida, Caputo, Marion, or Milbank), which, for the sake of brevity, will not be discussed in the present paper. According to the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, the gift is the sign of interpersonal love between God and human beings, as well as between fellow humans. However, the reciprocity of giving and receiving is beyond any social or religious convention. It is, par excellence, the experience of manifesting freedom and self-expression and fulfilling ourselves as personal beings. As signs of divine love, gifts are also signs of the understanding of the fact that all things originate from God and that because of this we all share in the richness of his being (Stăniloae 2000, pp. 21–23). Thus, Christian experience as a gift to others is the foundation for any authentic ecumenical dialogue.

In the context of the current attempts to revive ecumenical engagement, we believe that two aspects can play an important role in achieving concrete results. The first is related to the search for new approaches or models of thinking and of practicing ecumenism. The second is that the whole Christian community is facing new theological challenges, coming especially from the world of human sciences, which have an acute impact particularly in the field of anthropology. Rather than perceiving these as threats, theological reflection in this area can bring churches together to find common solutions to current problems, while at the same time engaging with relevant matters in society at large.

In this paper, we argue that the constant receptivity of Fr. Stăniloae's theology in Western traditions is an opportunity for reviving ecumenical dialogue through the gift exchange model. We start from the assumption that Stăniloae's anthropology is an important gift not only for the Orthodox, but also for many Protestant and Catholic theologians. His thinking about human nature and the place of humanity in the world—more precisely, his emphasis on human consubstantiality and its implications for the value of the human person on the one side, and the role of human persons as priests of creation, on the other—represents a useful springboard for finding answers to current challenges. Furthermore, it also encourages mutual openness of theologians from different traditions to receive and offer the gifts of their Christian experience and thus to bring churches closer together.

Within this framework, we structure our paper in three sections. In the first, we present some aspects of the complex legacy of the past that led to the current "ecumenical winter". In the second, we highlight some examples of new attempts to energize ecumenism at the beginning of the 21st century. In the third, we begin by presenting the gift exchange model for ecumenism and how Fr. Stăniloae's ecumenical theology and anthropology puts this model to work. We exemplify this with two aspects of Fr. Stăniloae's anthropology that could be considered as a launchpad for ecumenical dialogue: the value of human persons and their dignity as priests in creation. The paper ends with a set of conclusions.

2. Ecumenism in Decline—A Complex Heritage

At the present time, the ecumenical movement has reached a major impasse. Various theologians have characterised this situation either as a deep crisis or as having reached a turning point (Kasper 2004, p. 155). The description of this critical state as an "ecumenical winter" reflects "both the experience of ecumenical decline over the last decades, and the difficulties facing ecumenism today" (Pizzey 2019, p. 181). This decline refers both to past approaches to inter-church dialogue and to the results achieved. At the same time, this stalemate and cooling down in ecumenical engagement is also linked to a series of challenges that each church has to face both internally and in relation to a complex society marked by phenomena such as pluralism, globalisation, and secularism (Zizioulas 2015; Pizzey 2019, p. 180), as well as economic, social, and environmental crises. Furthermore,

the support offered by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine challenged not only the unity of the global Orthodox community, but also the ecumenical relations between Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants. By lending its unwavering support and even justifying the atrocities committed by the Russian invading army in Ukraine, Russian Orthodoxy has put a huge strain on its fellowship with most of the other Orthodox Churches. It has also prompted strong suggestions from ecumenical partners for the disaffiliation of the Russian Orthodox Church from the WCC (Conger 2022).

The attitudes of Christian leaders towards ecumenism vary in all church traditions from overly optimistic, seeing in it the sign of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, to extremely antithetic, with various fundamentalist perspectives seeing ecumenism as a heresy and a threat to the mere existence of the Church. Within Orthodoxy, such views and attitudes towards ecumenism are well summarised in the *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism* (Kalaitzidis et al. 2014).

In our opinion, ecumenism in the 20th century represents a spectrum of positions between two diametrically opposed approaches.

2.1. The Coming Back Home Model

The first approach, promoted by more traditionalist circles within Catholicism and Orthodoxy, we would call the “coming back home model”. It starts from the premise that there is only “one true Church” (be that the Orthodox or the Catholic one) which has kept unaltered “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3). According to this view, the present disunity in the body of Christ, which is such a scandal for the witness of the Gospel in the world, cannot be attributed to any extent to this “true Church” but is the result of human pride and/or heresy (departure from the dogma) by various groups of Christians at certain points in the history of the Church. As such, in order for any ecumenical effort to have legitimacy, its aim should be to call all the other Christian communities to humbly “come back home”, re-joining, in genuine repentance, the only “one true Church”, from which they were once sadly separated. Although this view is not endorsed in official documents, as it is more a popular sentiment than a theoretical position, it is a pervading one in historical churches and is implicit in the idea that the Orthodox Church (or alternatively, the Catholic Church) is the “one true Church”. As such, the only legitimate way of ecumenical engagement is for everybody else to become either Catholics or Orthodox. A good example to illustrate this view is a book including a series of testimonies of people from other Christian traditions who became Orthodox (Gillquist 2006). The language they use is expressive of the sentiment mentioned above, which is present in almost all “converts” to Orthodoxy. For these people, embracing Orthodoxy was not conversion, but really “coming home”.

The positive side of this approach is its strong affirmation of the creedal statement that there is only “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”, even if that is located exclusively in a particular confessional expression which, as such, becomes the only legitimate expression of the “body of Christ”. It is no surprise that such a perspective, of a dominant church, is viewed with suspicion by the various Protestant and evangelical groups involved in the ecumenical movement. One may detect in this perspective an unavoidable inherent triumphalism, that can never be a fertile ground for self-reflection and genuine Christian humility. We may even wonder if such an approach could be legitimately described as being ecumenical; its “all or nothing” absolutism could never be conducive to genuine and sustainable unity, unless those who accept it are willing to completely lose their identity and distinctiveness.

2.2. The Compromise Model

At the other end of the realistic spectrum, we find a different approach that we would call the “compromise model”, favoured primarily by liberal mainline Protestant churches. This is at the core of the ecumenical vision of the World Council of Churches (WCC). In principle, it invites churches to define the Christian essentials and to unite

around a common dogmatic core, while allowing for differences in adiaphora, in matters of theological opinion, and of contextual emphases (WCC 2012). It is essentially seeking for the reestablishment of the institutional unity of the Church, which was lost because of the various schisms and their subsequent effects. The practical means by which this process was developed consisted in a continuous series of meetings, at various levels, in which official representatives and leaders of various churches discussed and negotiated, seeking to obtain the envisioned compromise. In all this, ecumenism was reduced, more or less, to ecclesial politics, with all that politics entails, the "good, the bad and the ugly".

Positively, at the core of this approach is the realisation of the fact that, whether we like it or not, the world is changing continuously, and the Church is changing with it. The Church is not the same now as it was at the time of the Nestorian schism in 431, or of the Chalcedonian schism in 451; not even as it was at the time of the Great Schism in 1054, nor that of the schism created, even if inadvertently, by the Reformation, in 1517. The healing of the rifts created by these fractures could not be achieved by "going back" to the situations that occasioned them, because there was no "back" to go to. A sustainable solution could be found only by taking into consideration the state of the Church and of the world as it had become, and by looking forward.

Although the restoration of institutional ecclesial unity, as idealistic and even utopian as it may seem, is a welcome goal of ecumenism for Christians from most ecclesial traditions, maybe with the exception of (some) evangelicals, nevertheless it may involve major risks that some ecclesial traditions are not willing to accept. And rightly so. Any "compromise" that would affect the "apostolic foundation" or the dogmatic core on which the Church stands would give a fatal blow to its identity and will make it cease to be truly the "mystical body of Christ".

It is no surprise then, that this approach has led to the current ecumenical crisis.

3. New Approaches and Challenges to Ecumenism in the 21st Century

In the face of this impasse, a number of competent voices stress that ecumenism needs a different approach for the 21st century. In the past, attempts to find Christian unity have been linked to proposals to analyse confessional theological traditions and to find a way of dogmatic and institutional convergence between churches. The new approaches are much more focused on the ability of each Christian tradition to define more coherently its own identity and, at the same time, to be open to collaboration with and learning from other churches. This strategy is more likely to identify common ground for dialogue and greater unity than the one that starts with an analysis of differences. At the beginning of the 21st century, theologians from different traditions are trying to revisit the theme of ecumenism with new directions and possibly new solutions in order to bring the ecumenical movement out of crisis. In this section, we present examples of such attempts which are received with more confidence by theologians.

3.1. Catholic Initiatives

In recent decades, the Catholic Church was probably the most ecumenically active ecclesial community. Some of its actions were aimed at bringing Catholics and other denominations closer together, while others were attempts to contribute to theological reflection on the unity of all Christians. In the first category, we mention two dialogue initiatives between Catholics and Protestants. In 2013, Catholics and Lutherans developed the document titled "From Conflict to Communion". It highlights the need for Christian unity and the fact that the two churches have more in common than what separates them. This document was also a tool for preparing the common commemoration of 500 years from the Reformation. Another initiative was The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), which has reached its third stage of work since the beginning of 2011. The document "Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be the Church–Local, Regional, Universal", released in 2018, stipulates the openness of the two churches to learn

from each other, and emphasizes the shared heritage of the two traditions and the fact that each has something valuable to offer the other (ARCIC III 2018, pp. 22–50).

In the area of theological contributions to ecumenism, we highlight important Catholic models that have the potential to develop into new ecumenical approaches. A first model is that of "spiritual ecumenism", proposed at the Second Vatican Council in the document *Unitatis redintegratio*. This document emphasizes that ecumenism is a spiritual activity, based on the work of the Holy Spirit, the one who unites believers in the body of Christ. This approach to ecumenism is based on the idea that Christian unity cannot be achieved without placing the work of the Holy Spirit at the centre of its efforts (Vatican Council II 2014). Thus, spiritual ecumenism is a model that emphasizes the importance of the relationship of the individual believer and each local church to Jesus Christ first. It all starts with the process of their conversion and orientation towards God. The horizontal relationships, projects, and actions leading to a rapprochement between Christian communities can follow only after this first necessary movement. Walter Kaspers sees spiritual ecumenism as an approach that invites every believer to participate in the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. This model is of great importance because it considers the specifics of today's society, in which people have less faith in dogma and more openness to spirituality (Kasper 2004, pp. 156–57). For Pizzey, the main aspects of this model are "interior conversion, pneumatology, the emphasis on the virtuous and affective levels of ecumenical activity, and even implicitly, the ecumenical gift exchange" (Pizzey 2019, p. 145). This idea that ecumenism is a gift exchange process will be explored separately in the next section as a possible self-standing model that could contribute to the development of the ecumenical movement in the future. The importance of spiritual ecumenism for the Roman Catholic tradition is well emphasized by several authors. We mention here the opinion of Walter Kasper, who suggests that this model is the true soul of ecumenism, because it provides the spiritual grounds of the movement and inspires the approaches that will follow, as rooted in its pneumatological foundation (Kasper 2004).

The second model, that of "receptive ecumenism" (Murray 2010, pp. 5–25) focuses on a process of inward searching and conversion, in which each church seeks to become aware of what it is lacking and could be supplemented by the spiritual gifts of other church's traditions. This model is based on a willingness to learn from others, an openness to change through learning and through what we can receive from other churches. The process of learning through receptivity is a driving force that can stimulate ecumenical engagement. Receptive ecumenism has at its heart the following question: what can my own church tradition learn from others? The focus of this model is the attitude of receptive and transformational learning at the level of Christian communities, both for individual believers and for church bodies. Through the work of growth and development that each community open to learning from others is undertaking, a real way of mutual knowledge and communication between Christians can emerge. Receptivity to learning from others, and openness to change through what we can learn from other Christian traditions, is an engine that can stimulate greater ecumenical engagement (Murray 2010, p. 14).

The two models proposed by Roman Catholic theologians for overcoming the crisis in which the ecumenical movement finds itself presently are complementary. Spiritual ecumenism tries to stress the importance of the spiritual dimension of the dialogue between churches, implicitly of prayer and lay participation, beyond the actions and measures undertaken at hierarchical and institutional level. Receptive ecumenism continues from and builds on the previous model. Rediscovering the spirituality of ecumenism also involves self-critical learning in humility and ecclesial conversion as essential premises for a real closeness between churches.

3.2. Orthodox Reactions

In the face of this crisis, the Orthodox Churches reacted more slowly. For various reasons, during this period the most consistent voices discussing the topic of ecumenical engagement are those of Orthodox theologians living in the Diaspora, where Orthodoxy is

a minority. These thinkers, for the most part, are from the Russian, Greek, and Romanian communities living in the West. Among other Romanian theologians writing on Ecumenism and Diaspora (Turcescu 2002; Bordeianu 2011; Maican 2019; Porumb 2019; Coman 2020; Apintiliesei and Pogor 2022) we limit us in this text to contributions of two authors that reflect on the present and future dynamics of ecumenism. Răzvan Porumb and Radu Bordeianu are two important theologians who, through their work and the perspectives they bring as Orthodox, represent a breath of fresh air into the ecumenical dialogue. These authors emphasize the potential of Stăniloae's theology for the development of means and models for continuing the dialogue between churches. In their work, they note the importance of the ecclesiology of the Romanian theologian, one that is Trinitarian and ecumenical, and is based on the idea that the unity of the Church, as it is historically manifested at the level of local churches, is sustained by Christ. For ecumenical reflection, the "open sobornicity" model developed by the Romanian theologian (Stăniloae 1971) remains an important option for the 21st century.

In his work *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism*, Porumb considers that, from an Orthodox perspective, at least four approaches to ecumenism can be identified that could represent a better and more effective participation of the Orthodox in the ecumenical movement: a. journeying together—the ongoing engagement; b. unity as the core of Christian life and identity; c. ecumenism as a spiritual enterprise; and d. ecumenism as a koinonia of diversities (Porumb 2019, pp. 195–222). For the author, all of these possible paradigms are based on a Trinitarian vision of God as a communitarian being, and on an understanding of humans as beings moving towards a higher communion with God and with their fellow human beings. Dumitru Stăniloae has developed such a theological vision and it can be the foundation for a specific Orthodox approach to the ecumenical dialogue. Porumb considers that the concept of *human consubstantiality* developed by Stăniloae defines Christian life as a communion of believers with the persons of the Holy Trinity, and that this theological vision can contribute to ecumenism. Porumb explores the orientation of the churches' efforts to heal and overcome the divisions that currently exist among Christians, and those of finding means to actualize at the level of the churches the same kind of unity that already exists at the human level through the work of the Holy Trinity in the world (Porumb 2019, pp. 232–33). Although Porumb seems to indicate here a possible contribution to the ecumenical dialogue coming from the theology of Fr. Stăniloae, his arguments build on his ecclesiology rather than on his anthropology, which is our particular interest in this paper.

Radu Bordeianu, another Romanian Orthodox theologian living in the Diaspora, goes in the same direction, considering that the ecclesiology developed by Stăniloae could be an important contribution to the advancement of the ecumenical dialogue. The author argues that Stăniloae's ecclesiology is Trinitarian and ecumenical (Bordeianu 2011, p. 34). In this view, the divine unity of the persons of the Trinity is to be reflected in the unity of Christians at the level of local churches. These historical communities also actualise the fullness of the universal Church. As a result, the unity of the Church is guaranteed in Christ and is historically manifested at the level of local churches. For Bordeianu, this theological conception of Fr. Stăniloae provides an important theological and methodological framework for discussing sensitive issues at the ecumenical level and could stimulate progress towards convergence among Christian churches (Bordeianu 2011, p. 44).

4. The Gift Exchange Model and the Promise of Stăniloae's Anthropology for Reimagining Ecumenical Dialogue

4.1. The Gift Exchange Model

The "gift exchange" model, understood in terms of spiritual ecumenism rather than the institutional approach that dominated the last century, could be one of the most promising proposals for ecumenical dialogues within the 21st century. The concept originates from the Catholic documents *Lumen Gentium* (see *LG*, § 13) and *Ut Unum Sint,* which makes a distinction between ecumenism as an "exchange of ideas" and as an "exchange of gifts". This model asserts that different Christian churches have gifts to offer each other, but that

each gift ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit for the enrichment of Christ's Church. Starting from this perspective, Margaret O'Gara argues, in her text "Receiving Gifts in Ecumenical Dialogue", that in ecumenism, dialogue should be viewed not as a "melting pot", that obliterates differences between churches, but rather as a "mosaic", where each contribution is valued as an essential part of the whole, while at the same time they balance and correct each other where necessary (O'Gara 2010, p. 27).

In this framework, an exchange of gifts leads churches deeper into conversion to Christ and closer to each other, a goal made possible by the real communion that exists already within the Body of Christ. Yet, the acceptance of a gift presupposes a certain degree of ecclesial humility, even a process of inner conversion, the admission of a certain deficiency, of something lacking in one's ecclesial tradition which could be complemented by a corresponding strength manifested in another community.

The discussion above resonates well with Stăniloae's concept of "open sobornicity", which continues to receive attention in ecumenical theological research (Stăniloae 1971). Even if it emphasizes primarily, in a typical manner, what the Orthodox can offer to others, the model reflects to a certain extent the mindset behind the gift exchange model of ecumenism. In a similar way, we see a convergence between Stăniloae's preoccupation for synodality and Pope Francis' current two-year global Catholic consultation process in preparation for a conciliar reunion on synodality, an initiative having obvious ecumenical implications. The theological grounding of this process was set a few years earlier in the 2018 document of the International Theological Commission of the Vatican titled "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (CNA 2021).

In the present paper, we want to underline that the ecumenical potential of Stăniloae's theology cannot be limited to his ecclesiological reflections, but that in his theological reflections there are several anthropological ideas that could nourish new ecumenical interactions.

As Metropolitan Kallistos himself pointed out, perhaps the most important challenge for Orthodox theology in the 21st century comes from the field of anthropology (Ware 2012). Thus, the efforts of the Christian community to understand and respond to the problems of the applications of artificial intelligence, neuroscience, biotechnology, and genetics for humanity cannot have meaningful results without the energies of all the churches in both theological reflection and practical Christian life. In the face of analyses linked to the nature and meaning of human existence, ecumenical dialogue can no longer be an option, but becomes an absolute necessity. If, as some argue, the approach of theological reflection by some Orthodox thinkers in the neo-patristic movement has had a negative influence on their ecumenical engagement (Kalaitzidis 2014), this orientation towards the roots of theological thought can nevertheless be a source of theological renewal and ecumenical openness. In discussions on concepts related to the human person, most frequently the contribution of the Orthodox Church to contemporary theology and anthropology is related the various theological positions of the Greek theologians Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas. In the present paper, we argue that, until now, the contribution of Fr. Stăniloae to this conversation has been undervalued, mostly because the Romanian theologian participated very little in the international academic world, living his life in a communist country, and he produced his work in Romanian, with it being translated very late into English, most of it after 1989. We believe that some of the ideas he has formulated in this field can play a substantial role in the effort of developing consistent responses to the challenges of Christian theology in contemporary society, and also represent a source of inspiration and a launchpad for reimagining ecumenism. We present here synthetically two relevant aspects of Stăniloae's anthropology and the role they can play in the dialogue between churches, as a gift offered by the Orthodox Church to other Christian communities.

4.2. The Value of the Human Person—Human Consubstantiality

Stăniloae's anthropology is built on the concept of personhood. In his view, the most coherent definition of the image of God in the human being is rooted in the mode of existence of the divine being as a communion in love of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

Starting from the Cappadocian Fathers, the Romanian theologian considers that the patristic language distinguishing between the divine essence (*ousia*) and person (*hypostasis*), and it can also be applied to the human being. He argues that the image of the Holy Trinity, that is, the unity of persons sharing the same nature, is also reflected at the level of human beings (Stăniloae 1998, p. 250). For him, "the person is nothing other than the mode of real subsistence that belongs to a nature" (Stăniloae 1998, p. 256). It is also important to point out that for Stăniloae the fall did not break the ontological unity of human nature, but it rendered it incapable of actualization through the exercise of the gnomic will (Stăniloae 1998, p. 253). This anthropological vision of Stăniloae is rooted in the Christological anthropology of the Church Fathers, which was emphasized at the Council of Chalcedon, affirming that, through his incarnation, Jesus Christ is consubstantial with us and binds us all in communion with himself: "Human consubstantiality does not consist, therefore, only in the fact that one and the same nature is possessed by persons who are remote from one another. It consists also in a unique being which all the hypostases bear in solidarity with one another" (Stăniloae 1998, p. 254).

The implications of this anthropological vision are very meaningful in terms of responding to the challenges that today's society brings both for the Christian community and for the ecumenical dialogue. We underline here two aspects that are strongly linked. The first stresses the importance of human solidarity in general and Christian solidarity in particular. The idea of the consubstantiality of all people commits us to contribute responsibly to the present and future existence of the human race. The full actualisation in Christ of this reality of human solidarity invites Christians to the kenotic experience of self-emptying and loving others with the love of Jesus. Unity with God and the fulfilment of the meaning of human existence cannot be achieved "in isolation, but in the solidarity of each person with his neighbour" (Stăniloae 1998, p. 256). The second aspect is related to the importance of the value and dignity of the human person and the inviolability of human nature. Respect for the uniqueness and incommensurability of the person is the axiological and conceptual basis for addressing current issues related to bioethics, genetics, nanotechnology, etc. At the same time, at the ecclesial level, the value of the human person is the basis and invitation for all Christian communities to understand the diversity of the forms of expression of faith in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

4.3. A New Ascetic Life—Priests in Creation

Another central idea of Stăniloae's anthropology concerns his view of the place and role of human beings in creation. In line with the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor, the Romanian theologian considers that the world is the work of God and is meant to participate in the dialogue and interpersonal communion between the human and the divine person (Stăniloae 1998, p. 11). The solidarity between humanity and rest of the created order comes not only from their ontological bond as part of the same universe of creation, but also from the fact that there is a common dynamic of divinity for both humanity and the world (Stăniloae 2000, p. 1). The human person's role is to be a partner of God in the process of realising the communion of creation with the creator. But the world was created for humanity as a gift of God for the human person (Stăniloae 2000, p. 21). This gift is an invitation to dialogue, to know God from what has been created and then to act upon it, because human beings give the world back to the creator through their creative contribution. The idea of gift dialogue (Stăniloae 2000, p. 22), which involves both receiving the gift and returning it, is specific to the Romanian theologian's thinking about humanity's position in creation. The world is the place of encounter between the divine and the human person, the setting of authentic personal manifestation as self-giving to the other. Furthermore, Stăniloae considers that the role of human beings is to be priests over the entire cosmos (Stăniloae 2000, p. 81). Through this kind of priesthood, their task is to further develop solidarity among people and between human beings and the rest of creation through a new asceticism, a positive one, that involves work and sacrifice (Stăniloae 2000, p. 6). This asceticism is developed by Stăniloae from the theology of

creation *ex nihilo* and the fact that we are limited created beings. The assumption of these limits implies the common sharing of the world's resources, the development of a spirit of solidarity and human brotherhood that requires us to take care of the resources that God has given us. In this priestly office, humans have a double responsibility. The first is to use creation for self-development, for the knowledge of God, and the affirmation of one's capacities. The second is to take care of creation, with its finite resources, not to destroy it by over-consumption and pollution (Stăniloae 2000, p. 7). Even if the Romanian theologian does not give more precise indications on how this kind of asceticism can be realized to preserve natural resources for the future of humanity, it is clear that it involves joint efforts from all nations. And, Christian churches can play an essential role in this endeavour both by reinforcing this message and by working together to identify and propose commonly agreed ideas and practices to reduce destruction and waste.

This insight opens multiple opportunities of ecumenical engagement in terms of fruitful dialogue with various scientific disciplines, which could challenge and enrich theological reflection. This understanding of the role and place of humans in creation can play a very important role in the current context, marked by globalisation, economic crises, global warming, etc. It could be useful for the Church in the formulation of a coherent theological response to all these issues affecting the life of the faithful and of humanity in general. Such a response cannot be given in isolation but needs the convergence of all churches towards a coherent common position that expresses the Christian understanding of human's responsibilities towards creation. The new asceticism proposed by Stăniloae must first be practiced by the Christian community through a united effort of understanding and application, and then it can be proposed to the whole of society as a coherent way of managing the current and future challenges to our place on this planet. All of this requires Christians to work together and converge, to find solutions that will enable us to fulfil our call as priests of creation.

5. Conclusions

The key suggestion of this paper is that instead of church communities looking towards each other with the aim of reaching dogmatic agreement and institutional unity, a better and more effective way towards ecumenicity would be for them to work together, in the same direction, inspired by the "gift exchange" model, through theological reflection, common prayer, and practical service in response to the major challenges of a world in crisis.

Among these, anthropological challenges seem to be the most important ones at this time in history. And, since anthropology has replaced ecclesiology as the focus of theological reflection in this century, we suggest that performing anthropology together might not only help churches to enrich each other with their mutual spiritual gifts but would also help them to grow closer to each other.

We finally contend that in Stăniloae's holistic anthropology we have several important insights that might help revive ecumenical reflection and cooperation in this new century.

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Rebooting Ecumenism, the Theological Equivalent of the Climate Crisis: The Role of Urgency and Accountability on the Road to Ecclesial Interdependence

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Abstract: This article puts forward the argument for the acute and urgent need to move from ecclesial self-sufficiency to ecclesial interdependency in the ecumenical process. The difficulties in ecumenical cooperation mirror those in the climate crisis, as despite a global crisis of relevance for Christianity and for the ecumenical movement, individual Churches, much like individual states, fail to work together effectively as they negotiate their own internal challenges. Not dissimilar to the ecological climate breakdown, what we understand as the history-bound reality of the Church will not be safeguarded and will not be made relevant in today's globalised, pluralistic, interconnected, and dominantly secular, in many contexts, world, except by concerted action from all Churches.

Keywords: ecumenism; ecumenical movement; Receptive Ecumenism; synergy; Orthodox Church; Orthodoxy; ecclesiology; interdependence; accountability; urgency; discernment

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1. Rebooting Ecumenism—A Synergic Process

Ecumenism is a matter of ecclesiology, which means it is a matter of eschatology[1], which means it is also a matter of mystagogy[2]. Anyone who agrees with this, must acknowledge that there is a sacramental, divine, mystical reality at the core of ecumenism. Furthermore, in as much as the Church is a synergic reality, a divine–human joint endeavour, ecumenism is equally a synergic reality, a divine–human activity. Synergy implies proximity, close cooperation, harmony, and unity. In this sense, as a matter of eschatology, ecumenism is inevitably a question of proximity—to God and one another. To be 'one in Christ' (Gal. 3:28), to be 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17), is only possible where a radical synergic process of 'mediating the distance' has taken place. Ecumenism's drive to be a practice of minimising distance (at the level of theology, life, prayer) is not originally its own; rather, it is the human response—the Church's response—to God's continual impetus to minimise the distance between Him and us and between ourselves, in and through Jesus Christ.

In the hundred-plus years since the start of the modern ecumenical movement (Edinburg 1910), we have been very successful at de-sacralising and de-synergising ecumenical practice and professionalising it in an institutional bureaucratic way. The ecumenical synergy we perceive and work towards is less of the divine–human kind and more of the human-to-human kind, as we work towards reconciliation between members of various Churches and between Churches as institutions with synods and theological commissions. A simple, but I hope not simplistic, way of gauging the qualitative difference in this regard is to observe the disparity between the 'human ecumenical structures' and the 'human–divine ecumenical structures' that aim to facilitate ecumenical closeness—the former, in the shape of theological commissions, WCC departments, ecumenical agencies, etc., far outnumber the latter, for which the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity stands as an insufficient exponent.

Ecumenism is hamstrung by a failure to translate this synergic vision for unity, the sense of being invested spiritually in the process, and the accountability that comes

from this, from ecumenical institutions to living ecclesial contexts. This is the proverbial ‘bottleneck’ of ecumenism.

In this landscape, it feels natural—almost inevitable—to think about ‘rebooting’ ecumenism. But how do we reboot a process that is fundamentally synergic in a divine–human way, not merely in a ‘coming together of different human energies’ way? If ecumenism is a calling, a vocation, a divine eschatological imperative related to the “unity of all”—not just of Church members among themselves but simultaneously with the Triune God—and not primarily a ‘human project for Christian unity’, how can we contemplate a human-managed reboot? The key is identifying the process anew as a synergic process originating in God that calls humanity to a radical transformation of outlook. It is to realise, in the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemann that “*the real crisis is not on the level of ‘adjustments’ between the Church and the world* [NB. or, in the case of ecumenism, between Churches themselves] *but on that of the ultimate Christian vision of God, world and man*...” (Schmemann 2001, p. 59). In practice, this means to create structures and foster interactions rooted in this awareness.

To reboot ecumenism is to identify, own, and call out the flaws that *we* have introduced in the process. Doing so allows us to both see anew God’s original design for the Church, manifested on Pentecost, and be more receptive to God’s continual movement towards unity with all creation, in and through His Church, as co-labourers. This is part and parcel of the synergic character of ecumenism; so, it is a question not merely of theological awareness but of applied, practical theology rooted in that awareness.

On our part, at the centre of this radical action for unity, rests the theological realisation that cancelling or minimising the distance between us and God is inseparable from cancelling the distance between each other. This leads to an assumed eschatological pragmatism which asks, “what can *I* do to mediate the distance?”. The great prophetic and eschatological call of the ecumenical movement to all Churches is that *our own ecclesial distance from God* (experienced in unique ways in our own various Churches) *cannot be ever fully cancelled or mediated on our own, outside of ecumenical practice*.

In this context, this article puts forward the argument for the acute and urgent need to move from ecclesial self-sufficiency to ecclesial interdependency in the ecumenical process. It will do this in three parts:

- Firstly, it will briefly consider the state of the ecumenical journey so far, why it has led to the theological equivalent of the climate crisis, and what are some of the structural blockers that hamper progress.
- Secondly it will consider the ways in which the Orthodox could better negotiate urgency and accountability as they participate in the ecumenical dialogue.
- Thirdly, it will attempt to suggest possible components for a rebooted taxonomy of ecumenical engagement.

2. The Ecumenical Journey and Why It Has Led to the Theological Equivalent of the Climate Crisis

The pronouncement of climate advocates and scientists calling for the enacting of urgent and meaningful climate policies is as radical as it is simple: the planet will not be protected and it will not be ‘saved’ except by concerted and concrete common action from each and every one of the world’s countries. This is a warning we ought to appropriate theologically in the ecosystem of the Christian world.

The place in which we find ourselves is, granted, a place marked by immense progress in the ecumenical rapprochement since the early decades of the 20th century. Thus, one might query, not without basis, “*Why should we reboot ecumenism?*” After all, despite its shortcomings, the present ecumenical plateau is no fenland; rather, it is a summit—the summit of more than 70 years’ work of reconciliation and dialogue (if one were to use as reference the 1948 establishment of the WCC)—manifested in shared worship, mutual learning, and the *prosoponic* (face-to-face) rediscovery of one another across the family of Christian Churches. Yes, we are some way off the mark of expectation for unity that dominated the early days of the movement (recognition of sacramental validity, Eucharistic

sharing, integrated ecclesiological structures, etc.) but instead of looking at this as at a stalled process, should we, perhaps, approach this period at the start of the 21st century as a 'decanting stage', as the 'resting of the dough stage'? Things change slowly in the Church (granted, slower in some than in others), and what feels like a pause now, in wider historical perspective, may be merely the space between breaths?

It may well be that this is a decanting period. One ought not to depreciate what has been achieved—not by human effort alone, but by the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit. We cannot ignore achievements[3] like the international theological dialogue between Churches, agreed statements that have clarified and affirmed synoptic positions on key theological issues, the lifting of historic anathemas, joint action on climate and social justice issues, and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity—which, despite the opposition and condemnation it triggers in many majority-Orthodox contexts (Doru 2023), carries a poignant prophetic tension, representative of the entire ecumenical movement.

The issue remains, however, that, for as much as ecumenical progress is real and the fruit of human–divine synergy, it is also a tower with a very small base, which beyond a rotating cluster of theologians, clergy, and church activists (who communicate in a curated ecumenical lingo), does not really extend into the wider ecclesial community. This is an issue to which I will return later in this paper, but it is important to recall Yves Congar's dictum regarding reception as an ecclesiological reality fundamental to the ecumenical process. According to Congar, reception is

> "*. . .the process by means of which a church (body) truly takes over as its own a resolution that it did not originate in regard to its self, and acknowledges the measure it promulgates as a rule applicable to its own life. [. . .]*"
>
> "*it includes a degree of consent, and possibly of judgment, in which the life of a body is expressed which brings into play its own, original spiritual resources*" (Congar 2022, p. 32)

There is scarce observable evidence that ecumenical resolutions or bilateral agreements reached in theological commissions have been received and weaved in the life of individual Churches, even less so at grassroot level in parishes or dioceses.

The (partial) failure of ecumenism to deliver on the promise of unity adds to the wider sinfulness of our world—manifested as dividedness, greed, lust for power, and injustice. These elements shape the being of the world, our *zeitgeist*, even as the world seeks healing. As no one country can have an impact on the planet's damaged climate on its own, neither can individual Churches make a difference in and "for the life of the world" (John 6:15) on their own, without a synergic ecumenical effort. Without renewed ecumenical synergy, i.e., without common, coherent joint-up witness, Christ's redemptive sacrifice is 'parochialised' and 'denominationalised' instead of being affirmed in its universality.

The sobering reality is that, much like in the climate crisis, the many meetings and declarations issued over decades of ecumenical dialogue have done too little to lower the ecumenical temperature of our ecclesial milieu—we are as polluted as ever by the toxic emissions of ethnoreligiosity, jurisdictional imperialism, misconceptions and misreading, traditionalism and liberalism, or of doing theology in 'denominational bubbles' without concern for ecumenical consequences[4] as in the early days of the ecumenical movement—and this ecumenical climate crisis spills out into the wider fabric of our world.

Aspects of this challenge have been identified time and again at various meetings and in statements by ecumenical leaders.

In his 2005 presentation at the event marking the 40th anniversary of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, Cardinal Walter Kasper was contemplating both the progress made by the ecumenical movement and the need to revisit some of its failings, i.e., some of the things that may be part of a 'reboot'. Cardinal Kasper was acknowledging that after decades of

> "*intense ecumenical experience, we can look back with gratitude for the progress made in the journey towards full visible unity. But we need also to look critically at the present situation of the ecumenical movement. [. . .]*

At the beginning of the 21st century, the ecumenical movement needs a revitalised ecumenical vision, a renewed spirit and a new commitment by all partners." (Kasper 2005)

Cardinal Kasper's agenda for renewal, for a 'reboot' of the ecumenical movement, had five points: *clarity on its theological foundations*; *a shared, honest, and coherent vision and goal for what its unity ought to be* (where unity is not confounded with uniformity, and plurality is not equated with contradictory doctrinal pluralism or indifferentism); *renewal and conversion* of heart at both personal and institutional levels; *spiritual ecumenism rooted in prayer*, not mere ecumenical activism; and *practical ecumenism that has social and political impact* (because it focuses on the dignity of the human person and human rights, on the sanctity of life, family values, education, justice and peace, health care, the preservation of creation, and the advancement of interreligious dialogue) (Kasper 2005). Cardinal Kasper's five-point agenda for renewal highlights the areas where the ecumenical ecosystem is suffering. What is troubling is that these are not issues of periphery but core pillars of ecumenism that affect Christian witness on a global scale, and on which little progress has been made over so many decades.

In his 2005 keynote speech[5] at the Interchurch Center in New York, addressing the challenges facing ecumenism in the 21st century, the then General Secretary of the WCC, Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, spoke about the ways in which the Churches "*are called continually to re-examine our relationships, to ask if we may find ways of working together in more suitable patterns, more creative environments, more faithful ministries of service*". His entire speech conveyed a sense of tension between the ecumenical vision of greater fellowship and cooperation and the practical challenges of achieving them, which he perceived to be related to the "*imperative of learning to listen*", of not equating ecumenical institutions with the ecumenical movement—"*'the ecumenical movement' and 'the World Council of Churches' are not interchangeable terms*"—and to the need of "*reconfiguring the ecumenical movement*" so that it both better reflects a global rather than a Euro-centric reality and meets the challenge of providing substantive answers to those seeking profound spiritual answers in a globalised yet fragmented world. Dr Kobia's speech recognised the impending 'crisis of constituency' facing the ecumenical movement and the need to extend its base—as a response to the danger of institutionalising the ecumenical undertaking.

Resonating concerns are discernible in the November 2018 address of Dr. Agnes Abuom, Moderator of the World Council of Churches, to the Swedish Ecumenical Weekend, in Uppsala, Sweden,[6] entitled '*Prospects and Challenges for Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Movement*'. Dr. Aboum identified five challenges of contemporary ecumenism: *broader unity*; *moral discernment* of the important ethical questions facing the world today; *the reshaping of diakonia* so that it bridges the gap between religious communities and international organizations; *the generational challenge*, expressed in the need to give voice and a say to young people; and *the gender challenge*, articulated as the need to bring women closer to the centres of decision-making in the Church.

The issues raised by Kasper, Kobia, and Aboum represent overarching challenges to the ecumenical movement that are the fruits of local failures. They will not be solved by ecumenical institutions—whose role is (ought to be) to facilitate and resource not to sweep in with prepackaged solutions—but by being owned with urgency and accountability by Churches, communities, at a grassroot level. This transition of 'ownership' from ecumenical institutions to the hoi polloi, to living ecclesial contexts, has been and remains the bottleneck of ecumenism.

How could this be overcome? I believe that the place to start is by addressing the structural blockers of this transfer of ecumenical ownership at the level of local Churches already taking part in the process. These structural blockers are, in my opinion, the following: (a) the primacy of ecclesial self-sufficiency over ecclesial interdependence; (b) the naive *schadenfreude* perspective that 'the problems of other Churches are not our problems', especially in relation to societal relevance; (c) the misunderstanding of what 'spiritual ecumenism' is—in relation to Receptive Ecumenism. A lot of what follows is contextualised in relation to the Orthodox Church, not only because I am familiar with its background,

but also because its reluctance to authentically encourage and disseminate an ecumenical relational consciousness in its own context, while otherwise intensely active theologically in the ecumenical movement, invites consideration.

2.1. Ecclesial Self-Sufficiency and Ecclesial Interdependence

Ecclesial self-sufficiency is the great bane of ecumenism because it fundamentally goes against the need for relationship and the impetus for unity and reconciliation at the heart of the ecumenical movement. The compounded damage of ecclesial self-sufficiency is that it snuffs or deems irrelevant the motivation for urgency and accountability in the quest for unity.

In some churches, this self-sufficiency is coated in words like 'tradition' (Cavarnos 1992); in others, the term used may be 'scripture' (Vanhoozer 2021, especially pp. 225–26) or 'the gifts/baptism of the Spirit' (Black 2020, especially pp. 26–27), while in others, ecclesial self-sufficiency may be coated in the drive to 'stay relevant' vis-à-vis the shifting sands of society. Ecclesial self-sufficiency treats ecumenical engagement as a process that has to do with 'witness' rather than 'conversion'. This witness is predominantly seen unidirectionally as witness towards 'the others' (certainly so by the Orthodox)—and understands anything related to 'conversion' in dogmatic terms or statements that encapsulate or proclaim 'the truth', rather than as a wider process of ecclesial conversion of practices, of outlook—as the shedding of our ecclesial conditioning (which often has to do not with theology but with socio-cultural and historical habituations), which ultimately requires a process of internal conversion to what makes one's own tradition authentically itself.

To be sure, 'conversion' and 'witness' should not be understood as two binary choices, where conversion trumps witness. They are, of course, innately linked and part of the same unitary movement of ecclesial expression—like inhaling is connected to exhaling in breathing. One might indeed argue that conversion is the sine qua non of witness, as any witness that is not rooted in conversion (of the heart) is "only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1).

Ecclesial self-sufficiency is present when/where witness and (continual) conversion are seen as separate movements. This makes ecclesial self-sufficiency immune to the ecumenical paradox that ecumenical engagement, when occurring with faith, hope, and love, leads to a deepening of one's own faith identity, in their tradition. One becomes more Orthodox, more Catholic or Anglican, and so on.

In the words of Yves Congar:

> "*the discovery of another spiritual world does not uproot us from our own, but changes the way we look at many things. For myself, I remain a Catholic, a fact I do not hide from myself or from others, but ecumenism has freed me from a certain narrowness of outlook, characteristics of the Latin and of the Mediterranean man by bringing me into touch with Eastern Christians, Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons and with their respective traditions. I have kept my Latin anthropological make-up, but have looked critically upon its limitations.*" (Congar 1963, pp. 72–73)

Ecclesial self-sufficiency does not preclude ecumenical engagement, but it has at its core the apprehension (fear) of losing or diluting one's identity because of or through ecumenical engagement. I recognise this predominantly in my own Orthodox Church.

Because of this apprehension, ecclesial self-sufficiency stands as the polar opposite of ecclesial interdependency, which sees 'the other' as vital to one's one identity and to coming closer to Christ, to the revealed truth of Christian identity as unity in and with Christ. Resistance to ecclesial interdependency is predicated on the simplistic but powerful fear that it seeks the formation of a syncretic truth or identity. Rather, ecclesial interdependency puts at the core of Christian identity—both in its ecumenical expression and in its 'denominational' embodiment—the need for relationship, dialogue, and knowing each other. It perceives of these things not as secondary or as a residual effect of ecumenical interaction, but as essential to Christian ecclesial identity. Ecclesial interdependency joins

and sees compatibility between being firm in one's faith and, at the same time, open to 'the other', as part of the Church's natural response to Christ's prayer for unity.

The preponderance of ecclesial self-sufficiency as the default modus vivendi of many of the Churches involved in ecumenical dialogues is a major contributor to the 'theological climate crisis' facing Christianity in today's world. By 'theological climate crisis' I mean the observable dismantling of our established/shared ecosystems of belief and practice, which struggle to cope with decades and centuries of erosion of the unified Christian message and witness in the world—certainly in the Western world.

For example, a Pew Research Centre study of 2015 projects that by 2050, Christianity will involve the same percentage of the world population as in 2010 (31.4%)[7], which despite growth, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and East-Asia[8], means a real-terms stagnation or decline. It is worth pondering that the growth of Christianity in the Global South is attributed to Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches, which are the least engaged in the ecumenical movement. Despite the fragmentation associated with Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, one element that stands out is their unique approach and affirmation of ecclesial interdependency—manifested in the form of international Church networks that create and project (the message and reality of) a connected ecclesial world-wide ecosystem—something glaringly missing from the way the other Christian Churches tackle the ecclesial ecumenical agenda.

The theological expression of our 'theological climate crisis' fuelled by ecclesial self-sufficiency is twofold. On the one hand, it manifests as a form of '*ecclesial idolatry*' in relation to God, rooted in ecclesial self-sufficiency, and, on the other hand, as '*kerygmatic irrelevance*' in relation to society, to the world.

Ecclesial self-sufficiency is a form of ecclesial idolatry overwhelmingly responsible for the 'ecumenical theological climate crisis' of our time because—regardless of the particular manifestation it may take in various Churches—the same dynamic is at play, i.e., Christ and the Gospel are eclipsed by the institution of the Church and by all the ecclesial theological paraphernalia that transform faith identity into the religious identity of external observances and '*isms*'.

In the context of the Orthodox Church, this danger (reality?) was pointed to by Fr. Alexander Schmemann in his Journals (Schmemann 2000). Wonderfully introduced by Fr. John Jillions, in his article "Thicket of Idols": Alexander Schmemann's Critique of Orthodoxy" (Jillions 2019), Schmemann decries the way in which the Orthodox Church

> "*is perpetually looking backward to a mythic past rather than forward to the coming of Christ and his Kingdom, thus robbing Orthodoxy of its original eschatological vision. Instead of living the tension between history and eschatology ... Orthodoxy has settled comfortably for "hopelessly Constantinian" Byzantine and Slavic worlds that substituted spirituality for Christ (208).*" (Jillions 2019, p. 22)

Schmemann's diagnosis is stark and, regrettably, has not become outdated in the more than four decades since it was put across:

> "*What happened was the reduction of the Church to a mysterious piety, the dying of its eschatological essence and mission, and finally the de-Christianization of this world and its secularization.*" (Ibid., p. 22)

When the Church becomes sufficient to itself, familiar and comfortable with what clearly and particularly designates its expression in the world, it rejects whatever is perceived as potentially disruptive to the socio-institutional and historical construct of its identity. God, Christ himself, becomes a historic figure, whose commandment to trade and exchange one's talents to multiply them until He returns is deemed too risky to the entire establishment, to the degree that self-sufficiency becomes the norm—even more, it becomes a virtue—as it completely does away with the risk of losing anything by external engagement. What this achieves, though, is to introduce a distance between the Church and its Lord, between the Body and the Head. The Church listens to its own self-taught defensive impulse, piously protecting a mythic past and a socio-constructed identity,

rather than listening to Christ's call to live out the eschatological tension between history and eschatology.

Ecumenism is part of that tension; it requires reaching out, it requires challenging one's deep-seated assumptions (about oneself and about 'the other'). Moreover, it puts into even sharper relief how ecclesial self-sufficiency becomes ecclesial idolatry. When ecumenism is either dismissed off-hand (as heresy or betrayal) or engaged in as performative action instead of an exercise in learning, openness (vulnerability), and humility, then it generates an inner-looking dynamic excluding 'the other' and, by extension, the Christ present in that 'other'.

I still see this, more often than one would have expected by now, in how my own Orthodox Church negotiates its ecumenical commitment. The idol of self-sufficiency deforms Christ's prayer for the unity of those who believe in Him into a parochial, denominational exercise and relegates it from a universal, vital, dialogical and eschatological vison for unity in the image and likeness of the Trinity (*"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you"*) to an optional, one-sided exercise in theological haggling.

2.2. 'The Problems of Other Churches Are Not Our Problems' Adage—The Crisis of 'Kerygmatic Irrelevance'

Outside of the confines of the Church, in society, ecclesial self-sufficiency leads to 'kerygmatic irrelevance'[9]. What do I mean by 'kerygmatic irrelevance'? I mean to say that the proclamation of the 'Good News' is no longer a cohesive herald's call that has to do with an *existential encounter* with God in the Lord Jesus Christ at the level of both structures and persons, but rather a cacophony of voices carrying a denominational message—a tradition-specific message—to which today's secular and disenchanted society (of Europe and, increasingly, of the U.S.A.) or the non-Christian contexts of the Middle and Far East react with indifference or cynicism.

It is well documented in scholarship that the landscape of Christian belief and practice in both Europe and the U.S.A. has been changing from the 1960s, in a diminishing trend. Even in Eastern Europe[10] and Russia,[11] the Orthodox Church is facing disenfranchisement[12], with the number of active or practicing believers in single or low double-digit territory despite high percentages of nominal affiliation. In part, this has to do with internal aspects specific to each Church, but the wider ecumenical dissonance today has a compounding effect.

Failure to move away from an ecclesial self-sufficiency outlook results in a failure to witness coherently, which in turn translates as the decline or erosion of religious belief, identity, and practice in society. We see this both within specific Christian traditions and in global Christianity, and I will exemplify this briefly with two pertinent examples.

The 2021 U.K. census indicated, in a stark but unsurprising first, that less than half of the population of England and Wales considered themselves Christian[13]. Another telling example, also based on census data, comes from a historically and predominantly Orthodox country, Romania, where the Orthodox Church faced, for the first time ever, a decline in the percentage of affiliation within the span of a decade (from 16,307,004 at the 2011 census = 86.45% to 14,025,064 at the 2021 census = 85.541%)[14]. It represents only 0.9 of a percentage point, but in population terms, it marks a significant decline of almost 2.3 million people. The trend is not dissimilar across Europe, although there are local variations. Corroborated with data from the U.S.[15]—where there is statistical evidence to support the claim for loss of affiliation and church attendance for both Protestants and Catholics—matched by a rise in the number of the religiously non-affiliated ('nones'), it paints a picture of an overall diminishing landscape for Christianity.

The reasons for the decline are complex, varied, and often very contextual (and go beyond the scope of this paper), but the pattern for religious disaffiliation from Christianity seems to include a combination of pluralism, social emancipation, and mobility—prompted by migration, higher levels of education, and the mixing of religion and politics on the one hand[16] and a failure of transmission of the faith to the younger generations on the other

hand. This failure of faith transmission can be framed theologically both as a 'hermeneutical crisis' (where the Church is unable to palliate the gap between a dynamic society and an 'immobile' faith identity, usually linked with ethnicity or 'traditional values') and as a 'failure to witness' because of fragmentation and polarisation, often caused by narrow-minded attitudes to significant issues of faith in society, from the role of women to worship language, to ecumenical engagement.

This has ecclesial self-sufficiency writ large. It does not just amount to a failure to witness authentically within the ecosystem of one's own tradition but is connected to the wider failure to witness ecumenically in society. It is, in effect, a combination of both, since part of the societal hermeneutical crisis experienced by many Christian Churches today cannot be disjointed from the global ecumenical hermeneutic crisis.

Ecumenism is not a panacea for the crisis of relevance and witness that confronts traditional forms of Christianity today, but it provides a context in which Christian Churches can look at solutions together and learn from each other—mistakes and successes both. Not dissimilar to the ecological climate breakdown, what we understand as the history-bound reality of the Church will not be safeguarded and will not be made relevant in today's globalised, pluralistic, interconnected, and dominantly secular, in many contexts, world, except by concerted action from all Churches. It is not only concentrated action against poverty, sickness, humanitarian relief, and the like (because Churches are not just "religious relief NGOs"), but also concerted action at the level of theological, sacramental, and eschatological vision and practice that is required. To be clear, I am not referring here to a crisis of diminishing numbers (although this is part of the issue) but to a crisis of relevance in the world, which I perceive to be fundamentally related to a failure to engage ecumenically.

Not to act ecumenically with renewed urgency is to drive ourselves to irrelevance and extinction, despite God's beautiful design. The difficulties in ecumenical cooperation mirror those in the climate crisis, as individual Churches, much like individual states, have to negotiate their own internal challenges, the needs and tensions of their own 'households', over and against those of the wider *oikumene*. What hope is there for the Church to fulfil its calling to convert (i.e., redeem) the world, to be the vehicle of new life in the world, when it cannot convert, when it cannot redeem its own internal reality? If Christians cannot find the language, the action, the process to speak and exist towards each other in a way that leads to unity, how will they find it in relation to a secular, pluralistic, globalised world?

Ecclesial self-sufficiency postulates that 'the problems of other Churches are not our problems'. Ecumenism affirms that we cannot insulate ourselves ecclesiologically from the global Christian ecosystem. In this context, failure to shift from ecclesial self-sufficiency and subscribe with urgency and accountability to the imperative for ecclesial interdependence in ecumenism is to bury one's talent (out of a misplaced fear of losing 'the gift' or of punishment) and is theologically counter-eschatological. In a more practical sense, it introduces in the theological ecosystem of the world-wide Christian Church radical damages that go beyond local or regional ecclesial ecology and rather mirror the planetary damage done to the natural world by the disunity, abuse, and power dynamics manifested in the secular world.[17]

2.3. The Misunderstanding of 'Spiritual Ecumenism'—Receptive Ecumenism as a Path towards Ecclesial Interdependence

Frustrations over the state of ecumenical progress and the lack interdependency could be expressed in the way that a short yet punchy article in *The Tablet*, on 23 January 2020, does. It led with the provocative title 'Ecumenism is stalled and needs a kick-start'[18]. The article was squarely pointing the finger for this stagnation at the current tamed familiarity between the various ecumenical actors, a familiarity which mediates and screens any impulse that may rock the proverbial ecclesial boat and which has transformed ecumenical engagement in a very proficient exercise in maintaining the status quo. The authors decried the safe negotiation of the ecumenical plateau where Churches have been for several decades

and were apt to offer an example of how difficult questions, which would require actual 'movement' towards one another, are avoided. Considering the case of Catholic–Anglican relations, it highlighted that "*neither side has ever asked the other the obvious question: what would be your terms for full sacramental sharing of ministries, so we can start acting out the unity we say we desire so much?*"

Familiarity and a reluctance to not inflict damage to the hard-won improvements in ecumenical relations can indeed fuel ecclesial self-sufficiency—we dare not revisit the new-found boundaries of our ecclesial identities, lest we "spoil the peace". It can also have the opposite effect—approaches such as the one distilled in the question above, which champion approaching ecclesial interdependence in this direct, almost transactional way. Such proposals can harm more than they help, as they seem to ignore the layers of complexity inherent in the process of growing into ecclesial interdependence.

One such theologically sensitive approach to breaking the ecumenical dialogue deadlock is Paul Murray's Receptive Ecumenism (Murray 2008; Murray et al. 2022), especially because one of its main lines of approach focuses on ecclesial interdependence and mutual learning (or ecclesial interdependence *as* mutual learning), in a spirit of humility and openness toward the other. Receptive Ecumenism postulates that

> "*considerable further progress is indeed possible, but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, makes a clear, programmatic shift from prioritizing the question "What do our various others first need to learn from us?" to asking instead, "What is that we need to learn and can learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?*" (Murray 2014)

Receptive Ecumenism is a very compelling approach, deeply spiritual, and one that provides a more human (as opposed to institutional), humble, and grassroot-oriented avenue for the ecumenical journey—which it frames in terms of mutual learning and exchange of gifts. This receptive, learning approach is a blueprint for letting go of ecclesial self-sufficiency and, in my view, can go a long way toward addressing some of the damages arising from ecclesial self-sufficiency. By taking a spiritual, learning approach, Receptive Ecumenism seeks to reconnect and rebalance the theological aspects of ecumenism with the practical hurdles that get in the way of observable progress.

Receptive Ecumenism is not a silver bullet (none of its creditors claim this), and my concern for its effectiveness lies not in any of its tenets, but in the fact that to succeed, it must break new ground where the original modern ecumenical paradigm failed: it has to engage 'the many', not just those already on the inside of the ecumenical endeavour, and it must not tolerate to be perceived as a 'facelift' to what is 'the same old structure' underneath, but claim itself as the start of a renewed ecumenical paradigm. One way of doing this is to, gradually and considerately, move Receptive Ecumenism from its current confines of being primarily an academic exercise in creating a taxonomy of receptiveness, as it were, into the nitty-gritty of grassroots-applied receptivity. It has to be embraced by bishops and by deans of theological seminaries and tried out in student exchanges and in communities—initially, in urban parishes, because of their more plural and diverse constituencies. It then must use the 'shop floor' feedback to evaluate, readjust, and refine the approach.

Ecclesial interdependence cannot take shape unless we reframe ecclesial identity as witnessing to a journey. This 'journey witness attitude' is beneficial both to the ecumenical encounter itself and to the internal perception of each Church. This is not to minimise centuries of historic and theological development that shape the identity of the various Churches. Rather, it is to enact a radical shift in how historic and theological development is used, that is, not as fortified positions from which we sally forth in our ecumenical encounters, only to return and fortify them even more, but as living identity constructs that exist in a wider, interconnected ecclesial ecosystem.

Ecumenism realised in the major key of the 'clash of theological civilisations' misses out on a humble but key realisation—that our theological civilisations, despite the monolithic assurance they project, are kept together by small and fragile threads, by details that have to do with 'being on a journey'. Learning to identify the details of what makes the other

one's identity is one of the core dynamics of ecclesial interdependence—these fragile details range from considering how individuals we meet have been shaped in their personal faith character, to how things that sit just outside of a theological rationale (one may call them para-theological issues) shape that very rationale, e.g., nationalism, imperialism, totalitarianism, democracy, ethnoreligiosity, persecution, etc.

Ecclesial interdependency reshapes and reboots the terms of the ecumenical encounter by inviting us to pay attention to the details, to the fragility that is inevitably a part of the monolithic theological identity of the one we encounter as an 'other'. So, to borrow from the spirit of Paul Murray's question "What is that *we* need to learn and can learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?", I see the practice of ecclesial interdependence being framed in the attention called upon by the question "*What are the 'para-theological details' that hold the identity of the other together, as they engage with or reject me?*"

How does one move from ecclesial self-sufficiency to a place of ecclesial interdependence? Receptive ecumenism calls out for accountability and urgency.

3. Urgency and Accountability as the Place to Start

In the ecumenical movement, *urgency* and *accountability* may appear peripheral when considered against issues like *mission, justice and peace, diakonia, fellowship, or visible unity*. However, without a sense of *urgency* about the state of ecumenical progress, the perception (if not the reality) that ecumenism and the ecumenical consciousness that it generated has stalled will only continue to gain ground.

What must this sense of urgency be about? It must be about the reappropriation of the core of the Christian kerygma—i.e., the reconciliation and the restoration of unity between God and Man and between people themselves by the radical salvific action of Jesus Christ and the unabridged response of humanity to Christ's action, as embodied in the Church. It must be about the realisation that no one Church or Christian tradition will make a difference in the world on its own—in isolation or in spite of the others. It must be about realising that the only way forward toward that radical transformation of the world is through ecumenical effort, even as it is an imperfect effort. It must be about the realisation that it will remain an imperfect effort while it is not committed to with a sense of urgency and humble openness towards one another. And, finally, it must be about the realisation that any half-measure commitment to Christ's prayer for mutual love and oneness is not just a half-measure commitment to a flawed, perfectible human effort, but indeed is a half-measure response to Christ's last commandment to his disciples.

Correspondingly, the key to this much needed urgency rests with a renewed sense of *accountability*. This accountability must be three-pronged as follows: by all Churches *towards the ecumenical process itself*, by Churches *towards each other*, and by Churches *towards their own home context*.

We have become accustomed to spelling out these issues in subdued theological language like '*ecumenical commitment to shared witness*' for 'urgency' and '*ecumenical fellowship*' for 'accountability', rather than using words that aim to inject a sense of exigency to our ecumenical reality. For example, what difference would it make, in practice, to move from '*ecumenical commitment to shared witness*' to '*ecumenical implementation of shared witness*'? I believe the difference has to do with accountability and may result in agendas for joint work that could range from local networks for ecumenical cooperation on social issues to awareness workshops about the actual theological and spiritual progress in ecumenical dialogue, especially on key sacramental issues. These networks could initially be informal—but with episcopal blessing—and could include local clergy and interested lay Christians from neighbouring communities. It is extraordinary that even in the West, where Orthodox communities live alongside or even share worship spaces with Western Christians, and there is a greater sense of mutual dependency, this kind of initiative is virtually non-existent.

Being satisfied with the lingua franca of the soft ecumenical language of 'commitment' and 'fellowship' without practical tethers is to ringfence the issues of accountability and

urgency behind ‘theological newspeak’. Ecumenical accountability starts with language. The non-specificity prevalent in ecumenical language lacks the urgency that commits to concrete action and creates an ecosystem geared around a ’perpetual engagement with terms’. Its second problem is that it paints over internal Church-specific issues which pit ecumenical commitment and dialogue against intra-denominational unity—this is structurally related to accountability. In that sense, *urgency* and *accountability* are the proverbial elephant in the ecumenical household, because of their intrinsic practical component.

Accountability in ecumenical engagement is crucial to the entire ecumenical endeavour because of the practical demands it places on what ‘being ecumenical’ means. Yes, we may agree on this and that issue, we may receive inspiring insights from one another, and this may lead to some degree of change in the nuances of our dialogue and theological formulations, but it is how we are accountable in practice that makes a difference. It is the incarnational aspect of accountability that changes the ecumenical reality.

The Orthodox Church and Ecumenical Accountability

The Orthodox Church is an excellent case study for examining the difficulty of embracing accountability as an ecumenical virtue—and indeed as an Orthodox virtue in ecumenical practice.

The Orthodox Church has a problem with ecumenical accountability because the dynamic of unity in the Orthodox Church is informed by looking inwardly for the source of accountability. It is flanked on one side by tradition (a particularly defensive and passive understanding of it) and on the other side by a perception of Orthodoxy as averse to pluralism (because of its propensity for schism). This generates a kernel of self-sufficiency in the ecumenical orientation of Orthodoxy, which places it at the antipode of receptive accountability. This manifests both within—as reflected by the state of the worldwide Orthodox Church today, where the most extreme and deformed expression of ecclesial self-sufficiency and partisan accountability is enacted in the Moscow Patriarchate–Ecumenical Patriarchate schism—and outwardly in the overall practical ecumenical engagement of the Orthodox.

The Georgian Orthodox theologian Tamara Grdzelidze diagnoses convincingly the failure of the Orthodox with respect to practical ecumenical learning by observing that while they learned a lot through the encounter, their learning is not really reflected in the doctrine and practice of the Orthodox Church (Grdzelidze 2022, p. 27). Grdzelidze’s assessment is not uniquely applicable to the Orthodox and represents a valid diagnostic for many, if not all, Churches to varying degrees.

But why do the Orthodox, in particular, fall short on this issue? I think it is partly because accountability requires walking from the centre of one’s own tradition to the boundaries of it, to a space where we can discern, as it were, “the space between boundaries”. This is a vantage point where we can see as much into our own space as we can in the space beyond our borders. Only from here can we genuinely listen and be interested in what happens within the boundaries of ‘the other’. In that sense, the role of accountability in ecumenism can be perceived as both a meeting place and a facilitating energy. But most Orthodox are reluctant to find themselves in that border space.

The other reason for the underdeveloped accountability and applied ecumenical receptiveness present in Orthodoxy is, simply put, that there is no motivation for it, in practice, in the Orthodox majority socio-religious contexts of Romania, Russia, Serbia, etc. Every time I re-visit my native Romania, I am reminded that the Orthodox there tend to live in a monolithic Orthodox structure that is not motivated to think receptively. To make a comparison, I have always felt that in these majority-Orthodox contexts, the ecumenical approach of the Orthodox is no different than that of a Saville Row tailor: it is open to visitors/customers who admire and are attracted by the legacy, the exquisite materials, the craftsmanship, and the selective club message. But, like a Saville Row tailor, the Orthodox are hardly motivated to open a stand in a marketplace. They might ponder in their fine

shop a kind of theoretic, academic type of receptive openness to what happens 'down the street' but will not feel compelled to venture outside.

This is related to the issue of ecclesial self-sufficiency and is compounded, as Grdzelidze argues in the same article, by the two-pronged difficulty that "*Orthodox participation in ecumenical dialogues is marked by an inner struggle between pre-modern and modern thinking*" (Ibid., p. 28) on the one hand, and that the perceived "oneness" of Orthodoxy is missing the practical institutional mechanisms for consensus decision-making and for speaking authoritatively as one body, on the other—like in the case of the Catholic Church. Grdzelidze asks the rhetorical question "*How is the relation between many (bodies) and one (Body) reflected in the Orthodox teaching today?*" (Ibid., p. 29).

What this means, in practice, is that there is no commonly held sense of accountability in the Orthodox Church as a whole—either for internal issues or for ecumenical matters. Yes, some individual Orthodox Churches may be more ecumenically receptive or accountable, but this does not absolutely commit other Orthodox Churches to the same response. What we are left with in Orthodoxy is a fragmented, parochial accountability that hinders progress.

This is detrimental to both the ecumenical movement in general and the Orthodox themselves, since as Fr. Ioan Sauca argues (Sauca 2004), even for the Orthodox, ecumenism is a vocation, a response to the Trinitarian gift of unity, made visible and accessible in Christ. In Sauca's words, "*The search for unity is for Orthodoxy an ontological vocation*" (Ibid., p. 219). But this ontological search for unity is sterile without ecumenical accountability and the development of a receptive ecumenical conscience, based on ecclesial co-dependency.

One way the Orthodox could better incorporate the virtue of accountability in ecumenical engagement is to perceive *accountability* as *discernment*. Understood as discernment, accountability opens itself to a spiritual/ascetic perspective conducive to the spiritual and practical transformation of relationships both for individuals and for communities. The virtue of discernment takes one on a journey from fear (of the unknown or the different) to love, because it circumscribes accountability towards oneself and the other to Christological accountability—the Christ in the other. For the Orthodox, recognising 'the Christ in the other' could be translated in terms of a journey to 'illumination' or 'deification'. This is a spiritual journey that cannot be separated from practical life-sharing. In this, it is also a prophetic preparation of the eschatological revelation of Christ (which in Matthew 25 is affirmed as Christ in the other).

Accountability is, therefore, the conduit between the mystical dimension of the Lord's injunction that we ought to love one another so that we may be one, as He is with the Father, on the one hand, and the human dimension of what it means to be in meaningful, enriching, listening, metanoic relationships, on the other. Accountability, in its ecumenical dimension, is an eschatological virtue, because it heralds in the here and now the relational reality of the Kingdom, where we are all one in God.

4. Components for a Rebooted Taxonomy of Ecumenical Engagement

Rebooting ecumenism is a process that has to happen simultaneously both in the existing global ecumenical structures and in the Churches themselves. Accountability and a sense of urgency for moving from ecclesial self-sufficiency to ecclesial interdependency should be the catalysts of this process, because without them, the crisis of 'kerygmatic irrelevance' in today's world will not be resolved.

4.1. Components for a Rebooted Taxonomy of Ecumenical Engagement at the Level of Ecumenical Structures

A rebooted ecumenical taxonomy should reframe the ecumenical process in the context of the 21st century, i.e., a post-colonial, globalised, more connected and plural world than in the 20th century, yet also more divided along partisan lines and polarising narratives. Ecumenism is realised today in a world where people and communities are routinely conditioned into choosing simple answers to complex problems. Ecumenism must avoid

the trap of simplification and stereotyping and be a force for critical yet nuanced exchanges rooted in Christian love and aim to foster learning rather than reinforcing prejudice.

To achieve this, ecumenism must showcase better and build upon the real progress in ecumenical rapprochement that has been taking place in the last 30 years, especially in Europe. This tends to happen mainly between Christians belonging to Western Churches, where ecumenical partnerships and groups, as well as shared ministry and inter-Communion, are commonplace. This has not been replicated in relation with the Orthodox, despite a significant increase in the Orthodox presence in Western Europe in the last 30 years, the possibilities of which have been greatly under-used ecumenically.

Fuelled by the enlargement of the E.U. to the East and, since, and even before that, by migration in the 1990s from majority-Orthodox countries, Orthodox Churches are now de facto local partners of western Churches, not just remote communities, with more than 1 million Orthodox in the U.K.,[19] 1.5 million in Germany, and more than 1.5 million in Italy (Hämmerli 2023, p. 42), to give only a few examples.

This has led to the appearance of an idiosyncratic 'Orthodox meadow' in the West, where communities, parishes, and Orthodox jurisdictions are being cross-pollinated by their very closeness, the inevitable ecumenical reaching out, and the currents of secularisation, cultural pluralism, de-institutionalisation, and weak links with secular state structures, which define Western European societies. However, as time passes, this wild Orthodox post-communist diaspora meadow in the West will move to become a walled or landscaped garden, as communities experience the inevitable process of sedimentation that the forces of habitus, tradition, and institutional consciousness eventually bring about. Therefore, a rebooted taxonomy of ecumenical engagement—certainly in Europe—ought to prioritise engagement with the Orthodox in the West.

A rebooted ecumenical taxonomy should adopt a local, zonal approach to the effort. Relations between Churches are different in Europe compared to Africa, South America, or the U.S.A.—one (ecumenical) size does not fit all. Relations are different even within the same zone; for example, in Europe, the ecumenical attitude and engagement of the Orthodox (even if it can be improved) is different in the West—more positive, more open, more nuanced—compared to the East (where ecumenical scepticism or downright anti-ecumenical attitudes that still appeal to labels of heresy or proselytism are commonplace) (Kalaitzidis 2013). Ecumenism cannot be rebooted in a global way except via a local approach, because at the core of ecumenism sits the struggle for Christian identity—and Christian identity, for all its universal, catholic, vocation is, in practice, shaped locally. This also means looking at grassroot models, or attempts, of ecumenical cohabitation.

Finally, one of the priorities of ecumenical engagement at the level of ecumenical structures in the 21st century ought to be the *creation of structures of accountability* that link up ecumenical processes with individual Church-specific realities. Without these structures, ecumenical receptivity will not flourish.

By the creation of structures of accountability, I do not mean the establishment of a new level of ecumenical bureaucracy. These structures need to be more organic in disposition and structure. To use a more body-oriented analogy, these structures of accountability must address the fact that 'the ecumenical breathing' of the Church is in some sense artificially maintained. Deeply embedded in the need to reboot ecumenism is the realisation that the ecumenical condition or 'health' of the Church is sustained only by a team of specialists, using specialist resources and speaking in jargon, and that the rest of the Body has not learned how to sustain it organically, on its own, or at least in a way less dependent on 'specialist supervision'.

It is a great challenge to the ecumenical movement that, instead of becoming a central part of ecclesial identity, the ecumenical practice of seeking unity is treated as a kind of extracurricular activity in the internal functioning and decision-making of member Churches. It has not been incorporated as an 'internal' practice and is not treated as essential to the proper functioning of Churches. The minority of specialists who are

involved ecumenically do not seem to be able (or invested) to convey its importance to the rest of the members,[20] who often look at these experts with suspicion or bewilderment.

This thin ecumenical consciousness, this high ecumenical tower with too small a base, is in my opinion one of the major reasons for the stagnation of ecumenical progress outside of the established familiar circles where it already takes place. The disconnect between 'the professionals' and 'the λαός' is a major factor of the lukewarm present condition of ecumenism. This gulf runs the risk of turning sterile even the existing progress in ecumenism, because the ecumenical family tree cannot self-pollinate ad infinitum—it needs to be replanted from its current walled garden into the meadow of the Church. For this, new structures of accountability are needed, both theological—like Receptive Ecumenism—and practical-institutional, with local, Church-specific character and awareness. One way of doing that, especially in the West, especially for the Orthodox, is to make more use of resources available through national ecumenical organisations—like Churches Together in England,[21] for example—and move from a largely nominal membership and participation to one that has impact in local ecumenical partnerships or collaborations. This, however, cannot be achieved without episcopal encouragement—something that should be addressed in relevant meetings.

4.2. Components for an Orthodox Rebooted Taxonomy of Ecumenical Engagement

The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, the most frequently served Liturgy in the Orthodox Church, is bookended by petitions for unity, tucked in longer litanies at the beginning and towards the end of the service. One of the petitions in the Great Litany at the opening of the service includes the words "For the peace of the whole world, for the welfare of the holy Churches of God and *for the unity of all*, let us pray to the Lord", and towards the end of the service, just before the reciting of the Lord's Prayer, we pray "*Having asked for the unity of the faith and the communion of the Holy Spirit*, let us commend ourselves, and each other, to Christ our God."

We need to hear these words as an ecumenical imperative, not just as a call internally addressed to the Orthodox. Therefore, an Orthodox rebooted taxonomy of ecumenical engagement has to have a sacramental, prayerful dimension—raising the questions "What would an Orthodox spiritual ecumenism look like, in practice?" and "What would it contribute to the existing outline of spiritual ecumenism?"

Part of that 'Orthodox spiritual ecumenism' could be shaped by looking back at the Patristic tradition and reappropriating voices from among the Church Fathers—like St. Basil the Great[22] or St. Gregory the Theologian—who, while firm in their faith and dogmatic positions, demonstrated a mature ecumenical consciousness and had a more irenic and sensitive approach to overcoming differences and repairing situations marred by disunity (where this was possible).

In his Oration 22, St. Gregory the Theologian treats disunity and a resistance to reconciliation as an alignment with the work of the Antichrist and a failure of love, arguing that "*he will not attack the strong or those who have closed ranks in love. No. First, the kingdom must be divided against itself.*" (Gregory of Nazianzus 2003, p. 122)

St. Gregory posits questions that cut too close for comfort, when one considers they were asked more than 1600 years ago, yet capture the state of the Christian world today:

> "*Why in the world, then, do we, the disciples of love, hate one another so? Why do we, the disciples of peace, engage in wars which do not admit of treaty or truce? Why are we, the disciples of the chief corner stone, detached from one another? Why do we, the disciples of the rock, wobble this way and that? Why are we, the disciples of light, blind?*" (Ibid., Oration 22.4, p. 120)

He also pencils out a structure of theological ecumenical accountability in restoring unity:

> "*Will we not put an end to this wrangling? Will we not determine what issues admit investigation and to what degree, and which exceed our capacity? [. . .] Will we not decide*

> *among ourselves which issues we should not look into at all, which should receive our attention, but with restrictions, and which we should concede and relinquish, whatever form they take, to those who like to argue, on the grounds that they are matters that do not adversely affect our doctrine in any way? Which, too, are the exclusive province of faith, and which are receptive to our powers of thought as well? Which again are also worth fighting for, not with weapons, but with reason ardently applied?*" (Ibid., Oration 22.11, p. 125)

St. Gregory seems at pains not to lose the middle ground of engagement between differing factions, not to allow them to lose sight of what they hold in common, which should be more than enough—if approached in the spirit of peace and reconciliation—to help them overcome, in conversation, their differences. St. Gregory projects a realistic hope that disagreement can be overcome, because of the faith content that is held in common, when he says

> "*we shall reach agreement on all the other points as well; after all, we worship the same Trinity, subscribe to virtually the same beliefs, and belong to the same body; and the futile and barren offshoots and excrescences of the issues currently under discussion we shall cut away like a public cancer and destroy.*" (Ibid., Oration 22.12, p. 126)

and because he believes that striving for unity and reconciliation, even in an imperfect human way, is a form of imitatio Dei, entering into God's eternal work of restauration:

> "*For it is God who first and foremost will decide and settle these issues, he who establishes a bond between all things; and second, those of mankind who work for the good and recognize the blessings of concord. These blessings originate with the Holy Trinity, whose unity of nature and internal peace are its most salient characteristic, . . . [which] extend to the whole of creation, whose glory is its absence of conflict.*" (Ibid., Oration 22.14, p. 128)

The Orthodox possess the sacramental, patristic, and practical resources to contribute to the rebooting of the ecumenical movement. Appropriating ecumenical accountability as a virtue and as part of the process of deification in the Orthodox context will help placate the self-sufficiency and monolithic thinking characteristic of religious structures and socio-religious milieus where Orthodoxy exists as a majority Church.

In that sense, the Orthodox experience of the diaspora, given the inevitability of proximal, practical cohabitational ecumenism in the West, is a major opportunity for meaningful inroads towards a practically functional and theologically appropriate receptive ecumenical orientation for the Orthodox Church, rooted in accountability and a renewed sense of ecclesial interdependence. There is, in this context, an opportunity for the kenotic application of ecclesial identity in relationship with 'the other' that is essential for the future of the whole Church of Christ.

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Notes

1. Ecumenism as a matter of ecclesiology and eschatology is understood here in the sense of the Church fundamentally existing as 'life in Christ', as the locus of ultimate truth, as the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, which is the unity of all in and through Christ, with the Father and the Holy Sprit. The link between ecclesiology and eschatology was expounded by Fr. Alexander Schmemann in his article (Schmemann 1967) and also in his article (Schmemann 1977).
2. Mystagogy, Gr. μυσταγωγία (*hidden meaning, interpretation of mystery, leading through the mysteries*) is associated with the process of entering or participating in a sacrament, originally that of Baptism, and by extension, into the sacramental, mystical reality of the Church as the Body of Christ. Not to engage with ecumenism (in the sense of the process for and practice of the unity of the Body of Christ) as a matter of mystagogy is to misinterpret the process altogether and to rob it of its proper, scriptural, mystical, and synergic character, i.e., to negate that the process involves, by its very nature and origin (John 17: 20–21), something that transcends one's ability to grasp it rationally or as part of a binary cause-and-effect dynamic.

[3] https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/achievements (accessed on 18 January 2024).

[4] Consider the latest examples, one from the Orthodox and one from the Protestant ends of the ecumenical spectrum: the *Russkii mir* teaching of the Moscow Patriarchate (see Coman 2023) or the controversial decision (criticised by both opponents and proponents of same-sex marriage) by the Church of England to approve the blessing in church of same-sex couples, https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/prayers-gods-blessing-same-sex-couples-take-step-forward-after-synod-debate (accessed on 6 March 2024).

[5] *Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Movement in the 21st Century*, (available at https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/challenges-facing-the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century) (accessed on 6 March 2024).

[6] https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/prospects-and-challenges-for-ecumenism-and-the-ecumenical-movement (accessed on 6 March 2024).

[7] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/ (accessed on 5 January 2024).

[8] https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2021-03/is-christianity-shrinking-or-shifting (accessed on 5 January 2024).

[9] Kerygma, Gr. *κήρυγμα* (*to preach, to proclaim*).

[10] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/08/orthodox-christians-are-highly-religious-in-ethiopia-much-less-so-in-former-soviet-union/pf_11-08-17_orthodoxy-02-00/ (accessed on 20 October 2023).

[11] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/29/russians-are-not-waiting-for-a-church-boom-a65792 (accessed on 11 November 2023).

[12] For a relevant empirical study on the disenfranchisement rates of Orthodox Christians in the U.S.A., see (Krindatch 2020) and (Malkhasyan 2020) (I am grateful to Fr. Abraham for making his manuscript available to me).

[13] (46%, 13.3% lower in a decade, from 59.3% at the 2011 census), https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ethnic-group-national-identity-language-and-religion-census-2021-in-england-and-wales (accessed on 20 December 2023).

[14] https://eurel.info/spip.php?rubrique470&lang=en (accessed on 23 November 2023).

[15] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/ (accessed on 5 January 2024).

[16] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/#Disaffiliation-among-older-adults (accessed on 4 January 2024).

[17] NB. This is not to ignore the role that Churches themsleves have had (still have) in damaging the natural world, either because of a history of colonialism (in the West) or because of disunity, abuse, and power dynamics—as for the war in Ukraine, as the latest example, where the environmental damage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (blessed by the Moscow Patriarchate) has been significant and long-lasting. See a paper by the E.U. Parliament on this issue: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751427/EPRS_ATA(2023)751427_EN.pdf (accessed on 7 March 2024).

[18] https://www.thetablet.co.uk/editors-desk/1/17430/ecumenism-is-stalled-and-needs-a-kick-start (accessed on 29 July 2023).

[19] As of 31 March 2023, Romanian nationals' applications for the E.U. Settlement Scheme in the U.K. were 1,479,460 million. (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/eu-settlement-scheme-quarterly-statistics-march-2023/eu-settlement-scheme-quarterly-statistics-march-2023). Considering that the same ratio applies to Romanian migrants in the U.K. (85.3% of Romanians identified as Orthodox at the 2021 census), that would imply that there are at least 1,261,979 million Romanian Orthodox in the U.K.

[20] For a more extensive treatment of the issue of 'ecumenical consciousness' and why it has not developed on a wider scale, see (Oxley 2010, especially ch. 6, pp. 161–71).

[21] https://cte.org.uk/working-together/local/unity-at-a-local-level/, accessed on 2 February 2024.

[22] For example, St. Basil's Canon. 1., from his Epistle 188, where he pastorally but not confoundingly navigates the way in which schismatics can be joined to his Church, for the sake of unity.

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Article

Imaginative Ecumenism—Rethinking the Paradigm from an Anglican Perspective

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Abstract: This article reviews the history of the ecumenical movement from an English Anglican perspective, exploring its successes and limitations. It suggests that ecumenical aspirations risk being bogged down in incremental ecumenism, the pursuit of small steps in inter-church relations. A worked example is the Porvoo agreement, which depended on a new paradigm of the Anglican understanding of order, yet which has not been applied equivalently elsewhere. The necessity of unity is reasserted, and a call for a more imaginative, eschatological paradigm of unity is made. Some implications for Anglican ecumenism are briefly explored.

Keywords: Anglicanism; order; ecumenism; Church of England; faith and order; conciliarity; primacy

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1. Introduction: An Ecumenical Winter?

Has the modern ecumenical movement been a failure? By the standard of the post-war and post-Vatican II aspirations of its greatest advocates, it seems hard to deny it. Writing under the heading "Unity in our time" and reflecting on the impact of Vatican II, the American Methodist Bishop, Fred Pierce Corson (1896–1985), suggested that the Council had "launched a movement towards Christian unity that nothing can stop" (Corson 1965, p. 173). Corson's view was actually more nuanced than his essay title might suggest, but in 1965, it was easy to think that the new Catholic approach to ecumenism, and, above all, the Council's decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), was indeed a decisive turning point, raising a real possibility of Catholic and Protestant convergence on ecumenical strategy and theological agreement (Abbott 1966). The excitement of the moment was echoed across the ecumenical movement. Two years earlier, at the Montreal Conference of the Faith and Order Commission, the Conference's chair, Oliver Tomkins, had enthused that the time was like "an almost unbearable apocalyptic—'a door opening in heaven' revealing the potentialities of the Una Sancta on earth' (Hastings 2001, p. 123). The Conference's own statement, "A Word to the Churches", spoke of an ecumenical reality taking shape "faster than we can understand or express it" (Rodger and Vischer 1964, p. 39). The dramatic about-turn in the Catholic Church's attitude to the ecumenical movement unleashed pent-up hopes that seemed to be realised in ever more dramatic steps towards full visible unity—the beginning of major bilateral dialogues, including the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, the growing richness of local ecumenical relationships, the inclusion of Catholic voices in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the creation of new united churches, such as the United Reformed Church (URC) in Britain.

Yet, already, by the early 1970s, limits to what was achievable were beginning to appear. In 1972 the Anglican (i.e., Church of England)–Methodist unity proposals in Britain faltered for the second time. That was the same year in which the URC was formed, a union whose main protagonists strongly believed that their new church was "an intermediate entity with a desire to cease existence in the event [strongly anticipated at the time] of further unity in England" (Butler 1996, p. 152). There is a long list of ecumenical initiatives that appear to have stalled since then. In Britain, apart from the accession

of the Churches of Christ to the URC in 1981, there have been no more organic church unions since 1972. Covenanting proposals involving most of the mainstream Protestant denominations in England failed in the 1980s. Despite the renewed discussions inaugurated by the Anglican–Methodist Covenant of 2003, once again Anglican–Methodist unity seems, in 2023, elusive. Proposals for convergence and unity between churches in Scotland failed in 2006. Many local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs), formed enthusiastically in the 1980s and 1990s, have run out of steam, terminally in some cases. Churches recently, including the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, have depleted their ecumenical staff resources. Talk of an "ecumenical winter" has been common for a long time (Tjørhom 2008, pp. 841–59). Perhaps, fearful of ever more precipitous decline, many of the traditional churches in Britain have tried to refocus their energies away from what can seem the "luxury" of the pursuit of organic unity, towards internal reorganisation and projects aimed at fostering growth. Also, dramatic developments in inter-church relations themselves can provoke counter-impulses. As the Swedish historian and ecumenist Bengt Sundkler noted, as churches come nearer to one another in union movements (he was writing of the Church of South India), "they discover their supposed fundamental principles and assert them. This in turn. . .works against union, and a tension is created"; the same observation could be applied to ecumenical dialogue (Sundkler 1965, p. 295).

Despite these apparent setbacks, the achievements of the ecumenical movement on a long perspective are remarkable. Three main clusters are noticeable. One is the transformation in local ecumenical relationships over the last half century or more (and here I am referring specifically to England). Churches Together in England maintains a register of formally agreed local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs), where two or more denominations covenant to share resources, and to worship and minister together wherever possible. In 2022, there were 868 in England (Churches Together in England n.d.). It also listed some 43 as having lapsed, though this is almost certainly an underestimate. But although the total is small in comparison with the number of churches maintained by all the denominations, it does not include formal and informal church-sharing arrangements, and the many instances of repeated local cooperation, such as joint Good Friday walks of witness, shared worship, pulpit sharing, and many joint practical and pastoral projects, such as food banks. Putting all this together, it is clear that the local ecumenical scene is no longer one of mutual rivalry and sectarian suspicion, as it was into the early twentieth century. Despite some LEPs running into the sand as the "founding generation" died, or people moved on, there are signs of resilience here too. Recent research by the URC has concluded that churches in LEPs are more resistant to decline than other churches (United Reformed Church 2023).

Perhaps the most salient feature of the modern ecumenical movement in the last half-century has been the theological dialogues. Here, it is too easy to be sceptical of progress. In fact, a remarkable level of agreement has been achieved, both in bilateral and multilateral relationships. Just taking my own tradition, Anglicanism, the conclusions of global dialogue have been little short of breathtaking. The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, in three phases to date, has reached wide-ranging agreement on key elements of formerly disputed doctrinal and ecclesiological topics, including ministry, eucharist, authority, the Virgin Mary, morals, and salvation (ARCIC I 1981; ARCIC II 1986, 1991, 1993, 1999, 2005; ARCIC III 2017). Disagreements remain, but the groundwork for moving closer in prayer, worship, and life has been laid down. The Anglican–Orthodox dialogue, perhaps more episodic, has yielded important statements on doctrine (including a remarkable concession by Anglican participants that the *filioque* clause should be omitted from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed—a point that has yet to be adopted formally in the Church of England), ecclesiology, anthropology, and ecology (Anglican-Orthodox International Commission 1976, 1984, 2006, 2015, 2020). The Oriental Orthodox–Anglican Dialogue has concluded two far-reaching, agreed statements on Christology and pneumatology, challenging centuries of mutual misunderstanding (Anglican-Oriental Orthodox Commission 2014, 2017). The Anglican–Lutheran dialogue has led to relationships of full communion

between Anglicans and Lutherans in North America through agreements concluded in 2001, and in Europe between Anglicans of Britain and Ireland and the Lutheran churches of Scandinavia and the Baltic state through the Porvoo agreement of 1992, and also closer relations, though not yet full communion, with the Lutheran churches of Germany through the Meissen agreement of 1988. The Anglican–Lutheran conversations have been especially important in relation to changing Anglican understandings of ministry and ecclesiology, to which I will return. Anglican-Reformed and Anglican–Baptist dialogue have produced weighty, far-reaching statements (International Anglican-Reformed Dialogue 1984, 2020; Anglican Communion-Baptist World Alliance 2005). Above all, in Britain the Anglican–Methodist dialogue, though as yet to achieve full interchangeability of ministry, has built on a covenant process to reflect the almost complete absence of substantive theological disagreement between the two traditions. But this is only to survey the dialogues as they impact on Anglicans, and then especially on the Church of England. Once other bilateral and regional dialogues, and the multilateral work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC are taken into account, the extensive and now deeply rooted theological study, communication, and agreement across separated traditions is even more evident. Even bilateral conversations where convergence may seem, prima facie, altogether unlikely, such as the Catholic–Pentecostal dialogue, have involved serious theological engagement and yielded an impressive overlap of language, concepts, and terms (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity 2015). All this is necessary groundwork—to repeat the term—for any further progress towards full visible unity.

A further aspect of the theological dialogues, because it has been facilitated by theological convergence, is the formation of various united or "uniting" churches over the last eight years. Many of these are combinations of non-episcopal Protestant denominations, such as the Uniting Church of Australia, formed in 1977 from Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches. But their most salient form is perhaps the churches of South India (1947) and North India (1970), which combined those denominations with Anglicans in new, ecumenical episcopal polities.

Also dismissed all too easily are the various formal instruments of the ecumenical movement, from the World Council of Churches itself, formed at Amsterdam in 1948, through to national bodies, such as Churches Together in England, and down to local councils of churches. The creation of the WCC was long seen as marking the "arrival" of the ecumenical movement as the ultimate conciliar expression, outside Catholicism, of the aspiration for unity. It was, for example, the natural endpoint for Stephen Neill and Ruth Rouse's pioneering history of the ecumenical movement (Rouse and Neill 1954). Early assemblies of the WCC, and of its constituent commissions, such as Faith and Order, have proved fixed reference points for the self-understanding and strategic direction of the ecumenical movement—the "Lund principle" of 1952 to "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately", for example, or the New Delhi statement of 1961 on unity as "God's will and. . .gift. . .for one fully committed fellowship" (Tomkins 1953, p. 16; WCC 1961, p. 116). Yet, by the 1970s and 1980s, the WCC, alive to post-colonial sensitivities as it expanded its membership, was mired in allegations of covert support for left-wing regimes and terrorism (Norman 1979). Somehow, it has never quite recovered its early momentum. And the energy behind the formation of national and regional councils has also often faded, at least in parts of the West. Nevertheless, again it is possible to overstate the stasis and bureaucracy of many of these bodies. Compared with inter-church relations half a century ago, the situation today in many parts of the world has changed dramatically.

So, where has the perception of stasis, "winter", even decline, come from? Unquestionably for churches in the West—and this is true even of the United States—continuing decline in membership and attendance has sapped energy, and drawn attention away from ecumenism towards institutional reform and renewed efforts at evangelism (Gallup Report n.d.). Staff posts in ecumenism have been cut in many churches. The dramatic growth of charismatic and Pentecostal churches in much of the global south has, at least for a

time, sidelined longer-established patterns of inter-church relationship, though this may be less true in places where Pentecostal churches have begun to participate fully in national and regional ecumenical movements, such as Britain. It is perhaps also true that the most dramatic achievements of the ecumenical movement represent more of a "tidying up" of relationships between traditions, which already shared many common roots, than a fundamental paradigm shift in inter-church relations. From here on in, in other words, things get more difficult—the intractability of deeply-embedded cultural and social differences more evident, fundamental disagreements in theology more pervasive, the interplay of ecclesial power and ideology more complex. Of no Christian tradition is this perhaps truer than the Anglican tradition, since its internal divisions, especially in recent years over sexual ethics, often seem to transcend even the divisions between Anglicans and others.

This article aims to explore the current state of play in the ecumenical movement from the perspective of an Anglican participant, and a Church of England-based one at that, to review what appears to be the current impasse in ecumenical initiatives in which Anglicans are involved, and to chart a way forward. It will look, first, at what I am calling "incremental ecumenism" (which includes the methodology of ecumenical dialogue), putting that, second, in the context of the rationale for Christian unity, and then proceed to outline what I am here calling "imaginative ecumenism".

2. Incremental Ecumenism

It is often said that personal relationships constitute a crucial dimension of ecumenical activity. But relationships wax and wane, depending on the individuals concerned, and are difficult to assess as a starting point for a survey of ecumenical realities. In preference, I turn to the method of ecumenical dialogue, not to challenge its value, but rather to indicate the limitations that flow from placing too much reliance on its progress and too little on a longer, strategic view of Christian unity. I am leaving to one side the multilateral conversations of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, which resulted in the "convergence" texts, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*BEM*, 1982), and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), for the moment. The Anglican Communion (*qua* a Communion) has been engaged for over fifty years in an extremely wide range of bilateral dialogues, and their achievements, as noted above, are considerable. But any bilateral dialogue, attempting to mediate one Christian tradition to another, has to negotiate two complex sets of relationships—internally, how one language and symbolic system can be "heard" and understood by another, and externally, how whatever is the product of this first mediation is then received and understood by other Christian traditions outside the dialogue. Anglicans traditionally have tried to balance these things by "all round" ecumenism—that is, by insisting that progress in any one dialogue in which they are involved should not of necessity pose a further obstacle for other relationships. Push ahead on all fronts, in other words. Without calling this into question as a basic standpoint, given the breadth of theological opinion in Anglicanism and the resulting Catholic/Protestant polarity, its necessary implications are worth spelling out. In particular, moves that would look bold, even radically prophetic, in any one direction are ruled out on the grounds that they would obstruct or even reverse progress in another.

But this has shrunk expectations of what can be achieved by bilateral conversations down to relatively minor points of adjustment. Even without the ensuing paralysis that afflicts elements of our ecumenical relations, this caution has sometimes involved linguistic and theological acrobatics. As the Catholic philosopher of religion, Denys Turner, has observed, "too much official ecumenical activity between our two Churches [i.e., Anglican and Roman Catholic] has looked like piecemeal negotiation, is too fragmentary, too preoccupied with the identification of agreed, neutralizing, forms of words. . .which are still too fearful of the divisive power and vibrancy of each other's dialects" (Turner 2002, p. 70). But it has also reduced ecumenical progress to small, undramatic steps, which—necessary as they may be (and they are)—all too easily produce a foreshortening of ambition and vision. This is an *incremental ecumenism*, with sustained or elongated processes of mutual

discussion between committees of experts by which relationships are edged closer step by step, sometimes without the fundamental shift of ambition, which Jesus's prayer for unity really demands of us.

There is a logical method behind these incremental processes. Concentration on what divides two traditions helps to identify an agenda for constructive reconsideration. After all, the inverse problem of the goal of Christian unity is accounting for Christian division. This requires careful historical study of the confessional development of the two traditions, attending to the emergence of distinct ecclesial cultures. Mutual study of what is really meant by the language, concepts, and institutional forms of the two traditions can lead in turn to negotiation over how these differences can be reconstrued so as to permit some sort of statement of agreement, and even, ultimately a timetable for convergence. Perhaps the best example one can give from the ecumenical activity of the Church of England (indeed all the Anglican churches of the British Isles) concerns relations with the Nordic and Baltic churches, and as this is such an illuminating and significant example of a changing paradigm of church order, it will be examined in some detail.

The Nordic and Baltic churches are, like the Church of England, all descended from medieval Christendom, but had retained elements of continuity with their pre-Reformation origins. In some, such as Estonia, the episcopate had been lost altogether, with superintendents appointed in their place (Podmore 1993). In most, the jurisdictional pattern of dioceses had been retained, but political conflict and changing territorial allegiances over the centuries had complicated church governance. In Sweden, not only had the basic territorial pattern of church government remained in place, but so had the episcopal hierarchy, and the succession of bishops through the laying on of hands at consecration. The Church of Sweden, in its practice and understanding of church order, looked remarkably like the Church of England (even though, until well into the nineteenth century, the Swedish perception was that the Church of England was really a Reformed church in its theological essentials) (Wordsworth 1911). For this reason, growing mutual understanding between Anglicans and Swedish Lutherans in the late nineteenth century led to the appointment of a special commission by Archbishop Randall Davidson in 1908, which concluded that "Here we have an opportunity for. . .communion with a Church which is the most like our own in history and organization of any in Europe" (Archbishop of Canterbury 1911). Yet, for various reasons, despite the encouragement of successive Lambeth Conferences, no formal agreement of communion was instituted with the Church of Sweden as a result of this recognition.

Part of the difficulty perhaps lay in the realisation that any formal agreement with the Swedes could raise more complicated questions in relation to other national Lutheran churches in the Nordic region. Here, almost certainly nineteenth-century developments in Anglican ecclesiology somewhat impeded progress. Although the Church of England had preserved the tactile sign of apostolic succession at the Reformation, through the laying-on of hands by the ordaining bishop in ordinations of bishops, priests and deacons, little theological significance had been attached to this by the English Reformers themselves (Sykes 1956). Not even Hooker had made much of it: for him any specific form of church government was "a thing accessory" (Sykes 1956, pp. 20–23). Even High Churchmen in the eighteenth century did not generally emphasize apostolic succession (Nockles 1994, pp. 146–83). It was the Oxford Movement which "supercharged" the doctrine, Newman stressing in *Tract I, Thoughts on the Ministerial Commission* (1833) that "the real ground on which our authority is built [is] our APOSTOLICAL DESCENT", for Jesus had given his Spirit to the Apostles, and "they in turn laid their hands on those who should succeed them; and these again on others; and so the sacred gift has been handed down to our present Bishops, who have appointed us as their assistants" (Newman 1833). The Tractarian view was not universally accepted even by High Churchmen in the nineteenth century, but the renewed emphasis on apostolic succession shifted the centre of gravity of Anglican ecclesiology, paving the way for the summary on points Anglicans consider necessary to secure unity contained in the "Quadrilateral" approved at the Lambeth Conference in 1888—

the Holy Scriptures as the "Revealed Word of God", the Nicene Creed, the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and the "*Historic Episcopate*, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples" (Davidson 1896, p. 334, emphasis added). Since then, the Anglican understanding of order in ecumenical dialogue has particularly highlighted the need for agreement on the nature and exercise of episcopacy, and this has frequently been interpreted as insisting on the tactile, historic succession as an essential element of any agreement (Chapman 2000, pp. 474–503; Chapman 2022, pp. 29–46). This has been, for example, the issue tripping up successive Anglican–Methodist reunion schemes in Britain: how should Methodist ministers, non-episcopally ordained, be regarded in any future scheme of mutual recognition? But it also raised questions against ideas of Anglican–Lutheran convergence, especially where the Lutheran churches concerned had either lost the episcopate altogether or, whilst retaining the office of bishop, had lost the historic succession.

But a real shift in perspectives emerged in the post-war period, particularly through the formalisation of Anglican–Lutheran dialogue, and the multilateral conversations of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, which issued in *BEM*. Anglican ecumenical commentary in the 1960s was replete with the idea of what the 1968 Lambeth Conference called a "wider episcopal fellowship" (Lambeth Conference 1968, p. 147). The Lutheran–Anglican (here communion-wide) "Pullach" report of 1972 acknowledged Anglicans' sensitivities on the apostolic succession, but asserted that they need not "make it the sole touchstone of ecumenical fellowship with churches holding a different set of priorities" (Oppegaard and Cameron 2004, p. 43). By the time of the "Niagara" report of 1987, it was possible for Lutherans and Anglicans together to go much further and urge Anglicans to make the canonical changes, which would enable them to acknowledge and recognize "the full authenticity of the existing ministries of the Lutheran Churches" (Oppegaard and Cameron 2004, p. 110). This has not ever been accepted in full in the Church of England in the sense intended in the report, though it did also depend on Lutheran churches making changes in their practices of ordination, which have not universally happened. But the significant change in approach is best illustrated by the section on "Ministry" in *BEM*, which had, five years earlier, recognised that the "*primary* manifestation of apostolic succession is to be found in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole" and that the succession "is an expression of the permanence and, therefore, of the continuity of Christ's own mission in which the Church participates" (WCC 1982, para. 35). This paved the way for the *Porvoo Common Statement* (*PCS*, 1992), which established full communion not only between the Anglican churches of the British Isles and the Church of Sweden, but also most of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches, which, through mutual participation in ordinations, committed themselves to re-receiving the "sign" of the historic succession. Something easily forgotten in all of this was that Anglicans had here accepted a significant shift away from the Tractarian "supercharged" succession, back towards a more nuanced and richer idea of succession, in which the faithfulness of the whole Church over time, together with other elements of continuity, such as that of see (i.e., where there had been continuity in diocesan governance), provided a broader context within which the specific form of successive laying-on of hands should be received. This was a paradigm shift in Anglican ecclesiology, however modest the change might seem on a long view.

This development has been worth exploring in some depth, because whilst it helps to highlight how dialogue can make a real difference to inter-church relationships, and therefore can be acknowledged as one of the great achievements of incremental ecumenism, from an Anglican perspective, at the same time it also highlights some of its limitations. Here, specific problems between churches in the nature of episcopacy and the place of apostolic succession (subsequently re-badged as *historic* succession, to avoid the exclusive connotations of the other term) were identified, explored, and transcended in a mutually agreed formula for convergence. But not commonly noticed were the untidy elements in the resulting set of church relations. The *PCS* did not force identical theological interpretations of episcopacy on signatory churches (Eckerdal 2017). The status of Nordic and Baltic

clergy not ordained by bishops who had received the sign of historic succession was not treated as in any way inferior; indeed, there was no mass "re-ordination" of them. Ordination of deacons by cathedral clergy, never other than exceptional, was not formally abolished in some churches, including Denmark and Norway, until some time after 1992. The diaconate in some churches was not practised as a preparatory or transitional form of ministry, as it commonly was in the Church of England, though steps have been taken in the Church of Sweden towards that end. The sign of the succession was restored over some years, and has become universal in the participating churches, through the mutual participation of Anglican and Lutheran bishops in each other's consecrations, a practice, which continues to this day. Yet, this new paradigm in the Anglican understanding of order took over thirty years to emerge, and has not yet translated into significant advances for Anglican ecumenical relations elsewhere than the "Porvoo region", though it has been echoed (arguably in a more radical way) in relations between Anglicans and Lutherans in North America. Agreements with other Lutheran churches on the continent of Europe, including the Meissen agreement of 1988 with the German Lutheran churches, and the Reuilly agreement of 2001 with the French Lutheran and Reformed churches, have not produced a relationship of full communion and interchangeability of ministry, since the partner churches concerned have not implemented a model of episcopacy and historic succession consonant with that of the Anglican churches. But the British Methodist–Anglican proposals, *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*, which provided for full mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministry, and which *did* involve the creation of an order of episcopate within the British Methodist Church, and the extension of the historic succession to Methodist ministry, have also to date failed gain traction, in part at least because the status (from an Anglican view) of non-episcopally ordained Methodist ministers remained unresolved, despite the fact that this very same issue did not stymy the Porvoo agreement.

Something is amiss here, then. What I have called a paradigm shift in the Anglican understanding of order has not been reflected across the breadth of the Church of England's ecumenical engagement, where further progress towards mutual recognition continues to be bogged down by apparently recalcitrant elements of an older understanding of order. This is not to downplay what has already been achieved, nor is it to minimise the seriousness of the remaining obstacles in, say, Anglican–Methodist relations. But it is to point out that there is a certain foreshortening of vision in play here. The resulting relationships of communion created by the Porvoo agreement, and commonly called the "Porvoo communion", were always intended to be set in the wider context of the goal of full visible unity, and to be a stage on the way to further convergence. But little more has occurred towards that end since 1992. Full communion and interchangeability of ministry have not led to a process of ecclesial convergence. What is the justification for continuing separation, for parallel and overlapping jurisdictions, when there are *no* substantive, remaining differences of faith and order? Why are Anglican chaplaincies in parts of Europe not united with Nordic/Baltic congregations? These same questions can be put with equal force to the Anglican churches' relationship with the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, with which, under the Bonn agreement of 1932, a relationship of full communion (communio in sacris) was concluded long ago (Moss 1964). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the achievable goal of interchangeability of ministry here has been mistaken for a kind of ecumenical completion. The incremental nature of the ecumenical advances achieved by Anglicans in the last half-century has ground ecumenical ambition down into small advances, painfully made, with a bleeding away of wider ecumenical ambition and vision. The excitement generated by successive agreements and covenants with Old Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Methodists, to say nothing of the remarkable theological explorations of Anglican dialogue with Catholics and Orthodox, has fallen back into a preoccupation with the maintenance of what should not ever be more than temporary, proximate structures of dialogue and relationship.

3. Why Does Unity Matter?

Faced with this loss of ambition, it is important to return briefly to the question at the heart of the ecumenical movement—why does the visible unity of the Church matter? The New Delhi statement spoke of the growing visibility of a unity "which is both God's *will* and his *gift* to his Church" (WCC 1961). Will and gift provide a useful framework for a brief reconsideration of the ecumenical imperative. The text usually cited as foundational for Christian unity is John 17.20-1, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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." "That they may be one" has become something of a motto for the ecumenical movement, used for example in Latin as the title of John Paul II's great encyclical on Christian unity, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). The unity of Christ's followers is something *willed*; it is an intention of God in Christ that Christians should be visibly united. Why "visibly"? "So that the world may *believe*". Unity here is a condition of the mission of the Church, and it is therefore absolutely inseparable from it. Christians cannot evangelise, following this divine intention (and surely a divine intention becomes, for Christians, a mandate, a command to be obeyed) without at one and the same time pursuing the visible unity of the Church. It is not enough to be spiritually united but visibly separated into our independent denominations, and separate and competing structures. Furthermore, this unity is not something simply to be achieved as a human work. It is not in that sense ultimately a feature of creation. Rather, it is rooted in and stems from the unity of Christ with the Father. The formula "that they may be one" is used three times in just four verses, highlighting the intrinsic and unbreakable link between the unity of God and the unity of Christ's body on earth, the Church. Christian separation is a consequence of human failure. The search for visible unity has the highest possible priority. It is not an ancillary benefit of discipleship, but intrinsic to it. It *is* the Gospel, or at least it is the Gospel as seen from one side. Just as we can absolutize love, or redemption, or any one of a number of possible descriptions of the Gospel, so we can absolutize unity, provided that at one and the same time we recognise that all these terms are only ways of presenting what is a multivalent reality, life in Christ, and all are equally valid, provided they include the others. By implication, where disunity is accepted and not challenged, the Gospel is not truly preached, and, as Paul Avis has argued, the Church has actually ceased to be the Church and has become a 'counter-sign' of the Kingdom (Avis 2021, pp. x–xi).

The unity of the Church is also a *gift*; however, something donated to the followers of Christ who were gathered around him as he walked amongst them. After all, as Paul asked rhetorically in 1 Corinthians 1.13, "Has Christ been divided?" The answer, of course, is no—he cannot be. There is only one Christ, and therefore only one body on earth. The Church is the new Israel, Christ the one high priest who, by his offering of himself, has "perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10.14). The one Spirit was poured on the disciples at Pentecost, gathered in one place, and although they spoke in many languages, it was the one Christ of whom they spoke (Acts 2.1-4) and the one body to which they belonged ("And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul", Acts 4.32a). This *gifting* of the oneness of God, in Christ and in Spirit, occurred in many dimensions, one could argue—baptism, calling, sacrifice, service, prayer, inspiration with the Spirit—but its reference, its cause, was always the one God. Once we have grasped this truth, we can see it is everywhere in the New Testament, but especially so in the letters of Paul or pseudo-Paul, where constantly the words of the apostle are marshalled to retrieve or protect a unity in Christ, which risks being lost by the folly and greed of Christ's own followers. As Albert Melloni points out, even John 17.21 implies divisions in the community (Melloni 2021, p. 8). After all, much of 1 Corinthians is dedicated to combatting the consequence of Christian division—"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement"; (1 Corinthians 1.10); "when you come together as a church, I hear that there are division among you"; (1 Corinthians 11.18) "For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body". (1 Corinthians 12.13) In

Galatians, Paul rejects the idea of different grades or classes in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek. . .for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3.28). And perhaps the most striking formulation of this sense of unity in God as gift is in the letter to the Ephesians, where the word "one" connects God, faith, calling and life: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4.4-6).

It is not possible to shunt this powerful thread of New Testament reflection on the unity of the people of God into the sidings of the distinction between the visible and invisible Church. If this distinction perhaps has its roots ultimately in Augustine's famous assertion that "in the ineffable foreknowledge of God many who seem to be outside [the Church] are within: many who seem to be within are outside", nonetheless neither Augustine, nor any of the theologians who followed him (including Calvin) thought that this idea could be used to *justify* permanent division amongst Christians, or that the two dimensions of the Church were absolutely distinct (Augustine in Bettenson 1970, p. 239). The often-encountered suggestion that "Surely we can all get along in our separate traditions and churches?" falls before the logical outworking of any such suggestion in the light of the New Testament witness. Can Christians seriously maintain that it is possible ultimately to have radically different ideas about the eucharist and Christ's presence (or lack of it) there? Is Christ divided? Can we maintain that mutually contradictory positions on, for example, infant baptism are ultimately possible simply because we can be content with different church communities having totally different baptismal practices? Would not that be to condone a facile relativism? Is Christ divided? Practical consequences that have sometimes meant persecution and death to different communities of Christians have followed from our disagreements in the past—the obverse of the willingness to be martyred was the willingness to kill and maim for the sake of disagreement. And practical consequences remain in place today—Christian couples from different churches who cannot receive communion together, Christian churches competing for members, Christians in one community feeling condemned by the views and actions of those in another, and so on.

Any Biblical scholar worth their salt would point out that a fuller discussion of the scriptural vision of unity requires a substantial discussion in turn of the question of hermeneutics, and it is obvious that that lies beyond the scope of this article. But we can assert that the implication of unity as God's will and gift is that in no sense is the faith given to us simply "my own": I do not possess the truth of God, and the light of the Gospel, as if they were my own personal possessions, which I can dispose of at my own will, but only as they are given to me by God and demand of me complete self-transformation in conformity to the will of God. This sense of faith as objective and other than my own subjective consciousness is something that has had to be strongly restated again and again in Christian history, so powerful are the impulses that turn us away from Christ and draw us into our own little kingdoms. We find it in Luther ("the soul can do without anything except the Word of God"), for example (Luther 1960, p. 279); in Barth ("GOD is true: HE is the Answer, the Helper, the Judge, and the Redeemer; not man") (Barth 1932, p. 80); in Newman ("Grace ever outstrips prayer") (Newman 1882, p. 351); and in Schmemann ("Christ who is both God and man has broken down the wall between man and God. He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion"), to take but a few widely disparate voices (Schmemann 2018, p. 27). Variety and difference may be characteristics of the glory of God's creation, and it is no surprise then that they also characterise the lives of the followers of Christ in history; but that is a very different matter from the existence of permanent divisions amongst Christ's followers, embedded in rival denominations and histories of mutual suspicion and even persecution.

If unity is indeed God's will and gift, how is it to be achieved, given the limitations of our nature and the constraints imposed by our own cultures and global histories? The unity of the Church is not only a practical task to be worked at incrementally, as we have seen, but a goal whose completion—like the absolute fulfilment of the missio Dei—lies at the end of history. The modern church is often deeply uncomfortable with anything other

than the vaguest or most spiritualised eschatology. What was a powerful conviction of the imminent end of all things in the consummation of God's creation and Christ's return in the earliest centuries of the Church gradually lost edge over time, especially as growing human awareness of the extraordinary "deep time" in which the world as we know it was formed appeared to shrink and relativise the place of human history in it—this, despite the strong counter-arguments of theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann (Moltmann 1967; Bauckham and Hart 1999). No account of the Gospel, however, which neglects the future hope can do full justice to God's redemption and re-creation of the universe. Nor does this imply anything less than the fullest possible attention to the Christian life here and now: "the hope of the coming of God's kingdom is a living hope, which already breaks into a realisation in the present in Christian worship participating in the life of heaven, and Christian service, participating in the life of the world" (Doctrine Commission 1995, p. 195). If, as I have argued, the unity of the Church, both invisible *and* visible, is an intrinsic aspect of the Gospel, then its *full* reality lies ahead of us. William Temple expressed this nicely when he said, "The unity of the Church of God is a perpetual fact: our task is not to create it but to exhibit it" (Avis 2021, p. 154). We need to recover a fully eschatological vision of Christian unity, including but also transcending the proximate, practical, and incremental steps by which churches, including of course my own, the Church of England, tend to measure their efforts towards that goal.

4. Imaginative Ecumenism

The greatest and most urgent paradigm shift required in the ecumenical movement is, therefore, the recovery of a profound and urgent sense of the unity of the Church as an eschatological goal, something in which we as Christians participate, but which is ultimately God's will and gift for his Church, and which is a dynamic task for the Church as she is, in Augustine's words, "on pilgrimage in this world" (Augustine 1972, p. 45). Only in that light, can we truly evaluate what smaller steps we can take here and now, and in the immediate future. We need an *imaginative ecumenism*, which is not afraid to think and test what a fully reconciled and reunited Church of Christ would really look like. By "imaginative" I do not mean the merely fictive, but rather the capacity of active, creative discernment, as conceived, for example, by S.T. Coleridge (Hedley 2008). Although the future is not, of course, available for us to study, we can try to throw our imaginations forward, and conceive of what might be necessary in order to achieve the ultimate goal of full visible unity. F.D. Maurice, in his *Kingdom of Christ* (1838–1842), an influential text for early Anglican ecumenism, postulated that all existing Christian traditions stood for positive truths, which belonged to the Church as a whole, and tended to be, he thought, right in what they affirmed, and wrong in what they denied (Maurice 1891, pp. 62–130; Morris 2005, pp. 55–97). This was clearly an over-schematised reading of history, but it does help to indicate how a genuinely comprehensive vision of the unity of the Church might draw together the experience, traditions, and insights of separated communities of Christians across the centuries. This imaginative ecumenism would seek to align the horizon of present experience and ecumenical commitment, with its proximate goals, with the future horizon of the full visible unity of the Church, echoing perhaps the hermeneutic of two horizons expounded by Anthony Thiselton, drawing on Gadamer's work (Thiselton 1980). In order to do that, it needs to reckon with the whole range of Christian community and theological identity, and to do, imaginatively, the apparently impossible, namely, to think what can best and maximally capture this variety and experience. In doing so, it must transcend and at the same time encompass those seemingly contradictory instincts over unity, which have been falsely opposed in some ecumenical circles as "reconciled diversity" and "full visible unity" (Morris and Sagovsky 2003, pp. 167–90).

To spell this out, there can be no ultimate vision of unity, which does not include, on the one hand, Roman Catholics and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, and on the other, Pentecostals, independent and community churches, Quakers and the Salvation Army, as well as those traditions of "mainstream" Protestantism it is usual to place somewhere in

the middle of this particular continuum. For Anglicans, whilst this seems at first sight reassuring, in that it—superficially—reinforces the common perception that Anglicanism is a "bridge" between different wings of Christian tradition, what is actually challenging, perhaps even disturbing, is the reflection that obviously the full visible unity of the Church must lie somewhere *beyond* the ecclesiological space currently occupied by Anglicanism, and demand of Anglicans a process of self-criticism and change, which few of them have even begun to perceive. In my few remaining paragraphs I will attempt to sketch where such a process might lead.

Let me begin by stating what seems to me to be obvious: the full visible unity of the Church must recognise and embody fundamentally the development in church order which occurred at least from the second century of the Church onwards, and involved the emergence of episcopal order, with a principle of territorial oversight. No vision of unity which tries to convey something of the continuity of the Church over time, could possibly ignore the convictions of the Catholic, Orthodox and other episcopal churches, which together—on this specific question of order—represent far and away the largest portion of world Christianity. The Preface to the Ordinal of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* itself claimed that "from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church: Bishops, Priests, and Deacons". A fully reunited Church of Christ will be episcopal, though the specific *form* of episcopacy, which belongs to the full visible unity of the Church, remains an ecumenical problem to be studied and agreed. So too with the broader question of the "traditional" threefold order of bishops, priests and deacons. The WCC convergence texts are helpful here, and especially *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, which lays out the outlines of a growing ecumenical consensus on authority in the Church, and makes use of the term *episkope*, "oversight", whilst at the same time acknowledging lack of agreement yet on whether this needs to be embodied in a *personal* order of bishops, and also maps out important insights on conciliarity (WCC 2013, paras. 48–57). As I write, I am conscious that the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church is shortly to meet in Rome. This also has the potential to embody a significant shift in the Catholic Church's understanding of conciliar processes, and especially of synodality, including as it does some lay and non-episcopal voices, as well as voting "Fraternal Delegates" from other churches. It may be, then, that we are on the verge of another momentous step in Catholic ecumenism, which could put all these arguments about church order, on that long horizon of an imagined future for which I am arguing, into a new context of enhanced ecumenical convergence. For Anglicans, the conviction that the threefold order, and especially the historic succession, belongs to the full visible unity of the Church is justifiable, *not* because it has always been central to Anglican ecclesiological identity (for as we have seen, that is simply not true), but as a proleptic instantiation in the Anglican churches of a vital aspect of that unity. In practical terms, this mandates for Anglicans a continuing commitment to exploring with other episcopal churches, and especially the Catholic and Orthodox churches, remaining significant areas of difference in theology and practice. But let me be clear—it does not mean "no change" in our position on order and the episcopate. Even against this long, imaginative trajectory of unity we have much to reconsider in the ways order is expressed in our churches, including canonical status and discipline, synodical government, the exercise of office, and residual elements of social hierarchy, amongst other things.

Likewise, the long trajectory also demands of Anglicans a reconsideration of primacy. All the Anglican churches model primacy in a limited way in their autonomous national churches or provinces, but there are variations (Ross 2020). The Orthodox similarly add to metropolitical authority in some places the title and role of Patriarch. The ARCIC II document, which dealt most thoroughly with primacy, *The Gift of Authority*, whilst expressing agreement on the Petrine ministry as a ministry of discernment, appeared to contradict any suggestion (which lingers still in some Catholic circles) that that ministry is a ministry *over* the Church, for, it says, "This form of authoritative teaching has no stronger guarantee from the Spirit than have the solemn definitions of ecumenical councils" (ARCIC

II 1993, para. 47). The hostile reception of this document in some parts of the Anglican Communion, especially by Evangelicals, suggests there is a long way to go in securing even "in principle" consensus amongst Anglicans. It seems to this author at least that, if the Petrine ministry does belong to the full visible unity of the Church, it must perforce look very different from what it is now. It must sit inside a structure of ecclesial authority, which is relational, interdependent, and effectively non-hierarchical. Some strands of current Anglican discourse anticipate that (Wondra 1995). It is notable that one of the most striking passages in John Paul II's *Ut Unum Sint* touched precisely on this question, when he invited other Christian leaders ("Church [*sic*] leaders and their theologians") "to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject. . .in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church" (John Paul II 1995, para. 96).

If, as it will have seemed thus far, my call for a renewed eschatological vision of full visible unity supports the contention that the threefold order of the Church belongs to that unity, and that the Petrine ministry also does, does this not merely amount to something like a predictable "Anglo-Catholic" ecumenical agenda? I do not think so, for now I must turn to the implications for other sets of relationship. The inescapable starting-point here, from where I stand, is the Anglican–Methodist relationship. As I have already indicated, certain things that some Anglo-Catholics have held to be an obstacle to a relationship of full communion and interchangeability between the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain have already proved not to have been so in other contexts, and especially in the Porvoo relationships. Moreover, Methodists in the Anglican–Methodist Covenant process have already committed themselves to re-receiving the gift of an episcopal order, and the sign of the historic succession. The long trajectory of an imaginative ecumenism, focused on the distant horizon of full visible unity, would surely recognise the immensity of that change, given Methodist history and polity, and see it as the overarching framework within which any specific concerns about the exercise of ministry by non-episcopally ordained ministers ought to be set. It does not imply an automatic organic union, for as we have seen, that has not occurred in the Porvoo churches, nor between Anglicans and Old Catholics: that would be a further step, much further off and dependent on the relationship between the churches developing ever closer. Anglican–Methodist mutual recognition would be a remarkable testimony to the commitment of both churches to the unity of the Church.

Other relationships for Anglicans with Protestant churches also need to be seen against the background of the long horizon I have indicated. Full mutual recognition of ordained ministry between Anglicans and the German churches (the "Meissen" churches) is not, given all I have said above, just around the corner, not least because it would be difficult to take that step without something analogous to the Methodist Church of Great Britain's willingness to embody a personal episcopacy in a form consonant with the traditional threefold order. The united churches of the Asian sub-continent are a sign that further progress in this direction is perfectly possible, but they arguably prove my point: even if the Church of South India for example retains, in some ways, features of order that are not typical of other Anglican churches (such as the election of a bishop as moderator in each diocese every other year), nonetheless in their overall structure they adhere to the threefold order and on that basis, as well as their common cultural and linguistic heritage, participate in the Anglican Communion. The issue of order put to one side, the Reformation churches—Lutheran, Reformed *and* Anglican—surely have something vital to contribute to the long horizon of unity, in their renewed emphasis on the primary theological insights, which infuse the New Testament. The remarkable convergence signalled by the Catholic–Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999, subsequently adopted by Methodists, Reformed and Anglicans) is a case in point.

Restoration of the full visible unity of the Church requires above all the repairing of two seismic divisions in Christianity, that between East and West, and that between Catholicism and Protestantism in the West. But issues of order and doctrine, at least as

conventionally discussed in ecumenical dialogue, do not completely exhaust what needs to be said about that goal. Here, I think that, although F.D. Maurice's working out of his insight (derived from Coleridge) of the complementarity of truths strongly held by different traditions (and it is noteworthy that Yves Congar's method in *Divided Christendom*, 1937, bears some similarity) was much too rigidly and narrowly drawn, nevertheless the basic insight remains relevant. Separated churches have usually gone their own way because, in their concern to follow the Gospel to the best of their ability, they have highlighted and clung to aspects of the Gospel and Christian living lost or downplayed by others. To what extent these aspects are central or peripheral, essential, or disposable, to the full visible unity of the Church would need a treatise in itself. Would traditions that are non-eucharistic, for example, need eventually to recover the eucharist as the centre of Christian worship? I have said nothing here on the Anglican view on that, though my own belief is that the eucharist must belong to a fully reunited Church as its very centre and heartbeat. But the long horizon of which I've spoken does surely open up possibilities that go way beyond where ecumenical dialogue currently has reached—and incidentally, Anglicans participate with many other denominations in chaplaincies in hospitals, schools and universities in the UK where conventional confessional boundaries are often fluid. Only in recent years have Anglicans begun to engage seriously in dialogue, and in places (especially in the United Kingdom) in joint activity, with Pentecostal churches. I see no fundamental reason why the Pentecostal tradition should not be able to embrace the arguments on order I have suggested above, but it also seems to me that their richness of engagement with, and experience of, the theology of the Holy Spirit and the power of spiritual gifts is something so vital to the life of the Christian Church that it must belong to the *oikumene*. And what about the shape and structure of a fully reunited Church? Could it not include within it distinct traditions, which, while united around a common witness to the Gospel, nonetheless preserve something of their own emphases, characteristics and traditions? After all, in the Catholic Church religious orders in one breath are fully "part" of the structures of the Church, and in another remarkably diverse. Could the Salvation Army, for example, have a vocation in the long horizon of Christian unity as the equivalent of a missionary order within the Church? Could the Quakers have a particular contemplative role as a gift to the whole Church?

5. Concluding Comments

I do not believe we are in an ecumenical winter. Some initiatives have faltered. But there are many encouraging signs of greater mutual understanding between Christians, and a growing desire for reconciliation. Even as new grounds for disagreement have raised their heads in the last few decades—especially over women's ministry and human sexuality—at the same time churches have continued to rediscover a common life and witness. There are new forms, or new expressions, of the ecumenical spirit. Nothing I have said in this essay should be interpreted as critical of the theology of receptive ecumenism, for example, nor of the "spiritual ecumenism" noted by Cardinal Kasper (Kasper 2004, pp. 155–72), nor of the 'ecumenism of the heart' adumbrated by the World Council of Church's 2022 assembly (Murray 2008). I have said too little here of the fertile theology of koinonia, which lies behind many recent advances in ecumenical dialogue (Sagovsky 2000). All of these perspectives—which do not seem to me mutually contradictory—have been in some sense assumed into what I have written. They provide important tools and insights for further reflection.

In describing the effects of incremental ecumenism, rather than attempting to criticise or disable contemporary ecumenical instruments, dialogues, and initiatives, I have only intended to point to a foreshortening of vision latent in the contestation of proximate goals. These instruments, dialogues and initiatives are necessary vehicles of ecumenical advance. We cannot do without them, and in many cases they are the best we can do in the current circumstances. But the ecumenical strategy of any one church should not be defined and so circumscribed by them. They always need judgment against the longer perspective of the

full visible unity of the Church. Anglicans must recover their conviction and inspiration in that end, that telos of the movement for Christian unity. It is indeed a distant horizon, further off perhaps than some ecumenical enthusiasts thought in the 1960s and 1970s. But just as the unity of the Church is God's will and gift, in Christ, so the mundane task of working towards that unity, and overcoming our lamentable history of Christian division, is a challenge, hope, joy, and inspiration under God.

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Contemporary Critical Reflections on Ion Bria's Vision for Ecumenical Dialogue

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Abstract: In this study, I will expose the perspective of the ecumenical dialogue in the theology of Fr. Ion Bria, one of the well-known Romanians involved in the ecumenical movement. In the first part, after a short introduction, I will present the most important biographical milestones of the Romanian theologian, as well as some details about his activity in the World Council of Churches. Then, in the second part, I will critically present the most important aspects of Bria's ecumenical theology, as well as the reception of these ideas in contemporary Orthodox theology, in discussion with common witness and eucharistic communion within ecumenical dialogue. In the last part, I will present the critical remarks on ecumenism in Bria's theology. Through this analysis, I will emphasize important directions that the ecumenical dialogue can exploit today to overcome some historical, cultural or theological preconceptions and misunderstandings.

Keywords: Ion Bria; Romanian Orthodox Church; ecumenical dialogue; World Council of Churches

1. Introduction

Currently, the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) is actively involved in bilateral ecumenical dialogue or in various ecumenical forums, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) or the European Conference of Churches. Moreover, some of the members of the higher clergy had the opportunity to study abroad and better understand the phenomenon of ecumenism, both theologically and culturally–historically. An important moment for the affirmation of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the communion of autocephalous Orthodox churches remains, without a doubt, the participation in the Holy and Great Synod of Crete, held between 16 and 26 June 2016.

Among the prominent names of Romanian Orthodox theology involved in ecumenical dialogue, we can mention Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Fr. Ion Bria, Fr. Viorel Ioniță, Fr. Ioan Sauca, Fr. Daniel Buda, His Eminence Nifon of Târgoviște, His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Church, and many others. I can say that with the enthronement of His Beatitude Daniel, a new stage of the relationship with the WCC began, but also with prominent representatives of other churches or Christian denominations. I recall important moments for ecumenical dialogue, such as the visit to the Patriarchal Residence of His Excellency, Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, on 17 June 2015, at that time Secretary General of the WCC, or the visit of Pope Francis to the Palace of the Patriarchate with His Beatitude Father Patriarch Daniel and the members of the Permanent Synod of the ROC on 31 May 2019. The ROC accepted that Fr. Dr. Ioan Sauca, one of its representative theologians, was to be Interim and Acting General Secretary of the WCC between April 2020 and December 2022. Also, His Eminence Archbishop and Metropolitan Dr. Nifon, from the Archdiocese of Târgoviște, was elected as a member of the Central Committee at the 11th Assembly of the WCC, held in Karlsruhe, Germany, from 31 August to 8 September 2022. Officially, at least, the ROC continues to be represented at the highest level in ecumenical forums. It remains to be seen to what extent these official positions will also have an effect at the local level. As a general impression, the attitude of the Romanian Patriarchate towards ecumenical dialogue is positive, with theologians dedicated to this commitment.

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Ion Bria is one of the well-known Romanian Orthodox theologians involved in the ecumenical movement. Beyond his administrative involvement in the WCC, in recent years, his theology has attracted the attention of several Romanian and foreign theologians. Certainly, the history of the ecumenical movement will hold a special place for him in terms of ecumenical dialogue in the Orthodox and Romanian spheres. I will present some biographical details, his activity in the WCC and also his theological ideas about ecumenism.

2. The Historical Personality of Ion Bria

Ion Bria was born on 19 June 1929, in the locality of Telega, Prahova County, Romania. His parents were Ion Gheorghe and Maria. Between 1936 and 1940, Fr. Bria attended the primary school in his village. He attended middle school between 1940 and 1944 and high school between 1944 and 1948 in Ploiești. After graduation from high school, Fr. Bria entered, in turn, the Faculty of Petroleum and Gas and the Faculty of Agronomic Sciences in Bucharest. For political reasons, he had to give up both. But in December 1950, he enrolled at the Theological Institute in Bucharest, where he graduated with excellent results in 1954. Accepting the advice of the rector, Prof. Ioan Coman, he entered the MA or magisterium courses at the Theological Institute in Bucharest, completing them in the period 1955–1957. Upon the recommendation of Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, the graduate Ion Bria was appointed professor at the Theological Seminary "Bishop Chesarie" in Buzău. In November 1962, he was transferred to the Theological Seminary in Bucharest, where he would stay, with interruptions, until December 1964.

The Romanian professor and theologian Ion Bria had the opportunity to pursue higher studies in the West. He was sent to Great Britain to the Anglican College "St. Augustin" in Canterbury between October 1962 and June 1963. There, he had the chance to meet Lesslie Newbigin, Nicolas Zernov and William Chadwick. Between March and June 1966, Deacon Ion Bria was sent for a new training period at the Faculty of Theology "St. Chad" in Durham, UK. That scholarship was the result of an intense dialogue between the Romanian Patriarchate and the Anglican Church. Visibly, those two scholarships had the role of opening the ecumenical vision of the theologian Ion Bria, who thus had the opportunity to attend courses of renowned professors, to meet Orthodox theologians from abroad and to access the libraries of those theological institutes.

After the West experience, Fr. Bria returned to Romania, where he would continue his teaching activity. Prof. Ion Bria applied for PhD courses in November 1960, but the defense of the thesis with the title "Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericilor creștine" (Dogmatic Aspects of the Union of Christian Churches) would only take place on 18 June 1968. The thesis coordinator was Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, and Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae was also part of the committee (see Bria 1968). Moreover, at the beginning of January 1965, he would be appointed assistant at the Theological Institute in Bucharest. On 30 January 1965, he was ordained deacon, and later, in April 1972, priest by His Beatitude Justinian Marina, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Another stage in Fr. Ion Bria's missionary journey, which will mark his career, was his appointment to the staff of the World Council of Churches. That unique opportunity arose in the context of Fr. Bria's participation in the World Missionary Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, which took place between 31 December 1972 and 7 January 1973. There, Bria, as a delegate of the Romanian Patriarchate, met with important theologians of the Commission, among whom we can mention Anastasios Yannoulatos, Jürgen Moltmann, Philip Potter, Jacques Rossel and Emilio Castro. A short time before, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism had established a new office called *Orthodox Studies and Relations*, coordinated for a short time by Archimandrite Yannoulatos, who was meanwhile appointed to head a missionary studies center at the University of Athens. In that context, Fr. Bria was asked to take over the WCC Office for *Orthodox Studies and Relations*. Fr. Bria's final answer was given after returning to Romania, where he had a meeting with His Beatitude Patriarch Justinian. Fr. Bria was officially employed by the WCC in Geneva since April 1973, when he moved with his wife Ecaterina and son Alexandru.

The theologian Ion Bria's activity in the WCC can only be summarized. Officially, Fr. Bria worked on the basis of a contract in the WCC for no less than 21 years and 3 months, between April 1973 and June 1994. In the Council, Fr. Bria held various positions. Firstly, he served as *Executive Secretary* at the Office for *Orthodox Studies and Relations* between April 1973 and December 1986. Another important position was that of *Deputy Director* at the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. The position was officially advertised as vacant starting on August 31, 1980. Unfortunately, I have not officially identified the date of the appointment, but in 1982, when Fr. Bria edited the volume *"Jesus Christ—the Life of the World"*, he appeared with the full title of Deputy Director of the Commission and Executive Secretary at the Office of Orthodox Studies and Relations (Bria 1982b). According to my research, he would hold this representative position until December 1986. In January 1987, Bria became the *Director* of the Renewal and Congregational Life sub-unit. After 1991, Bria was appointed *Interim Convener* of Unit I: Unity and Renewal and *Executive Director* from April 1993 to June 1994, when he retired.

In January 1994, in Johannesburg, South Africa, the retirement of Fr. Ion Bria was reminded during the meetings of the Executive Committee and the Central Committee. At the commencement of the Executive Committee meeting on 18 January 1994, Fr. Ion Bria led the opening service as a sign of appreciation for the activity carried out. Between 20 and 28 January 1994, at the meeting of the Central Committee, also in Johannesburg, South Africa, Fr. Bria's retirement was noted, and official thanks were given to him. In Geneva, on 30 June 1994, the farewell celebration took place in the presence of Mr. Konrad Raiser, the new General Secretary of the WCC since 1992.

After his official retirement from the WCC activity, Fr. Bria continued to participate in various consultations and conferences from the WCC and even the Romanian Patriarchate. In October 1995, at the invitation of Fr. Prof. Mircea Păcurariu, Dean of the Faculty of Theology "Andrei Șaguna" in Romania, Fr. Prof. Ion Bria accepted the position of Associate Professor within the Department of Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology, where he would remain until the end of the academic year 1998–1999. The Sibiu project would result in the publication of some works and also in the training of theologians who are still active in the Romanian theological school today (see Marcu 2022b).

On 2 July 2002, at the age of 73, Fr. Ion Bria passed to eternity after a heart attack. His body would be brought from Geneva and buried on 8 July 2002 in the cemetery of Cernica Monastery, near Bucharest, Romania. The funeral service was attended by a group of bishops and priests, relatives and close friends (Tia 2002; Moșoiu 2002; Necula 2002).

3. Ecumenical Theology and Dialogue Promoted by Ion Bria

Bria, the pioneer of ecumenism in the Romanian Orthodox Church. Regarding the theological reception of Fr. Bria, different theologians actively involved in the ecumenical movement consider him a pioneer. In recent years, his ecumenical theology has become the subject of research at the level of master's and doctoral studies or for articles. An interest in his theology can be seen in the circles of evangelical theologians in Romania, but also from abroad (see Oborji 2006; Tulcan and Ioja 2009; Simuț 2010; Moșoiu 2010, 2014; Ubeivolc 2011; Tapernoux 2011; Papathanasiou 2011; De Mey 2012; Vassiliadis 2013b; Stan 2013; Njoroge 2013; Tosi 2015; Fibișan 2015; Toroczkai 2016, 2018; Bates 2016; Morariu 2019; Pătcaș 2019; Freishyn-Chirovsky 2019; Boldișor 2019; Moșoiu 2020; d'Aloiso 2020; Sonea 2020; Marcu 2022a).

Fr. Bria was one of the theologians passionate about ecumenism and the effort of mutual recognition of Christians who belong to different churches or Christian denominations/groups. In the course of five decades of theology at the highest level, he earned a reputation for speaking on these sensitive subjects, sometimes even contradicting his initial personal premises. What are the most important elements of this vision about church boundaries, ecumenism and eucharistic communion in the thinking of Fr. Ion Bria? In the following lines, I will critically present these topics and the vision of Bria regarding ecumenical dialogue.

First of all, Fr. Bria identifies the Orthodox Church, which manifests itself as local Orthodox churches, with the historical Church, *Una Sancta*, which was formed at the time of Pentecost as the mystical Body of Christ, the Head of the Church. This church is confessed by the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed. In other words, "the universal Church is the Orthodox Church; the universal Church is one, but it is embodied in local Churches" (Bria 1989, p. 181). Consequently, the identity of the Orthodox Church is unique. Therefore, Fr. Bria believes that placing the Orthodox Church in a confessional triangle limits its identity as an ecumenical church. At the same time, in a paradoxical way, Fr. Bria claims that "the Church—Una Sancta does not exist without the Orthodox, but it is not the property of the Orthodox" (Bria 1997, p. 3). Hence the opinion of Bria about "our confessional pride", which has, as a consequence, insensitivity towards the status of other Christians.

What is actually the intention of ecumenism? Fr. Bria talks about several types of ecumenism (integral, local, spiritual), but all of them refer to the attempts of Christians who belong to different churches/denominations/Christian groups to get closer. Ecclesial unity must be the most important concern of ecumenism. Any deviation from this goal entails a disregard for ecumenism itself. Obviously, this unity involves "a full consensus in the fundamental truths of faith". Today, Christians find themselves in a state of separation, for theological and non-theological reasons. To resolve these misunderstandings, dialogue is the only working method. Fr. Bria does not believe that "the dividing walls between religious beliefs are raised to the sky", but he believes that an active involvement of the entire Orthodoxy, clergy and laity, is not optional but vocational. Fr. Bria is also aware of the voices in the Orthodox churches that do not agree with the contemporary ecumenical movement, but he believes that they "like to live in the comfort and isolation of the past". In other words, for Bria,

> "ecumenism does not mean erasing the doctrinal divergences and cultural tensions created by 'non-theological factors', but to reset confessional and cultural particularities in their historical, local and universal context, to find a 'catholic' space of communion and solidarity, to inspire an evolution towards a synthesis in the form of a consensus" (Bria 2003, p. 88).

Bria's perspectives on common witness and Eucharistic communion. Fr. Bria talks about the importance of a common witness for credibility in front of the world. We must acknowledge that the current separated life of Christian communities constitutes the most massive obstacle to the credibility of the Gospel for our contemporaries. The lack of unity among Christians acts like a screen, preventing the manifestation of Christ Himself. Unfortunately, the reception of ecumenical convergences raises great problems of communication and accountability. Fr. Bria says explicitly that, most of the time, these theological results are not taken into account by the leading clergy and are not brought to the attention of the members of the Church. He believes that,

> "nevertheless, common witness is a unique ecumenical chance, especially for small communities, with important value for people struggling not only with the old and new confessional isolations, but also with the new political alienation and ideological restrictions. There are situations where common witness is an urgent need for individuals and established communities. The task of the churches is therefore to encourage the common witness experience as an immediate living form of our historical, possible, already-given conciliarity. The large Christian fellowship desires to live today, now, as one people of God" (Bria 1982a, p. 396).

The greatest impasse of the lack of unity among Christians is seen in the Holy Eucharist. The Orthodox Church does not accept communion with anyone who is not an official member of the church. Beyond the various names—eucharistic hospitality, intercommunion, eucharistic concelebration—I believe that the expression eucharistic communion is the most comprehensive. Fr. Bria states repeatedly that it is not possible to have eucharistic communion with other Christians, even Catholics, as long as we do not share the same

faith, the same creed. However, there is a unique statement by Fr. Bria where he claims that Orthodox priests can offer Holy Communion to believers from traditional churches: the Roman Catholic Church, the Old Catholic Church and the Oriental churches. Interestingly, this statement is found only in English. Moreover, it does not appear at all in the Romanian version of that work (Bria 1996a):

> "It is the priest's responsibility to encourage all people who take part in the offertory and the anaphora to come for holy communion. At his discretion he may give communion to members of Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Old Catholic churches without formal conversion to the Orthodox church. Of course, the way for full eucharistic communion needs solid preparation" (Bria 1996b, p. 29).

Fr. Bria's statement was commented on by two Romanian Orthodox theologians from abroad: Viorel Coman and Fr. Radu Bordeianu. Regarding Coman's criticism, we should note the pertinent observation that Fr. Bria did not express whether it was possible for an Orthodox believer to receive communion in other churches, such as those already specified (see Coman 2019, p. 236). Fr. Bordeianu did not agree with the lack of approval from the episcopal authority, in the absence of which the gesture of an Orthodox priest to offer Communion to a Catholic could entail his defrocking (see Bordeianu 2019, pp. 15–16). I believe that a possible answer to this attitude must be correlated with a question that Fr. Bria formulated a few years before. According to his words,

> "could the eucharist be shared not only to consolidate a proper ecclesial life and celebrate the reunion of divided Christians, but also to challenge exclusive, historically organized communities to transcend their visible institutional limits in order to share the "common bread and cup" in a more catholic way, with others and for others who need the bread of life?" (Bria 1991, p. 79).

I could say that the desire to see a real rapprochement between churches is characteristic of those who participated in so many ecumenical meetings and conferences:

> "We waited with hope not only for unconditional forgiveness between Churches, but also for the opening of the Altar doors for those 'outside', who have clothes of a different color, we mean we waited for mutual Eucharistic communion" (Bria 2005, pp. 286–87).

In a personal testimony, the Greek theologian Petros Vassiliadis points out Fr. Bria's enthusiasm but also the disappointment that the eucharistic communion between the Orthodox and the Orientals did not take place:

> "In a private conversation we had during our last meeting in Geneva, a few months before his death, he openly confessed to me his disappointment that at least some sort of intercommunion had not taken place between the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox churches; and with all humility, he put the blame on us theologians!" (Vassiliadis 2013a, p. 67).

In agreement with these positions, we must be aware that an important point is the differentiation of dialogue partners. We need a more accurate classification because, at the popular level, most of the time, the differences or qualities are standardized. It is not possible, theologically and historically, to accept the mixing of differences and similarities. We should highlight that there is a difference between traditional churches, such as the Roman Catholic or Oriental Churches, and those that have been formed much more recently. This classification would help us, at a theological and pastoral level, to have a much more achievable dialogue.

Critical remarks in Bria's theology about ecumenism. Fr. Bria considers that the issue of accepting or rejecting the ecumenical dialogue in the Orthodox communities, in Romania especially, should be related to the position of the hierarchy. At the institutional level, the attitude towards ecumenical dialogue has a double standard. More precisely, in some

situations, theologians or hierarchs who represent the voice of the Orthodox Church are reserved in transmitting, promoting or applying the decisions approved in ecumenical forums. What is more, there have been situations when, in their position as lay theologians, they have been open to ecumenical dialogue, but when they became members of the higher clergy, they changed their attitude. In this sense, the impression conveyed by some hierarchs is interpreted as anti-ecumenism and against dialogue. In Bria's words,

> "unfortunately, the results of consultations such as these seem often to disappear en route to Orthodox theological schools, parishes and other centres. Or they go quickly into the filing cabinets of ecclesiastical offices, never to be taken out again" (Bria 2000, p. 255).

Another critical point, related to the former, is the problem of translating and presenting the results of the ecumenical dialogue. Here, an important role belongs to the institutional church, which should transpose the common agreements at the local level. In practice, many reports or consultations are translated late and without genuine intention to implement them. Reception in some cases does not exist, hence the hostile attitude towards what was not present at the right time and in the right context. In this regard, Bria is among those who noticed this situation and pointed out the imposture in which the Orthodox can find themselves in relation to their ecumenical partners:

> "For Churches that do not have a proper ecumenical experience, ecumenical convergences can occur as something imposed from outside. There are situations in which the church authority does not allow ecumenical perceptions and experiences to reach the level of believers and parish communities. The question is therefore whether, currently, the laity is trained, excluded or denied in this process of reception" (Bria 1985, p. 133).

In Orthodox communities, the word *ecumenist* or *ecumenism* has become a pejorative one. When you categorize someone as an ecumenist, it can mean that they have lost their faith in the Church. In the perspective of some, the one who is an ecumenist must be considered a traitor of the Orthodox teachings and needs to repent and be re-accepted in the Church (see Kalaitzidis 2014, pp. 134–52). For example, in the documents of the Holy and Great Synod, although they speak of ecumenical dialogue, the word ecumenism is not used even once. If Romanian theology had been consistent with the ecumenical language, the current reaction of those who do not accept ecumenical dialogue would have been much more moderate. Before 1989, but also after the fall of communism in Romania, Bria published a lot of articles, both in Romanian and foreign languages, in which he encouraged the involvement of Orthodoxy and Orthodox people in ecumenical dialogue. At least for the Romanian Orthodox space, he is the theologian who wrote the most about ecumenism and its implications.

The anti-ecumenical position in the Orthodox Church in general and the Romanian Orthodox Church in particular must be presented with a lack of a common vision towards the ecumenical dialogue of all the autocephalous Orthodox churches. Moreover, the anti-ecumenical attitude of the monks of Holy Mount Athos is increasingly accepted as the norm and considered an indisputable spiritual position. Although the Holy and Great Synod of Crete presented a balanced image towards ecumenical dialogue, the reception of these positions suffers mainly from the lack of unity of all the autocephalous churches. In Bria's words,

> "of course, there are pious groups and theologians who like living in the comfort and isolation of the past, and who try to avoid the controversial issues by withdrawing and by-passing the present ecumenical structure. This attitude is understandable since all of us have had both positive and negative experiences in the ecumenical movement. But it is not a sound enough reason for weakening Orthodox participation in the present struggle for ecumenism" (Bria 1981, p. 322).

The main argument of those who do not accept ecumenical dialogue is related to the truth of faith. They say that through dialogue with others, there is a possibility that the teachings of the Church can be changed or altered. As the only true Church of Christ, the Orthodox Church has the sacred duty not to change anything from the teaching received from Christ, the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers. Orthodox theologians who accept ecumenical dialogue, like Ion Bria, understand the Church in the same sense, but they want to offer others the opportunity to appreciate the testimony of the Orthodox Church.

The ecumenical movement is not sufficiently studied in the faculties of Orthodox Theology in Romania. Moreover, others are presented only from a negative, schismatic or sectarian perspective. Their theology is presented only through the lenses of triumphalist and theoretical Orthodoxy. In the past, the discipline was called Missiology and Ecumenism. Today, it is called Orthodox Missiology. I personally believe that a Catholic, a Protestant or any other theologian from another Christian group or denomination would present the theology of his church or his community much better than any Orthodox professor. This is where the unresolved issue of proselytizing comes into play. Many Orthodox suspect that others have only the intention of converting members of our church. Bria insisted on ecumenism being taught in Orthodox Theology faculties:

> "Ecumenism has to become a theological discipline in its proper sense. While many faculties of theology have accepted ecumenism in the academic curriculum, it is practically limited to the history and development of the ecumenical movement. The doctrinal profiles of other churches are still described according to the old apologetic model of confessionalistic comparison" (Bria 1996c, p. 209).

In the Romanian Orthodox Church, there is a need to give voice to the new generation of theologians. Moreover, as Fr. Bria said, we need to train theologians who are able to dialogue with others. My impression and experience are that there is no careful concern for those who may represent the Orthodox position in the future in these dialogues. Also, I think it is time to recover the Romanian Orthodox theologians from the diaspora, who have come to understand dialogue with others much more clearly and honestly than us. Bria always claimed that the mission of the Church is fulfilled through various factors, but an important place is occupied by the work of theologians and theology. Without theology and theologians, the Church lacks a vital dimension to its work.

4. Conclusions

An important deduction of this study is related to the outstanding personality of Ion Bria, a pioneer of ecumenical dialogue in contemporary Orthodoxy. Today, his studies on ecumenism are being re-evaluated and proposed for study by the new generation of Orthodox theologians. In particular, in the Orthodox faculties in Romania, Bria's theology is intensively studied. The discipline of missiology is marked by Bria's vision, and most of the Romanian professors of missiology continue Bria's legacy. Certainly, much more needs to be done in the continuation of this work.

Bria's pro-ecumenism positions and the solutions offered are in the process of implementation and re-evaluation. There are several solutions for rebooting ecumenism, among which we mentioned its introduction as a theological discipline in theology faculties, the training of theologians and bishops who know the rigors of ecumenism, informing Christians in parishes or local communities, etc. Most of the time, at the non-academic level, the intentions and objectives of dialogue are not translated or presented clearly enough. But theologians and hierarchs must take on the task of learning and explaining the role of ecumenical dialogue correctly. In this sense, the legacy of Ion Bria's theology remains relevant and offers opportunities for the new generation of theologians.

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Where Scripture and Tradition First Meet: How the Field of the Early Reception of the New Testament May (Re)Shape the Academic Dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox—Romania as a Case Study

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Abstract: In recent years, Evangelical scholars in Romania have shown a growing interest in studying the early reception of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of the Pre-Nicene Fathers (*c.* 90–300 CE). In parallel, a new generation of Romanian Orthodox scholars has come to appreciate the importance of a critical approach to both Scripture and Christian Tradition. As a result, fresh common ground is currently taking shape in academia: a critical approach to the early reception of the New Testament. This presents an opportunity for both Evangelical and Orthodox scholars in Romania to come together and explore certain issues of faith that have not been previously explored in this way. Since there are already several hints that the early reception of the New Testament could lead to a more meaningful dialogue, an innovative project has been initiated to further the hypothesis. The ongoing project involves five Evangelical New Testament scholars and five Orthodox New Testament scholars independently researching the same five obscure passages in the New Testament (Matthew 27.51–53, Romans 9–11, 1 Corinthians 15.29, Hebrews 6.4–6 and 1 Peter 3.18–22). Each passage is analyzed independently by one scholar from each denomination using the same methodology, i.e., a critical dialogue between exegesis and reception history. The forthcoming volume aims to assess not only the value of this approach for academic dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox in Romania, but also to estimate other potential gains should this method be applied on a larger scale, such as in various international ecumenical projects. There is one overarching question behind this project that still awaits a response: if the early reception of the New Testament is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, could it also be where Evangelicals and Orthodox finally meet?

Keywords: Scripture and Tradition; early reception of the New Testament; New Testament Evangelical scholarship; New Testament Orthodox scholarship; academic dialogue; Romania

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1. Introduction

Romanian Evangelicals are Baptist, Pentecostal, and Brethren Christians that belong to the *Evangelical Alliance of Romania*. However, since Brethren scholarship is currently still emerging (e.g., Leonte 2020, pp. 14–15, 37–39), this study will focus on the Baptists and Pentecostals. Both denominations were established at the beginning of the twentieth century, soon after the foundation of the modern state of Romania (1918).[1] The Romanian Baptist Union was founded in 1920 (Popovici 2007, pp. 288–94), while Pentecostals requested official recognition in 1924 (Bălăban 2022, p. 43).[2] Accordingly, these two years will constitute the *terminus a quo* of the research.

Since their establishment in Romania, Evangelicals have maintained their own distinctive way of reading the scriptures. Given the dominant Orthodox background, this distinctiveness has largely meant the avoidance of any interaction with Patristic literature, particularly when the *meaning* of a biblical text was discussed. Scripture and Tradition were

seen as antagonistic for most of the period following the 1920s, until a new generation of Evangelical scholars emerged after the demise of communism in 1989.

In the following sections, I will survey the evolution of Romanian Evangelical New Testament scholarship and its parallel evolution of interest in Patristic literature, with a special emphasis on the pre-Nicene authors and their reception of the New Testament (*c.* 90–300 CE). For this growing interest in the early reception of the New Testament creates a new opportunity for Romanian Evangelical scholars, specifically, to read New Testament texts through hermeneutical lenses similar to those of Romanian Orthodox scholars. For centuries, Orthodox and Protestants (Evangelicals included) have shown that reading similar religious texts does not necessarily lead to similar conclusions. Should similar texts be read through similar hermeneutical lenses, would there be more compatibility in their religious views? In an attempt to answer this question, a comparison will be drawn between Orthodox and Evangelical readings of a given New Testament text (Ephesians 1.4–5). Then, an ongoing Evangelical–Orthodox project will be introduced. The project is designed to test the value of the early reception of the New Testament approach for the advancement of the academic dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox. If the early reception of the New Testament is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, could it also be where Evangelicals and Orthodox finally meet?

2. Romanian New Testament Evangelical Scholarship—General Background

Romanian New Testament Evangelical scholarship has undergone a relatively recent evolution. During the period of the 1920s–1980s, i.e., prior to and during the Communist regime (1947–1989), higher education was inaccessible to the majority of Romanian Evangelicals. Formal theological training was also a limited option, principally available through the Baptist Theological Seminary (founded in 1921) and the Pentecostal Theological Seminary (founded in 1976),[3] albeit with significant constraints from the national government. For instance, both seminaries faced severe limitations on student enrolment. In 1980, at the Baptist Theological Seminary only five students were permitted to enrol, followed by ten in 1984, four in 1986, and five students in 1987 (Bunaciu and Bunaciu 1997, pp. 224–25; Drimbe 2024). The Pentecostal Theological Seminary experienced similar fluctuations in student enrolment, enlisting five students in 1980, then a noticeable hiatus ensued until 1984 when limited admissions were reintroduced. The years between 1986 and 1989 witnessed the acceptance of only three students per annum (Bălăban 2016, pp. 119–20). Although the term "seminary" might suggest undergraduate theological education, these institutions offered basic, pre-university training. It was only after the collapse of Communism that the seminaries were transformed into fully-fledged academic establishments, becoming the Baptist Theological Institute and Pentecostal Theological Institute, respectively (Drimbe 2024).

Due to the adverse political climate, the emergence of the first PhD in the field of the New Testament came late, only in 1998. Alexandru Neagoe holds the distinction of being the first Romanian Evangelical (Baptist) to earn a PhD in the New Testament (Neagoe 2002). Since 1998, approximately thirty other Romanian Evangelicals have been awarded PhDs in New Testament studies (Drimbe 2024). Thus, the pivotal year 1998 marked the inception of a novel era in Romanian New Testament Evangelical scholarship, a benchmark against which some comparisons will be drawn below.

Furthermore, it is significant that the initial ten PhDs in New Testament studies awarded to Romanian Evangelicals are from institutions in the United Kingdom and North America (Mănăstireanu 2007). This aspect bears both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, these emerging scholars were being ushered into the realm of internationally recognized academic research, thereby setting elevated standards for subsequent New Testament Evangelical scholarship in Romania. On the other hand, it underscores a lack of interdenominational collaboration during the Communist period. The Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu posed challenges due to linguistic barriers, as it exclusively offered training in Hungarian (Cluj-Napoca) and German (Sibiu). The Orthodox institutions refrained from admitting Evangelical students, invoking theological

incongruences and the vocational nature of the curriculum. However, these restrictive actions should be attributed to the prevailing political circumstances. Only a few Evangelicals were awarded theological degrees by accredited Romanian institutions at the time. Notably, none of the degrees was in New Testament studies (Drimbe 2024).

The theological landscape underwent another significant transformation in the 2000s, spurred by a burgeoning, interdenominational collaboration in academia that took root during the initial decade following Romania's emergence from the Communist era (1990–2000). During this period, a noticeable shift occurred as a number of accredited theological institutions began to embrace a more inclusive stance, welcoming Evangelicals into their fold. As a result, an increasing cohort of postgraduates opted for local educational opportunities. In a watershed moment during 2009, Ciprian Terinte was awarded a doctorate from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Sibiu (Terinte 2010). His achievement stands as another historic milestone, as he became the first Evangelical scholar to earn a PhD in New Testament studies from a Romanian institution, all the more so as it is an institution of Orthodox affiliation.

In the subsequent decade (2010–2020), a cohort of ten scholars followed suit, with half of them earning PhDs from Romanian Orthodox and Catholic institutions (Drimbe 2024). This surge in Evangelical scholars undertaking advanced theological studies at non-Evangelical institutions is testament to the evolving dynamics of interdenominational scholarly pursuits within the Romanian academic landscape.

3. Romanian Evangelical New Testament Scholarship and Patristic Literature—Before and after 1998

3.1. Scripture vs. Tradition: 1920–1998

Between the years 1920, marking the establishment of the Romanian Baptist Union, and 1998, when the first Romanian Baptist was granted a PhD in the New Testament, the output of secondary literature on the New Testament by Romanian Baptists remained rather modest, comprising approximately 25 monographs and textbooks (Bel and Ghioancă 2017). Remarkably, no scholarly articles concerning the New Testament had been published prior to this juncture. As for the Pentecostals, their publications are even fewer. Only five monographs related to the New Testament emerged between 1924 and 1990 (Bălăban 2013). Also, prior to 1999 and the inception of *Plērōma*, the theological journal of the Pentecostal Theological Institute, scholarly articles delving into New Testament studies were notably absent. This scarcity of written works can be primarily attributed to the persistent constraints imposed during the Communist regime, which routinely suppressed the publication and dissemination of Evangelical literature. Added to this, the authors of these publications were not New Testament scholars in the modern technical sense. Consequently, they predominantly confined their works to introductory level studies (Drimbe 2024).

More relevant to this study, however, is the noticeable absence of scholarly engagement with Patristic literature among these scholars. Early Church authors such as Papias, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Eusebius of Caesarea are mentioned rarely and almost exclusively in relation to introductory matters: the authorship of a New Testament book, dating, language, early traditions about the martyrdom of Jesus' Apostles, and so on. Hardly any of these early Christian authors are cited when the *meaning* of a certain text is discussed. Also, any interaction with Patristic literature is indirect. Furthermore, all references to Patristic authors are taken from Protestant and Evangelical English-speaking authors. A paradigmatic case is that of John R. Socaciu (1926, 1928). His works *Armonia Evangheliilor [A Harmony of the Gospels]* and *Studii în Noul Testament [Studies in the New Testament]* are, in fact, translations and slight adaptations of the renowned American New Testament Baptist scholar A.T. Robertson's *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Robertson 1922) and *Studies in the New Testament* (Robertson 1915). Socaciu studied under Robertson at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, USA. It is from this place that he brought these two studies into Romania. Robertson (1915) refers to "early Christian

writers" and "tradition" when he discusses, e.g., the preservation of the few uncanonical sayings of Jesus, the last years and martyrdoms of Paul, Peter, and John, the last years and suicide of Pontius Pilate, the authorship of the Book of Hebrews, the provenance of 1 Peter, and Gnosticism in 1 John. In his adaptation of Robertson's writing, Socaciu follows this approach closely.

Robertson/Socaciu set the tone for the marginal use of Patristic literature in New Testament studies in Romania. This approach, which continues through to Ioan Bunaciu (1981a, 1981b, 1989), was consistent with the view that *sola Scriptura* implies, among other things, a reticence to cite any "tradition" in order to uncover the meaning of a biblical text. It also maintained the popular yet academically unproductive dichotomy that Evangelicals deal with Scripture while the traditional Churches deal with Tradition.

3.2. Beginnings and Transition: 1998–2009

Things changed, however, after 1998, and especially after 2009, once Romanian Evangelicals began to study at Orthodox and Catholic institutions. Thus, the decade 1998–2008 marks the transition toward including Patristic literature in New Testament studies. As was mentioned above, the first ten Romanian Evangelicals earned PhDs in the New Testament from the United Kingdom and North America (Mănăstireanu 2007; Drimbe 2024): Alexandru Neagoe (London School of Theology/Brunel University, 1998); Octavian Baban (London School of Theology/Brunel University, 1999); Radu Gheorghiță (University of Cambridge, 2000); John Tipei (University of Sheffield, 2000); Sorin Sabou (London School of Theology/Brunel University, 2001); Beniamin Fărăgău (Queen's University Belfast, 2002); Crinișor Ștefan (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003); Corneliu Constantineanu (Oxford Centre for Mission Studies/Leeds University, 2006); Corin Mihăilă (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006); and Cristian Barbosu (Trinity International University, 2009). Given their research interests and the Evangelical affiliation of most of the doctoral schools these scholars attended, the interaction with Patristic literature is very rare. In most cases, it is almost non-existent. In some cases, it is minimal, yet significant for this initial stage. Among the noteworthy representatives of this transitional period are Gheorghiță, Sabou, and Mihăilă.

(1) Radu Gheorghiță is, to my knowledge, the first scholar to use the Early Fathers critically when discussing a New Testament text in detail. In his thesis (2000, 2003), Gheorghiță analyses the role of the Septuagint in the Book of Hebrews, with a special emphasis on Habakkuk 2.3–4 in Hebrews 10.37–38. When discussing the textual variants of Habakkuk 2.3–4 in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Syriac, he surveys the reception of the text in several Patristic authors, such as Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, "and possibly Ambrose and Ambrosiaster" (Gheorghita 2003, pp. 156–59). Gheorghiță, then, directs his attention to the reception of Habakkuk 2.3–4 in the New Testament and briefly examines its four occurrences. Three occurrences are in Paul: Romans 1.17 (twice) and Galatians 3.11. The fourth occurrence, to which "special consideration" is given throughout several chapters, is in Hebrews 10.37–38. Before delving into contextual and theological analysis, the textual variants are once again scrutinized. At this point, his focus expands to encompass "the frequent appearance of Hab. 2:4 in the writings of the Greek Fathers . . . quotations . . . from their exposition of either the Pauline epistles or Hebrews . . ." Three textual variants are cited from Eusebius' *Demonstratio Evangelica* and three are cited from Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* (Gheorghita 2003, pp. 157–58). Once the issues of textual criticism are dealt with, Gheorghiță moves on to show how different textual variants of Habakkuk 2.3–4 may be used to make different theological points. In this case, the author of Hebrews uses the LXX Habakkuk in order to align the scriptural portrait of the coming Christ with the one emerging from the earthly life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and, by doing so, reveal his theological indebtedness to the Greek textual tradition of the Jewish Scriptures.

Gheorghiță's approach represents a significant stride in the progression toward employing the Early Fathers in the interpretation of the New Testament. Commencing with this study,

the Patristic writers are referenced not merely in relation to introductory or secondary matters, but to unveil diverse critical issues and connotations within a biblical text.

(2) Sorin Sabou discusses in his doctoral dissertation (2005) the debated meaning of the phrase ἐφ᾽ ᾧ in Romans 5.12: διὰ τοῦτο ὥσπερ δι᾽ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν ἐφ᾽ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον . . . In order to uncover the meaning of ἐφ᾽ ᾧ, Sabou cites Augustine, Pelagius, and Cyril of Alexandria. For Augustine, ᾧ [ὅς] is a masculine relative pronoun with the phrase ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου as the referent (Sabou 2005, p. 125). For both Pelagius and Cyril of Alexandria ἐφ᾽ ᾧ is a conjunction meaning "because", yet their views of ἥμαρτον [ἁμαρτάνω] disagree with each other. Pelagius argues that ἥμαρτον refers to "men's sinning in their own persons quite independently of Adam, though after his example" (Sabou 2005, p. 126). Cyril, on the other hand, considers that ἥμαρτον means "actual sinning". This view is "in contrast to the Pelagian view in that men's sinning is related to Adam's transgression not merely externally but also internally, as being its natural consequence" (Sabou 2005, p. 126). Sabou goes on to interact with modern scholars, e.g., Cambier, Danker, Cranfield, Fitzmyer, Moo, and Bruce. Following interaction with Bruce (1985, pp. 126, 230), Sabou synthesizes the two historical views: "Because Adam *is* mankind all are said to have sinned in his sin. Thus, the theological content of Augustine's interpretation is put together with the grammatical understanding of Cyril and Pelagius concerning ἐφ᾽ ᾧ" (Sabou 2005, p. 127). In addition to taking the phrase ἐφ᾽ ᾧ "as having a consecutive meaning", Sabou considers that "the reference of ἐφ᾽ ᾧ [includes] the *reality* of death" (Sabou 2005, p. 130).

Sabou's research stands among the first examples of a Romanian Evangelical scholar using the Early Church authors to determine the meaning of a debated phrase in the New Testament.

(3) Corin Mihăilă's (2009) approach is similar to that of Sabou. Although his interaction with Patristic literature is minimal and indirect, he also makes use of it in search of the meaning of a disputed term, as is μετασχηματίζω in 1 Corinthians 4.6: ταῦτα δέ, ἀδελφοί, μετεσχημάτισα εἰς ἐμαυτὸν καὶ Ἀπολλῶν δι᾽ ὑμᾶς, ἵνα ἐν ἡμῖν μάθητε τό. The Church Fathers cited by Mihăilă are Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Theophylact of Ohrid. While Mihăilă admits that Chrysostom, Theodoret, and Theophylact give the natural meaning of the verb μετασχηματίζω, "changing the form of something into something else" (Mihăilă 2009, p. 207), eventually he offers a more nuanced and contextual interpretation of the verb, considering its meaning to be more complex than the Church Fathers acknowledged: Paul suggests that he has changed the discussion about preachers and the Corinthians, in general, to a discussion about himself and Apollos, implying thus that the argument he builds in the section is not true only of the former (Mihăilă 2009, pp. 209–12). Although he approaches the Patristic sources indirectly, closely following contemporary research (e.g., Vos, Hall, Lampe, Thiselton), the interaction is still there.

Gheorghiță, Sabou, and Mihăilă are representative of this initial stage, as they make use of the Patristic literature when interacting with New Testament texts, aiming to establish a certain textual variant or searching for the *meaning* of debated terms and phrases.

3.3. Development and Climax: 2009–2023

(1) As was noted above, Ciprian Terinte (2010) is the first Romanian Evangelical to earn a PhD from an Orthodox institution. Moreover, he inaugurates a new stage in regard to the use of Patristic authors for New Testament interpretation. His interaction with the Church Fathers is broader (engaging with more Patristic authors) and deeper (in terms of analysis). He interacts at length with twelve Patristic authors and eighteen of their writings, covering a period that spans from Hermas (*c.* 150) to Gregory Palamas (c. 1296–1359). Given the Orthodox affiliation of the doctoral school, there is an apparent preference for the Greek Fathers: nine out of twelve are Eastern.

More significantly, Terinte engages the Patristic literature in order to uncover the *theological meaning* of certain texts in the New Testament, mainly Pauline. For instance, there is a rather unexpected view regarding the foundation of the Church—unexpected, given his Pentecostal affiliation. On the day of the "Christian" Pentecost (Acts 2), the Church came into existence as a missional community, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The establishment of the Church was definitively not initially realized on this occasion. The constitution of the Church is initiated at the incarnation of Christ (Terinte 2010, pp. 115–17). Under the influence of John Chrysostom and Simon the New Theologian, Terinte utilizes the Adam–Eve and Christ–Church parallelism (Ephesians 5.22–32; cf. Genesis 1.26–27; 2.24) to assert the beginnings of the Church as follows: "Eve was not yet created, but she was there in Adam's rib, and therefore existed with him. Through His very incarnation, Jesus Christ carried the Church within Himself. . . Just as Eve came out of Adam's rib, so the Church came out of Christ's side" (Terinte 2010, pp. 115–16, 296–97). Just like the patriarch Levi, who paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham, for he "was in the body [or: in the loins] of his ancestor" (see Hebrews 7.9–10), so also the Church existed in the body of Christ before Pentecost.

(2) Terinte's interaction with Patristic literature, in terms of both quantity and detail, is unparalleled to date—if only monographs are considered. Yet his research is indicative. Since 2009, Romanian Evangelicals have shown a growing interest in the early reception of the New Testament, with an emphasis on the Pre-Nicene Church Fathers. Within Romanian Evangelical academic circles there is a general agreement that pre-Constantinian Christianity had not yet split into different denominations and that there are numerous traces and trajectories of Apostolic Christianity, with which Evangelicals identify.

I would include at this stage the bulk of my own research. After graduating from the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest (BTh, 2003), I pursued post-graduate studies in Biblical and Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Alba Iulia, Romania (MTh, 2008). It was during this period that I became particularly interested in the Apostolic Fathers and, especially, their reception of the New Testament. I have continued to pursue this interest, as can be seen in my doctoral dissertation (Drimbe 2018, 2020) and subsequent publications (Drimbe 2018, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

In an attempt to stimulate the development of the earliest reception of the New Testament field among Evangelicals in Romania, in 2015–2016 I initiated, together with Sorin Sabou, a research project called "Unele lucruri greu de înțeles" ["Some Things that are Hard to Understand"] (see 2 Peter 3.16). For the majority of scholars, among the most obscure passages in the New Testament are Matthew 27.51–53; Luke 16.9–12; John 6.53–59; Romans 9–11; 1 Corinthians 15.29; 1 Peter 3.18–20; and 1 John 5.16–17. As part of the project, all of these passages are to be analyzed considering their earliest reception: how they were interpreted during the pre-Constantinian Christian era. Since the project has been innovative (even experimental), the contributors were limited to New Testament scholars that teach or have taught in different capacities at the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest or the Faculty of Baptist Theology, University of Bucharest—where both I and Sorin Sabou teach. At the same time, the volume aimed to foster a more fruitful academic dialogue between Romanian Evangelical and Orthodox/Catholic scholars (Drimbe 2024). Yet, for several reasons, the publication of the "Some Things that are Hard to Understand" volume was repeatedly delayed. Two of the major reasons for the delay will be revealed in the following sections.

(3) I consider the climax of the interest in the early reception of the New Testament to be the forthcoming "Seria Comentarii Exegetice Românești" ["Romanian Exegetical Commentary Series"] (SCER). Broad discussions regarding the particularities of the series began back in 2012, but it was only recently that a decision was reached. What is unique about SCER is that it is written from an Eastern Evangelical perspective and also from the perspective of the early reception of the text. Each New Testament writing is interpreted in dialogue with predominantly two Fathers of the Early Church, one from the East and one from the West. The commentaries are written almost exclusively by Romanian

Evangelicals, including some of the scholars mentioned previously: Drimbe, Gheorghiță, Mihăilă, Sabou, and Terinte. The only non-Romanian contributor is H.H. Drake Williams III, Associate Professor of the New Testament at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium. Williams, a long-time guest lecturer at the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest, co-authors several volumes in the series. He also acts as one of the general editors; the other general editor is Octavian Baban, Senior Lecturer at the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest. A noteworthy reason regarding Williams' involvement is that he plans to have a similar series written in English, incorporating several contributions from SCER, that is to be published by Gorgias Press.[4]

A consequence of the SCER project is that Evangelical New Testament scholars from Romania interact for the first time with Patristic authors on a national scale. More importantly, this series has the potential to open fresh topics of dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox/Catholics. An example regarding the series' potential to generate meaningful dialogue will be provided in the following section. Also, the preparation and launch of this series constitute one of the reasons for the delay of the "Some Things that are Hard to Understand" volume. However, it is not the prime reason.

4. The Romanian Exegetical Commentary Series (SCER) and Orthodox New Testament Scholarship—A Comparison

The first volume to be published in SCER is the commentary on Ephesians. It is co-authored by Baban and Williams, the general editors of the series. In the commentary, Baban/Williams interact extensively with Marius Victorinus, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Theodoret of Cyrus. It is this interaction that creates a plethora of possibilities for dialogue. To exemplify this, a brief section of Baban/Williams' commentary, namely Ephesians 1.4–5, is to be compared to the corresponding section of Stelian Tofană. Tofană is Professor of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca and a senior figure of Romanian Orthodox scholarship.[5] Ephesians 1.4–5 is preferred for the comparison, due to its theological significance for Protestant thinking. In regard to the text, Tofană makes the following comments:

> the election of Christians represents an act of God's eternal love that calls upon its recipients to lead lives of holiness: "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him" (1.4). Through Jesus Christ, the elected are embraced as children of God through adoption, revealing yet another facet of God's love, with the aim of salvation and redemption: "In love, He predestined us to adoption as children through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (1.5). Therefore, the rationale behind this choice lies in God's "predestining" Christians to become His children. However, the concept of "predestination" relates more to WHAT will happen, rather than to WHO will be elected. In other words, the predetermined destiny of Christians is that ALL of them will become fully entitled children in Christ Jesus, not just a select few. Hence, the "divine predetermination" mentioned in the text doesn't pertain to any confessional interpretation, such is the teachings about predestination in Protestant theology. (Tofană 2006, p. 53; author's translation).

Tofană reads the text from a traditional Orthodox perspective. At the same time, he explicitly challenges the Protestant view. His emphasis lies on the purpose of predestination, rather than the persons being predestined, on "what", rather than on "who": "chose us. . . that we would be holy and blameless"; "predestined us to adoption as children". For Tofană, the Pauline "we/us" refers to Christians in general, i.e., those who "have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of. . . wrongdoings, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1.7).

On a similar note, Baban/Williams write:

> The verse conveys a profoundly positive message that should be appreciated as such, without misinterpreting its message. God elects a people for Himself from among all humanity. . . Although certain commentators may be concerned about God's selective election (some are chosen, some are not), we should focus on the positive way Paul presents this truth. Ephesians 1 does not portray God as the One who rejects, but elects. . . The purpose of the election is that all Christians would be holy and blameless. The NTR and EDCR versions of the Bible [the New Romanian Translation and Dumitru Cornilescu Revised Edition are Romanian Evangelical versions—a.n.] use the phrase "in order to", the Greek text uses the stronger infinitive of purpose *einai*. God elects with a purpose. . . In his sermon on Ephesians 1.4, Chrysostom writes the following about the purpose of being elected to be holy: "You have been chosen to be holy and blameless before His face. He Himself has made us holy, yet we are called to remain holy. . ." (Baban and Drake Williams 2024; author's translation).

The similar emphasis on the purpose of election, rather than on the persons being elected, is noteworthy—and Chrysostom's citation is used to strengthen this point. There is also the general language with reference to those elected: "a people. . . from among all humanity"; "all Christians". In line with their Protestant perspective, Baban/Williams also highlight that God's election of Christians does not imply that God rejects others.

The similarities and distinctions of the above comparison lead to some intriguing theological and practical questions. Is predestination essential or marginal in God's plan of salvation? If God's election concerns primarily a purpose and not persons, what does this reveal about those being elected? Is God's elective purpose restrictive/exclusive, conditional, both, or neither? Who is a Christian, in the light of God's election? If God's eternal purpose is "holiness and blamelessness", can there be Christians that are living unholy and blameworthy lives? What is the relationship between divine purpose and Christian ethics? If the elect are all the adopted children of God, what are the benefits and limitations of Christian confessionalism? The emphasis on the purpose of God's election could stimulate reflection for both Evangelicals and Orthodox, particularly on issues like Christian identity, ethics, and communion. Moreover, it could incite fresh dialogue.[6]

The benefits of a New Testament commentary series such as SCER for the dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox/Catholics remain to be assessed in the future. For now, however, it should be noted that, at the core of the emphasis on the purpose of God's election, there stands the citation of Chrysostom. It is also noteworthy that only a few years ago a comparison like the one above would not have been possible.

5. Where Scripture and Tradition First Meet—Could Evangelicals and Orthodox Finally Meet There?

It is beyond the scope of this study to survey Orthodox New Testament scholarship in Romania. A few general comments will suffice. The beginnings of critical engagement of the New Testament are related to the scholarship of Vasile Gheorghiu (PhD, 1897), considered the first Romanian Orthodox New Testament scholar in the modern sense (Rovența 1932, p. 275). While Orthodox scholars traditionally interpreted the New Testament in the light of Patristic literature, for most of the 1897–1990 period, their reading of both collections was predominantly confessional and infrequently critical (see, e.g., Tofană 2024). Similar to the Evangelical trajectory, Orthodox New Testament scholarship has experienced significant developments after the demise of communism. A new generation of scholars emerged, with improved critical methodology and international recognition. Among these, I consider Daniel Batovici (2019a, 2019b, 2021) and Cosmin Pricop (2016, 2018, 2019, 2020) to be prime representatives.

This is the first time in the Romanian context that both Evangelical and Orthodox scholars have approached the reception of the New Testament in Patristic literature in a highly critical manner. For centuries, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants have shown that

reading similar religious texts does not lead to similar conclusions. Now, we can pose the too-often-neglected question: if Evangelicals and Orthodox scholars were to read similar texts through similar lenses, would there be more compatible views? Since Evangelicals are more open to interacting with Pre-Nicene Fathers, might a common reading of the New Testament in their light be the starting point? Moreover, it is suggestive that the reception of the New Testament in the pre-Nicene writings is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet.

In early 2023, Cosmin Pricop (Assistant Lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest) and I adapted the "Some Things that are Hard to Understand" project. This constitutes the main reason for the delay of the initial volume. Five Evangelical New Testament scholars (myself included) and five Orthodox New Testament scholars (Pricop included), all Romanian, are to research five of the most obscure and disputed passages in the New Testament already mentioned: Matthew 27.51–53, Romans 9–11, 1 Corinthians 15.29, Hebrews 6.4–6, and 1 Peter 3.18–22. Each passage is analyzed by one Evangelical and one Orthodox scholar, using the same methodology: a dialogue between modern exegesis and the earliest reception of the New Testament (*c.* 90–300 CE). The two scholars are to work independently, without sharing notes or ideas. The results of the research project will be published in a volume with each passage rendered twice and in parallel, from both Evangelical and Orthodox perspectives. Following the ten contributions, two chapters will synthesize the findings, assess the utility of the approach, and estimate potential gains—including whether this method is to be applied on a larger scale, such as various international ecumenical projects. One chapter will be written from an Evangelical perspective (Drimbe), one from an Orthodox perspective (Pricop). An ending chapter, co-authored, will draw final conclusions and suggest further developments.

Could the reception of the New Testament in the Pre-Nicene writings, where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, provide common ground for a more meaningful dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox in Romania? While the theological and academic value of the project remains to be assessed after the publication of the volume, its mere existence is in itself a noteworthy achievement.

6. Conclusions

Over the past twenty-five years, Evangelical scholars in Romania have shown a growing interest in the early reception of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of the Pre-Nicene Fathers (*c.* 90–300 CE). In parallel, a new generation of Romanian Orthodox scholars has come to appreciate the importance of a critical approach to both Scripture and Christian Tradition. As a result, fresh common ground is currently taking shape in academia: a critical approach to the early reception of the New Testament. This presents an opportunity for both Evangelical and Orthodox scholars in Romania to come together and explore certain issues of faith that have not been previously explored in this way.

As the comparison between the research of Baban/Williams and that of Tofană has shown, the early reception of the New Testament approach has the potential to produce a more meaningful dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox. To further test its potential, an innovative project was initiated in early 2023. The project involves five Evangelical New Testament scholars and five Orthodox New Testament scholars, independently researching the same five obscure passages in the New Testament: Matthew 27.51–53, Romans 9–11, 1 Corinthians 15.29, Hebrews 6.4–6, and 1 Peter 3.18–22. Each passage is analyzed independently by one scholar from each denomination using the same methodology, i.e., a critical dialogue between exegesis and reception history. The resulting volume aims to assess not only the value of this approach for academic dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox in Romania, but also to estimate other potential gains should this method be applied on a larger scale, such as various international ecumenical projects.

The overarching question that is behind this project still awaits a response: if the early reception of the New Testament is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, could it also be where Evangelicals and Orthodox finally meet? In the meantime,

there is an expectation that a positive response could lead to further projects, in which passages that are more divisive for Romanian Evangelicals and Orthodox could be examined following the same methodology. In addition, this case study may inspire other similar projects in international or denominational scholarly groups, where interest in the reception of New Testament scholarship is rising.

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Notes

1 The modern state of Romania was founded in 1918, when the regions of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania were added to the United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia.

2 Although their request was rejected by the Romanian government, it shows that in 1924 there were enough Pentecostal churches to establish a confessional association. Also, in 1924, the first Pentecostal confession of faith was published in Romania (Bălăban 2022, p. 43).

3 However, the Pentecostal Theological Seminary has functioned unofficially and intermittently since 1948 (Bălăban 2016).

4 The announcement regarding the new series, *Early Christian Writers: A Commentary Series*, is available on the Gorgias Press website: https://www.gorgiaspress.com/early-christian-writers-a-commentary-series. URL (accessed on 4 September 2023).

5 Stelian Tofană is the current president of the Union of the Biblical Scholars in Romania.

6 While scholars of other denominations might also interpret Ephesians 1.4–5 in this way, this is the first time that Evangelical scholars in Romania read the text in a way that is compatible with the Orthodox view.

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Article

“Open Sobornicity” in Dumitru Stăniloae’s Theology—Christian Orthodox Creeds in the Context of Contemporary Ecumenical Relationships

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Abstract: This study analyses several of the key principles of Father Dumitru Stăniloae’s conception of Orthodox ecumenical theology. It considers the foundations, the possibilities, and the type of ecumenical manifestation, specifically regarding the relationships between Orthodox Christians and Christians of different denominations and traditions. This is a necessity as the result of the profound actual theological crisis and the lack of clarity of principles of faith at the ecumenical level across the whole Christian world. This study fills this gap by seeking to identify the doctrinal principles that define Orthodox Christian life in an ecumenical context and the manner in which such theology can be practically applied.

Keywords: sobornicity; ecumenical relationship; unity; ecumenical winter; rebooting ecumenical action

1. Introduction

This approach represents a response to what contemporary theologians refer to as the “ecumenical winter” (Ola Tjørhom 2008; Rauch 2017, pp. 88, 91), a cooling of inter-Christian, inter-religious, and even interpersonal relationships. It seems that the actual Christian world is going through a crisis of faith principles and action. In this sense, the present analysis aims to contribute to a general clarification of ecumenical Christian relationships by delineating the most important doctrinal foundations for ecumenical belief within Orthodox Christianity. This study also addresses various challenges of the Orthodox ecumenical model, and offers some practical directions for Orthodox ecumenical engagement in contemporary activities and relationships.

To achieve these goals, this text draws primarily (see for Stăniloae’s ecumenical conception: Stăniloae 1963, 1965, 1967b, 1969, 1970, 1971a, 1973) upon two articles by the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae: „Sobornicitate deschisă” (Stăniloae 1971b) and „Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere ortodox” (Stăniloae 1967a). In fact, the first part of this study is dedicated to a hermeneutical reading and systematization of the doctrinal principles of Stăniloae’s ecumenical thought. In the second part, we will attempt to provide brief responses to various challenges, objections, and questions related to the topic, proposing several practical ecumenical solutions. Such an attempt is necessary for two reasons. The first of these is that, within the Orthodox world, there is a general poverty of understanding regarding the authentic Orthodox theological grounds for ecumenical commitment. The second is that there is no precise definition for such an ecumenical commitment that is mutually assented to by all Christian traditions.

Stăniloae’s ecumenical perspective has been researched in recent years in numerous and significant studies (Sonea 2016; Jemna and Mănăstireanu 2023; Bordeianu 2013; Turcescu 2002; Mosoiu 2020; Coman 2016; Noble and Noble 2019; Bara 2022). Often, these studies have noted the specific expression “open sobornicity” as a phrase coined and utilized by the Romanian theologian in various studies, particularly in the paper with the same

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title mentioned above. This expression refers to an entire and complex theological edifice with profound implications and consequences for the ecumenical–universal dimension of the Christian life. The main elements and structure of this edifice will be presented here, along with a contextualization and an update of the theme.

2. "Open Sobornicity" or Doctrinal Foundations for an Orthodox Ecumenical Model

According to Stăniloae's theological thought, Christian life encompasses the entire divine, human, and cosmic reality within Jesus Christ. He views Christianity as the mystery par excellence of human and divine universality, a universality experienced and embraced in Jesus Christ and His Church through the Holy Spirit. This universality of Christianity is rendered by the syntagma open sobornicity. He argues that it is possible to participate in this mystery of open sobornicity within the One Church of Jesus Christ as a divine and human reality. Jesus Christ has already realized for humanity the mystery of open sobornicity as Catholicity, encompassing and perfecting the whole world and the full humanity in Himself. Catholicity, from the Greek kath'olon, means completeness/all-inclusiveness, and sobornicity, from sobornuiu, is the Slavic translation of kath'olon but with an emphasis on togetherness and fellowship (for a detailed definition of the terms see: Stăniloae 2012, pp. 79–80). Thus, the Catholicity/sobornicity of the Church constitute the foundation, calling, and the ultimate goal of all people. Through the Holy Mysteries, Christians receive the power to become Catholic/sobornic beings in Jesus Christ. Hence, the vocation and need for Orthodox Christians to be open to all people created in the image of God.

2.1. "Open Sobornicity" or the Extension in the World of the Unity of the Divine Trinity

As can be inferred from Stăniloae's theology, open sobornicity is a reality that is ultimately founded on the model of the unity and tri-hypostatic being of the Holy Trinity. Open sobornicity, as Catholicity of the Church, is grounded in the simultaneous distinction and identity of the Essence and Persons of/within the Holy Trinity. The Three Persons are the ultimate divine foundation of, and the Ones working to imprint/communicate, the mystery of the unity and sobornicity of the Church (Stăniloae 1967c, pp. 44–45). The Church teaches both the Unity/Unicity of the divine Essence and the Trinity of the divine Persons, even though these two aspects may appear contradictory. The sobornicity of the Church is determined by the simple yet complex reality of the divine Essence, through which various theological aspects—complementary and/or paradoxical—can be held in a unified conceptual framework. These antinomies ensure a balanced understanding of the unity and being of the Holy Trinity; though, as Stăniloae points out, this equilibrium retains the character of a mystery, as it encompasses contradictory aspects (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 167). Therefore, *open sobornicity* is determined by the unity of the Essence of the Holy Trinity or, in other words, by the unity of the Three hypostatic mysterious divine realities. In other words, the Unity of the Trinity is enveloped in a trinitarian apophatic mystery. Stăniloae considers the apophatic mystery of the Holy Trinity as a fundamental theological reality, as it translates/transfers the Catholic state to a personal level. He understands God, through the apophatic mystery, as being the Creator of the human person, both in body and soul, and as the origin of his both Catholic consciousness and action. This is explained as the result of the divine unity of the Holy Trinity which is the source of the infinite and the unbroken sobornicity of all creation. The Christian can have and should acquire, through a relationship of love with God—the Triune Divine Being—a Catholic, read universal/total wholeness, existence.

In this sense, Orthodox Christians are called to participate in the *open sobornicity* of the Church by working towards the transparency and continuous transcendence of their spiritual state. In order to achieve this transparency, they are called to be one with all humanity as God is One. Thus, they have to embrace, based on the fullness of divine revelation, the theological pluralism of perceptions of God in the context of various Christian confessions. The Romanian theologian explains this by stating that the divine mystery of

God's unity is so profound that any approach to it, even by the humblest soul, constitutes an act of theology (Stăniloae 1971b, pp. 178–79). Through participation in the mystery of God and, implicitly, in the *open sobornicity* of the Church, every Orthodox Christian is called to encompass and assume these multiple, complex, and pluralistic realities of the religious phenomenon of their own growth. This involves showing openness to all those who do not fully know God (Stăniloae 1971b, pp. 178–79). This is because the Holy Trinity continues to work "beyond" the sacramental–canonical realm of Jesus Christ's Church (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 528). In fact, God acts as the Creator of the world and does not "transgress" the "boundaries" of the Church, but works, insofar as it is possible, for Church activation in the entire world. That is like a mysterious and free action of God that allows Orthodox Christians to transcend the limitations of forms, rituals, words, and ecclesiastical institutions (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 175). *Open sobornicity* is not only a possibility, but also a de facto condition of the Church. It depends on the members of the Church, following Jesus Christ's example, to be open to all people without demanding a response. This is about recognizing in all people the traces of God's work, even if they do not wish to be in communion with Him and the Church. This theological perspective about humanity and the world, based on the unconditional divine work, makes the Church alive, infallible, and certain in terms of salvation and sanctification of the faithful. This perspective also prevents Orthodox Christianity from becoming rigid within narrow and legalistic confines (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 175). Guided by this principle of the Orthodox faith, rituals, church practices, acts of worship, and words, etc., can and should become transparent to God. They should be opportunities for a living transcendence towards God, a vibrant experience of connection with Him (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 175).

Understandably, this is possible because Orthodoxy, as *open sobornicity,* surpasses any religious protocol of manifesting faith. It is not about the forms of religious worship, it is rather about the divine life of God as shared, communicated, and present in all humankind. Thus, the Orthodox Christians are called to live this life in communion with God and with the entire world as a life in Christ, and not to focus exclusively on rituals and forms of venerating God.

Open sobornicity, as highlighted by Stăniloae, protects us from absolutizing an idea, concept, or a form concerning God and His work in the world, as might be found predominantly or exclusively in the various Christian confessional spaces. For instance, there is a significant emphasis in the Evangelical Christian tradition of Scripture and in the Roman Catholic tradition on ecclesiastical unity. Going beyond the Protestant or Catholic experience, Orthodox Christians can actualize and give a greater importance to the fullness of revelation expressed in the Church by the Scripture. Through the unity of the Church and its administration from a historical perspective, Orthodox theology allows for this holistic approach without making exclusive the various expressions of the faithful. In this sense, Stăniloae states that: "it might be considered that God Himself guides us toward this framing of everything that other Christian communities have experienced in such a sobornicity" (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 175).

For the Romanian theologian, the Catholicity of the Church, as well as its unity and holiness, are understood as being grounded and sourced in God, in Jesus Christ, who resides in and works through the Holy Spirit (Stăniloae 2012, p. 80). In other words, the unity of the Trinity of Persons is extended as an action of salvation through Jesus Christ within the Church. Through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity imparts to the Church and the faithful of every age the fullness of the holiness and unity of the Holy Trinity. God reveals, in a way beyond comprehension, all the mysteries *in* and *beyond* the Church and throughout all of creation. As a result, the *open sobornicity* of the Church is paradoxically conditioned by the various ways in which God works in the world beyond or activates in all of creation the sacramental–canonical space of the Church. The fact that the divine work of the Holy Trinity is carried out throughout all of creation, and that this work is personally perceived and uniquely received by the members of the human community, *opens up* and activates the sobornicity of the Church at a pan-human level. Moreover, as

Stăniloae observes, the modes, acts, and forms of the divine revelation should not be seen as ultimate realities, but rather as transparencies of God, modes through which acts of God's Existence and *oikonomia* (the work of salvation) are revealed and communicated (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 173). We must acknowledge that, beyond the fullness of the divine work and revelation, "the ways Christians have expressed God up until now have a value, but also a certain awareness of incompleteness" (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 173). It is not the work and presence of God that is incomplete, but rather the level of perception, assumption, and expression of the divine mysteries shared with humanity in general and with Orthodox Christians within the Church more specifically. It is not that the Church or the revelation of God within the Church are incomplete, but rather that the forms of revelation are limited due to the human condition of the Church's members.

2.2. The Christ–Cosmological Dimension of Oikonomic Work and the "Open Sobornicity" of the Orthodox Mission in the World

The fundamental oikonomic basis (from *oikonomia* or the salvific work of Jesus Christ) of *open sobornicity* is none other than the divine and human Person of Jesus Christ. For Stăniloae, the interconnectedness of people and God's work within and beyond the Church arises from the fact that "all things and all persons are held in the unified network of rational principles (λογοὶ τῶν ὄντων) radiating like threads from the divine Logos, and all are gathered, as they work and develop in accordance with those principles, into the unity of the Logos, with all their amplified richness" (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 528).

Expanding and applying the theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor about the eternal reasons/principles of creation (λογοὶ τῶν ὄντων) to the present context, Stăniloae emphasizes the inter-relationship of all humans with creation in the unity of the Divine Logos from Whom these reasons/principles spring. This means that, within the existential substrate of humans, there is an array of uncreated reasons (λογοὶ τῶν ὄντων) that are activated in their diversity and unity simultaneously when a person is connected to the incarnate divine Logos, Jesus Christ. The Romanian theologian underscores the universal dimension of cosmic reasons (λογοί) and general cosmic rationality as the foundations for the spiritual and existential development of man as a rationality in himself and within the broader reality of creation (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 530). This development occurs in connection with Jesus Christ, the new Adam who fulfils the universal vocation of humanity to become divine by grace and action. Thus, open sobornicity originates from the fact that Jesus Christ, as the incarnate Logos, "came unto his own" (John 1:11), which is to say that He assumed and perfected all things in Himself so that we "might receive the abundance of His grace" (John 1:16). In other words, through a mystery beyond understanding, Jesus Christ is fully present in creation and humanity, enlightening every person entering the world (John 1:9). Open sobornicity aims at this "light within people", that Jesus Christ is present latently in every human being, whether they have chosen to unite with Him or not.

From the Pauline theology, which the Romanian theologian employs to support the concept of open sobornicity, it emerges that God desires through His unique oikonomic plan to share with all people the inexhaustible wealth of His divine life (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 173). Therefore, His Son was sent into the world as the Savior of the entire cosmos (Σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου/ John 4:42) as and through the divine human reality of the Church. Jesus Christ died for all people so that all may be sanctified through Him. Jesus Christ, as a Man, calls all people brethren and is not ashamed to do so (Hebrews 2:11).

On the other hand, the Orthodox Christian mission does not involve preaching a gospel message "to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:23) in the sense of mere religious information about the Person of Jesus Christ. Instead, it implies an *open sobornicity* through which we discover Jesus Christ in one another and in all of creation. This is because the Church and creation are full of Jesus Christ. He is active sacramentally through the Holy Spirit throughout the ages in the Church, and He is also active in all of humanity through the *open sobornicity* of the Church. In this sense, we understand how the human

aspect of the Church is built (Ephesians 4:12). It requires building because not all humans have activated within themselves the gifts of Jesus Christ's saving oikonomia.

Hence, those entrusted with the mission of the Orthodox Church do not preach a Christ of their own, but they strive to identify His work in the world and in all people in order to reveal His full presence in His Church. This Missionary dimension of the Church prevents Orthodoxy from proselytism and from adopting a superior attitude towards other Christians or other people. Non-Orthodox fellow persons may sometimes be recipients of a less-than-perfect religious system of assistance, but they are nevertheless mysteries of the work and presence of Jesus Christ. In other words, I, as an Orthodox Christian, need the other so that Jesus Christ can fully work within me. In the context of the Orthodox mission, Stăniloae believes that *open sobornicity* can be experienced and manifested even in human creations of a cultural, technological, scientific, etc., nature. These creations can be a challenge but also a platform for expressing and actualizing the sobornicity of the Church. In this regard, the Romanian theologian affirms:

> "It has become evident that deepening the higher meanings of the Gospel gains much today through the enrichment of the human spirit, due to modern progress that appreciably brings to life latent human potentials that were previously dormant. On the other hand, this enrichment and actualisation do not occur in human groups confined within narrow boundaries, but rather in a very extensive circulation of ideas, modes of approaching nature, and life's problems [. . .]. This means that the Church itself must maintain a vibrant connection with all humanity, which, especially in the new era, enriches itself astonishingly through its experience within the universal horizon" (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 530).

2.3. The Need for "Open Sobornicity" Stemming from the Apostolicity of the Church

Another theological characteristic of *open sobornicity*, as elucidated by Stăniloae, is its Apostolic foundation. Catholicity, in the fullest sense of the word, is the active realization in all Christians, in complete communion, of the entire treasure of truth and life, brought into the world and in the Church by Jesus Christ on the foundation of the Apostles. Catholicity or sobornicity is the perfect Christian unity in confessing and living the Apostolic heritage of all Christians. For the Romanian theologian, the One Church, toward which every ecumenical endeavor aspires, is the Apostolic and Catholic Church. Without Apostolicity, he argues, sobornicity loses its significance. On the other hand, without sobornicity, Apostolicity or the divine revelation in Jesus Christ cannot be fully known and actualized. It cannot fulfil its purpose, develop all human dimensions, and fully perfect any believer (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 516). The Orthodox Church considers the unity of Christians from different Christian traditions achievable in the unity of faith and in the integral content of the teaching of faith or divine revelation preached by the Apostles (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 524). Apostolicity is not merely a judge/evaluator across time to the faith of the Church and its conciliar work, but it is also the connecting point for all Catholic manifestations throughout history. It is the basis of unity and the foundational stone of the Church. "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18) refers to the faith and confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the God–Man crucified and resurrected on the third day from the tomb. *Open sobornicity* is not a relativization of the Orthodox Christian faith in the infinite realm of ideas and religious beliefs. It is not an assimilation of Orthodoxy within the general space of religious creeds, but an identification of the revealed foundations of Orthodox faith, taking into account the various Christian and religious contexts and placing them on the rock of Apostolic faith.

What Stăniloae asserts is that sobornicity cannot exist without Apostolicity, and vice versa. This reality implies that any ecclesial gathering and conciliar work must be established on an in Apostolic foundation and place, respectively, on a basis and in a house of faith, which is primarily that of the Holy Apostles. This House (which is the human perspective of the Church) has grown and risen in many aspects, yet on the foundation of the faith and the life of the Apostles.

Conversely, Apostolicity without the conciliar openness toward the world would remain an enclave of peculiar people who witnessed a Man risen from the dead, keeping this secret to themselves in order not to be deprived of the gifts due to the first participants in such miracles. Such a stance would seriously call into question the reality of the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The message and content of the resurrection mystery must be shared with the entire world from all times, grounded in the Apostles, and this is achieved as the *open sobornicity* of the Church of Jesus Christ.

2.4. The Providential and Oikonomic Catholic Work of God: The "Latent Church"

What constituted a topic of debate for many theologians (see Florovsky 1989, p. 34) of the past century is the possibility that God works in the entire world through the Church, including beyond the Church and through the Church in the whole of humanity and creation. For the Romanian theologian, it is evident that God's work transcends the "boundaries" of the Church and Christianity (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 527). He even speaks of a "Latent Church" hidden within each human person, waiting to be activated through the work of Jesus Christ, and even through the activity of the members of the One Church upon the world and humanity in general.

From Stăniloae's perspective, the Church is a cosmic mystery that surpasses or/and activates the sacramental–canonical reality tied to a specific space and time. It is connected to the sacramental eternal presence of the Holy Trinity throughout the whole cosmos. Thus, the Church is called to be open to the world and to the presence of God within it. The Romanian theologian emphasizes that God works in the world not only through the Church, but also through all and diverse people. He works in the world and in the Church through human persons who may or may not be canonical members of the Orthodox Church. For this reason, through the *open sobornicity* of the Church, He envisions the universal redemptive and sanctifying oikonomia or the will of God that operates in all mankind, in His Church, and throughout creation:

> "The Church must always be open to the world and its movement, in order to understand God's work within it, to testify to the world about God's consent to its movement, and to wholeheartedly support it. Christ sent His disciples as trusting lambs into the midst of the world, not to halt the world's development, but to testify to God's love for the world. The Church is made up of people who confess Christ in the midst of the world, upholder of everything that occurs in the world (Pantocrator)[. . .].God works not only through the Church upon human persons but also through human persons—within or beyond the Church—upon the Church. Therefore, it (the Church) needs to be open to God's will, both when it is sent to work upon human persons and when asked to listen and see His work within human persons" (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 531).

The theological principle on which Stăniloae bases his conception that God works through the Church in His world and beyond the Church's "boundaries" (which is not a restrictive or non-inclusive perspective, but refers to the work of Jesus Christ to activate His Church in the whole of humanity grounded on the free will of every human person to be in communion with Him) is that the Son of God became incarnate, assuming "a human nature that was not yet the Church" (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 528). This means that all of human persons from all times, regardless of their respective social, cultural, or religious contexts, are recapitulated in His human nature and in His unique Hypostasis, and are assumed through *enhyposthasis*. That is to say that all humanity is Hyposthasized in His Hypostasis, which is before ages and without beginning.

On the other hand, he points out that the New Testament presents cases where God works directly upon particular persons without the mediation of the Apostles' preaching—that is, without the mediation of the Church (the centurion in the Gospels, Saul, Cornelius, etc.). The most notable case is that of the Holy Apostle Paul (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 528). He received the revelation and the entire Church experience "outside" the Church. Additionally, Stăniloae argues that general experience confirms that God applies His judgment upon

those who are not part of the Church, as they have not fulfilled His will written in their hearts (Romans 1:18–22; 2:14) (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 528). Based on this foundation, Stăniloae speaks of a "Latent Church" of those who fulfil God's will outside the ecclesiastical organizations (Stăniloae 1967a, p. 530). By this, he does not refer to the Protestant idea of the invisible Church, but to the real presence of Jesus Christ in various Christian or non-Christian believers who follow the "law of nature" (Romans 2:14). The "Latent Church" implies that God is present potentially through Jesus Christ within the souls of all human persons, and this latency is activated when the person in question seeks and encounters the "Living Church" in Jesus Christ. This can be accomplished as *open sobornicity*, aiming at the depths of every human person's soul and the oikonomic presence and work of God within them.

The "Latent Church" signifies that, from a human perspective, the Church of Jesus Christ, though perfected in Jesus Christ, continues to be activated over time and in human persons as God is sought by them. This means they do not convert as an act of joining the Church but rather discover and activate the Church within themselves through the pursuit of God's will and its fulfilment in their own lives. They discover the "Latent Church" within their own souls. It is more an act of actualization than one of conversion. Conversion, rather, involves aligning one's life with the life of the Church or of Jesus Christ.

2.5. Divine Revelation Is Contextually Activated as "Open Sobornicity"

For Orthodox theology, the realities of faith are not inventions or discoveries made by any human person regarding the mystery of the Absolute Being. Orthodox Christianity is the revelation that God Himself made and makes to humanity about Himself through the sending of Jesus Christ into the world. Revelation constitutes the main pillar of the righteous faith, a faith that is not verified "scientifically," but rather through faith itself. God has historically revealed Himself to all humanity and continues to reveal Himself sacramentally to all human persons after His Ascension to heaven, assuring us that "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

Stăniloae establishes his thesis about *open sobornicity* in this work of achieved revelation, historically concluded through the Ascension of the Lord Christ, but still open concerning its actualization in Christians of every era. Thus, *open sobornicity* is understood as both a theological mystery, and the action of assuming and actualizing divine revelation in the Church. This is understood from the perspective of general Christianity and the universality of all people, beyond their confessional, religious, and social contexts.

In this regard, Stăniloae affirms:

> "Sobornicity cannot be a theory but a practice. Sobornicity must actually be a living communion of faith; it is the Christian universality in the form of communion. It is not only the universal unity of Christians in the form of communion but also the all-encompassing unity of the Christian teaching lived by the universal and free community of Christians. It is equivalent to the universality of the aspects of divine revelation, perceived by all human perspectives and made for the common good of the universal human community. It must be the council of the whole world, in which all Christians bring their understanding of the entire revealed divine reality and the entire human reality seen in the light of integral revelation, to share it with all and for everyone to partake in the understanding of all" (Stăniloae 1971b, pp. 171–72).

In other words, from the human perspective, *open sobornicity* is the work of actualizing the fullness of revelation in the Orthodox Church in relation to Christians of various Christian denominations. As argued by Father Stăniloae, at the level of each Orthodox Christian Orthodox sobornicity must be developed and be grown in accordance with the *spiritual values* that other Christians have actualized through their faith in Jesus Christ. The fact that they have emphasized certain aspects of faith allows these aspects to be further explored, which can provide Orthodox believers with the opportunity to activate their faith with already elaborated elements. For instance, Catholics have worked extensively on the

aspect of the Church's unity, sometimes to the detriment of this unity (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 171). This point of faith can be useful and critically embraced for the actualization of the faith of the Christian Orthodox faithful. The unity of the Church in the human realm is also discussed in the Orthodox Church, and can draw from what Roman Catholics have accomplished. Therefore, the predominant development of certain elements of revelation in the expression and manifestation of faith in different Christian denominations is not just a discordant and different note from Orthodoxy but mainly an opportunity for the Orthodox Christian to activate some aspects of faith that have already been worked on. For sure, this must be done with full accuracy in accord with the fulness of revelation.

Thus, as highlighted by Stăniloae, the fulness of revelation in the Orthodox Church requires sobornicity to be activated at the human level of Orthodox Christians. A true Catholicity/sobornicity is the integrity of divine revelation of the Orthodox Church, fully and continually actualized by the Christian Orthodox community in full communion with the entire community of fellow human persons (Stăniloae 1967a, pp. 517–18). *Open sobornicity* shields the Orthodox Faithful from attachment to a single aspect of revelation or even to a select few of them. The Church of Christ practices an *open sobornicity;* that is to say, a transparency to any concept or system, surpassing the narrow and unilateral level of simple ideas of faith:

> "She (Orthodoxy) is shielded from the absolutisation of an idea or form, through the richness of her forms. Therefore, she has an easier possibility of achieving a transcendence toward God, through all the ways in which He revealed Himself and which the Orthodoxy applies in her worship and devout life. At the same time, she has an easier possibility of incorporating among these modes, even those modes retained or unilaterally emphasized in Protestantism or Catholicism, while liberating them, of course, from the exclusive emphasis placed on them in those confessions" (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 175).

Open sobornicity makes sense not only from an Orthodox perspective but also from the perspective of the Christian world and of creation in general. Divine revelation discloses to all Christians, to all humans, and even to creation in general, the significance accorded to them by God Himself. This fact can be realized as *open sobornicity* and the full activation of divine revelation of the member of the Church in Orthodoxy:

> "In this open sobornicity or universality and in a continuous movement in a vertical and horizontal sense, not only the types and forms in the Church or in the Christian world receive importance, but all aspects of the world. The words, acts, and images used in revelation highlight the purpose of all types, forms, thoughts, and words of creation in interpreting the divine reality; the human person appears in the light of revelation in all its breadth, in a continuous movement of actualization and transcendence, as an expressive image of God" (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 179).

As *open sobornicity*, according to the Romanian theologian, Orthodoxy shows itself through its members to be free from any unilateral attachment to one single aspect of faith. All external aspects of expressing faith, the symbolic nature of the teachings of faith, the acts of worship, and the general forms of expressing faith are transcended and become transparent to God. These are opportunities for living transcendence toward God through the practice of *open sobornicity* (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 175).

Everything that people generally, and Christians of different confessions more specifically, perceive and produce as spiritual meanings and senses of the divine are premises for the continuous advancement of Orthodox Christians in the mystery of faith under the operation of an *open sobornicity* toward all people: "Christians can make use of all human acts and words in continuous progress to know God better" (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 180). Embracing all modes of revealing and expressing God in the world would, in Stăniloae's view, lead Christians to an ongoing advancement toward the infinite spiritual richness of God (Stăniloae 1971b, p. 178). Therefore, all Christians must strive to embrace all aspects

of revelation and thus reach their unity in God, alongside all Christians who seek and see God beyond the forms of His revelation. This refers to individual Christians, not to the Church which encompasses and holds within it the fulness of divine revelation and all the possibilities of expressing God.

3. Open Sobornicity: Current Diagnoses, Challenges, and Responses—The Possibility of an Ecumenical Theological Project

It seems that, based on the above, we could gain an understanding not only of the possibility of ecumenical action and relations from an Orthodox perspective but more importantly, of the theological need for such an endeavor (Yeftici 1972; Sauca 2004). However, this possibility remains sensitive and a challenge to Christians. An important challenge in particular is to fulfil one of the most central Gospel commandments: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:31). In Christ's Evangelical meaning, the neighbor is "the other", beyond their social, cultural, or religious condition. Yet, this commandment and task has been subject to numerous interpretations and implementations, involving continuous struggles leading to confusion, misunderstandings, and crises.

3.1. Ecumenical Relations at a Standstill? Current Diagnoses

Since the 1970s, ecumenical relations have faced challenges and crises, many of which persist to this day. In one of his studies, Stăniloae commented on observations made by Cardinal Jan Willebrands regarding ecumenical Christian themes. The latter pointed out three sources of these ecumenical crises: *the problem of contesting official Church structures, the problem of hermeneutics, and the problem of secularization* (Stăniloae 1970, p. 296). Stăniloae argued—at least at the time he wrote his reflections—that these three challenges were not as prevalent within Orthodoxy and that Orthodoxy could offer solutions to overcome the ecclesial contestation within Roman Catholicism, the hermeneutical issues of Scripture in Protestantism, and the secularization present especially in the Western world (Stăniloae 1970, pp. 298–99).

Although these three issues used to be primarily identified in the Western context, they have now significantly affected Orthodox spaces as well. Additionally, contemporary challenges propagated by the "new world" include the destabilization of moral, ecclesiastical, and social principles, virtual "reality", transhumanist anthropological drifts, artificial intelligence, and others. All these challenges pose threats to humanity in general, particularly concerning the fulfilment of human nature as a communitarian reality in a relationship of faith with others.

The ecumenical crisis continues, therefore, both within the frameworks of the different Christian confessions, but also in terms of the bilateral and multilateral relations of Christians. This is because human societies face assaults not only on their communitarian identities but also on their personal identities. Multiple factors contribute to the confusion of human persons who struggle to attain real fulfilment.

Within the broader context of Christian life, the desire for an ecumenical Christian identity, unity, consciousness, and action has often been fragmented and interrupted by the societal scourge of individualism and by the religious shallowness and complacency of various Christians. In the collective Christian world, the awareness of the need for Christian unity has been treated in widely diverse manners. Sometimes, it has been marginalized and overshadowed by confessional and personal individualistic expressions and enclaves. Other times, the desire for faith unity has been intentionally transferred or restricted to ecclesiastical hierarchical factors, actions, and decisions, approached administratively by ecclesial authorities. The desire for faith unity has not represented a constant in understanding, living, and practicing Christianity, as Stăniloae emphasized.

This process has involved numerous emotions and predominantly human aspirations after centuries of separation and conflict. The underlying issue of the ecumenical reality, its foundations, challenges, and goals, have rarely been understood by many. For example, in the early decades of the last century, the desire for unity and Eucharistic intercommunion

was often quickly pursued under the banner of "love" (Stăniloae 1973, p. 169), sometimes exclusively. However, as Stăniloae pointed out, "the contemporary impasse of ecumenism comes from separating love from the knowledge of God, from the knowledge of the truth" (Stăniloae 1967b, p. 290). Unity built on love devoid of truth is destined to fail. Thus, Stăniloae somewhat prophetically stated nearly half a century ago:

> "Contemporary ecumenism places a more serious task upon theologians and representatives of the Churches, and all Christians, than that of academic discussions, very general diplomatic formulas, or sentimental declarations of love that do not translate into actions. It requires abandoning the pride of imposing a truth without love or the pride of refusing a truth or coddling it in the name of love" (Stăniloae 1967b, p. 290).

On the other hand, it has been challenging to recognize the truth that Eucharistic *intercommunion* arises from a shared and identical faith rooted in the Church of all times. *Intercommunion* can only be established and founded upon the unity of faith. As the goal of ecumenical actions, the unity of faith has been a more or less well-founded concern based on the theology of the Church Fathers as the Romanian theologian and notable Stăniloae hermeneut Anca Manolache underlines: "The origin of the Church's unity lies in the One God in Trinity of Persons, in the incarnation of the Only-Begotten Son, and then in the source and symbol of unity, the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist" (Manolache 1969, p. 576).

Frequently, there has been a premature and superficial transition to dialogues that have often hindered and blocked the inner search for unity in Christ Himself. Ecumenical relations have been confined to concerns more related to the societal comprehension of faith or the phenomenology of faith. As Stăniloae observed many years ago, ecumenical relations have been marked by facile enthusiasm and a predominantly diplomatic spirit, leading to the creation of numerous ecumenical institutions and structures, but more importantly, to confusion:

> "The ecumenical movement has the undeniable merit of bringing heightened concern for unity in the lives of the Churches and encouraging them to engage in dialogue for this purpose. However, among the many ideas and expressions it has sparked, there are some that can produce confusion and sometimes relativize certainties of faith, even the most fundamental ones. The will for unity has sometimes given rise to facile enthusiasm, which believes that it can easily soften and shape realities through its sentimental warmth, or sometimes to a transactional diplomatic spirit, which believes that it can reconcile certain positions or realities through compromise that keeps the Churches divided" (Stăniloae 1971a, p. 561).

The conception presented by Stăniloae and systematized in the above pages could propose a predominantly "non-institutional" and un-orchestrated Christian ecumenical action, which should animate all those who believe in Jesus Christ based on the existence and vocation of their Catholic/sobornic nature and faith. Every Christian should delve into the divine oikonomia of Jesus Christ and then attempt to identify it in others, under the banner of an "open sobornicity". This perspective, which is rarely encountered in contemporary theology, can lay the groundwork for an organic ecumenical action rooted in Jesus Christ and be embraced and followed by all who believe in Him and follow Him. It is not merely an emotional openness but a theological–spiritual process regarding the Church. Only the Church, in its extension and the ongoing human actualization of its Catholic quality in Jesus Christ, can encompass all within itself. However, not all perspectives mentioned above might be positively received and interpreted by all Christians. At least two criticisms could be raised against Stăniloae's vision: Orthodox-centrism and correlative ecclesiology/interconfessional relativism.

3.2. *"Open Sobornicity" or Orthodox-Centrism?*

The first criticism that could be raised against Stăniloae's theological–ecumenical vision might come from all non-Orthodox Christian traditions. The *open sobornicity* is,

unequivocally, an *open sobornicity* of the members of the Orthodox Church toward other Christians. According to Stăniloae, the consciousness of Orthodox believers is that the Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ throughout all times (Stăniloae 2012, p. 66).

However, this belief and witness about the Church is practiced by almost all the various Christian denominations in their own respective traditions. This raises a series of questions: Can *open sobornicity* be practiced within other Christians ecclesiologies? What is ultimately the One Holy Church? What would be the contribution of such a vision since it can only be founded on Orthodox theology? How can ecumenical relations between Christians be re-established, revitalized, and developed based on the *open sobornicity* of the Orthodox Church?

The theological debates aimed at identifying the One Church have already taken place and will continue to unfold. These debates have arisen either from the desire to impose a particular denomination's belief about the One Church on the entire Christian world or from the sincere desire to discover the true One Church. The Orthodox response is that the Church of Jesus Christ cannot be discerned and identified except through the complete reference of all Christians throughout all times to the fullness of the revelation and the salvific oikonomia of Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, whoever embarks on the quest for the One Church in relation to Jesus Christ will find it.

Regarding the practice of *open sobornicity* by each Christian denomination in relation to their ecclesiology, this can be both a challenge and a significant point of convergence. If all Christians were to practice *open sobornicity* in the sense proposed by Stăniloae, then each Christian, regardless of denomination, would relate to the presence of God in the other. Until all Christians universally assent to the Catholic Church, the One Church, and until all agree how *open sobornicity* can be theologically applied considering the multitude of ecclesiological concepts, all Christians will be able to identify, for Christ's sake, the divine mystery of God's love for humanity in each other. This sincere pursuit could contribute to the unity of faith—a unity not based on different confessional notions, but on Jesus Christ Himself. As Stăniloae would argue, any denomination, and specifically any Christian of different traditions entering into dialogue and ecumenical relationships with others, should primarily aim to see God's work in them and in their traditions. Therefore, beyond identifying the One Church, every Christian living and acting in the spirit of *open sobornicity* will seek Jesus Christ and His presence in the other. Each Christian is called to do this while considering Jesus Christ in the fullness of His salvific and sanctifying work within His Church, all people, and the world. *Open sobornicity* does not promote a platform for exchanging ideas and beliefs between each Christian tradition or religion; rather, it seeks, from a human perspective, to activate in each Christian through their relationship with other Christians, the One Church with all the gifts and teachings that Jesus Christ shared within humanity.

In conclusion, the Church is and will remain One, belonging to and being one with Jesus Christ. Orthodox theology firmly professes the Orthodox Church as the One Holy Church. Nevertheless, based on the foundation of *open sobornicity* proposed by Stăniloae, all Christians, beyond their beliefs and those of their respective denomination, should seek signs of the presence and work of Jesus Christ in each other. This convergence, which emphasizes "the other", ultimately places the emphasis on Jesus Christ Himself, the only One who can lead Christians to the unity of faith and to His Church. Through the mystery of His oikonomical action, the "other" is in fact Christ Himself (Mt. 25, 45). Thus, as St. Maximus affirms, to be Christian is to be "Christ". Therefore, for being Christian we have

> "to make ourselves partakers of God in His fulness, and to become, through Grace, gods in our own fulness, such that we may be considered to be Him in every sense, without an identification with Him in essence" (Maximus 1865b, coll. 376B).

In other words, the principle that has been outlined concerning Orthodox Christians could be applied by all Christians who believe in Jesus Christ and believe that they are

inheritors of the One Church, whether this holds true for all or not. Only Jesus Christ guarantees the sobornicity of the Church and its quality of being One, as well as guaranteeing the full participation of the Christian in His Church. In this sense, it should be noted that Orthodox believers, although affirming the fullness of the Orthodox faith, should not confess or present Christian doctrine as a possession of their Orthodoxy. They are not possessors of the truth; rather, they participate in Orthodoxy to the extent that they follow Jesus Christ in His salvific and sanctifying work within His Church, all people, and the world. This sensitivity to the presence of Jesus Christ in the other and in the world, even if it is perceived to varying degrees and not fully realized in all, can lead to an ecumenical relationship in which partners are more than just Christians among the other religious beliefs, as has been attempted in theological dialogues.

Rather, they are to be understood as Christians in a relationship with each other that they establish through or in Jesus Christ Himself. It is a theological relationship in three, with Jesus Christ as the Head. This is not a human understanding among Christians based on their faith (which will never happen), but an ecumenical relationship in Jesus Christ, with each person seeking Jesus Christ in the other and allowing themselves to be led by Jesus Christ to the other. By maintaining and following the same principle of participation rather than the adherence or ownership of the Mystery of the Church, all Christians can meet, discern, edify, and grow in the *open sobornicity* of the salvific work of Jesus Christ and the One Church.

Certainly, this perspective is not to diminish the heresy or the unrevealed elements of one Christian tradition or another. But, if we focus on heresy it is quite difficult to move beyond it, and furthermore we can only be healed by Jesus Christ, the Savior. That is why an authentic ecumenical relationship could be realized when all Christians seek to find the Face of Jesus Christ in the other. The shortcomings and heresies of others will be addressed by the One who alone can say: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). This does not mean that heresies and schisms will cease, or that they will not need to be identified as such, but in relationships between people in general and between Christians in particular, they should be motivated by the love they have for God and the quest to become more like Him in the way He loves. For Christians, this *Love* is not merely a sentiment, but carries the name of Jesus Christ. Orthodox Christians, even though they testify that the Orthodox Church is the One Holy Church, do not constitute the Church by adhering to it; rather, the Church makes them Orthodox Christians through sacramental participation in God's oikonomia and love for humanity, in the Mysterious Body of Jesus Christ—the Church. Therefore, the quality of the Church is not determined by its members but by her Head—Jesus Christ. They participate in the Body of Jesus, but do not determine or possess the Church of Jesus Christ.

Thus, as it is seen by Stăniloae from the Orthodox perspective regarding the personal quality of each Christian, it is unknown who participates more in Jesus Christ's mystery and work, the Orthodox or the non-Orthodox. This is understood from the fact that Saul was outside of the community of the Church when he saw and spoke with Jesus Christ in Light on the way to Damascus. This is not to say that the Orthodox Church is a transconfessional or unhinged reality; rather, it is about every faithful individual living in relation with Jesus Christ. As Saint Maximus the Confessor writes, by imitating that One in all things as Master and Lord, you have made yourself another Him/ἄλλον Ἐκεῖνον (Maximus 1865a, coll. 624D). Yet, the personal quality of one's relation and participation in Christ is not equal to the quality of the presence of Christ in His Church. Nevertheless, there is a difference in the presence of Jesus Christ in Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians because of the Sacrament of Baptism grounded in the One Church of Christ, the Orthodox Church. It was after the great vision of Jesus Christ that Saul was baptized and received the Holy Spirit in the One Church of Christ (Act 9: 17–18).

On the other hand, to be Orthodox, as Stăniloae mentioned, one must see God in "the other". The experience of Christ's contemporaries has proven that even those who were waiting for Jesus Christ ended up missing Him. In the Christian context, an Orthodox

Christian is "better" than a non-Orthodox Christian only when they can follow Jesus Christ to the Cross, to death, and can die for sinners or heretics, just as Jesus Christ did. This Evangelical principle applies to every Christian of any Christian tradition. If this Evangelical (John 15:13) and Pauline (Romans 5:8) principle is followed by all Christians, it can lead to convergence precisely because it leads to Jesus Christ. Therefore, if we were to conventionally label these relationships "ecumenism", then an ecumenism of the relationship of each individual with Jesus Christ and of each Christian with the Orthodox Christians could be established; an ecumenism of seeking Jesus Christ that could unite us and bestow upon us the mystery of true faith's unity. Until then, practically, we are all called to *metanoia* and transformation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17), and to follow Jesus Christ "wherever He goes" (Luke 9:57). This is the primary disposition; the forms of these relationships will emerge through the search, pursuit, and common deepening into the mystery of Christ: "Christ, who is your life" (Colossians 3:4).

3.3. Open Sobornicity or Correlative Ecclesiology/Interconfessional Relativism?

Another criticism that could be raised regarding Stăniloae's perspective on *open sobornicity*, this time by some Orthodox believers, is the potential for a vague or correlative ecclesiology. It might be inferred from what Stăniloae stated that, through the theology of „open sobornicity", he supports a syncretic, globalist, collective–impersonal ecclesiology. Some could compare his principles to the ecclesiological theory of branches within Protestantism (Cunningham 2009, p. 8). In other words, the Romanian theologian might be seen as suggesting that parts of the Church form the Church through association—a kind of "federative" Church.

For some Orthodox believers, the fact that Stăniloae perceives God's work as also being carried out outside the Orthodox Church, along with his insistence that we should be receptive and participate in this outside divine work, could suggest a relative constitution of the Church and Orthodoxy. It might seem that Orthodox believers need others to identify and present themselves as members of the Church. This could be termed *correlative ecclesiology*, which defines itself in relation to the various Christian denominations that also call themselves churches. This Orthodox sensitivity is ancient and tied to the canonical character of Orthodox ecclesiology. In fact, God's action is not outside the Church. It is the dynamic activation of His Church in different people from the perspective of communion with the Holy Trinity which leads them to a full participation in Jesus Christ's Church. The Church is governed by canons, but especially by the foundations of faith or dogmas. The Christological dogma of Chalcedon speaks about the *homoousios* of Jesus Christ with human persons, but also about the *homoousios* of human persons with Jesus Christ (Stăniloae 1974, p. 574), without specifying that this *homoousios* concerns only the "inside" canonical limits of the Church. According to the perspective of the Romanian theologian, this *homoousios* can be activated within the Church through the practice of *open sobornicity*.

Sensitivities related to the canonical boundaries of the Church have recently been highlighted, especially following the Pan-Orthodox Synod in Crete (Marcu 2023, p. 8). The reference alone to certain "Christian" traditions during the Crete Synod, to non-orthodox Christian traditions—without explicitly naming them as churches—has led to numerous debates, conflicts, and even schisms. The major accusation against the Synod, which interchangeably uses the term "church" with the Orthodox Church and with the different churches and Christian traditions, led to the interpretation that this practice diminishes the quality of the Orthodox Church as *Una Sancta Ecclesiae*. This approach could be seen to argue for a relativistic ecclesiology of synthesis and reciprocity.

In the broader Christian world, most denominations claim to be churches. Similarly, most people believe that everyone should unite in one Church, which some identify with their own church, while others suggest a confederative church. Clearly, this cannot happen. It would lead to interconfessional relativism and the absence of an Evangelical and theologically sound ecclesiology. The Church is One because it is identical to the

Body of the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ, built on the faith and foundation of the Apostles. This criticism can be addressed by noting that Stăniloae does not consider the Church of Christ to be an open reality in the sense of ecclesiological pluralism, but rather a manifestation of the *homoousios* character and sobornicity/Catholicity of Jesus Christ in relation to the world and humanity. His perspective does not imply the existence of multiple churches or that the Orthodox Church will find its identity in relation to various denominations and Christian traditions. *Open sobornicity* is the mysterious identification of the Church with the "latent Church" or the cosmic–universal ecclesial reality that St. Maximus the Confessor speaks of in his Mystagogy (Maxim, ch. II–IV). In other words, after completing and perfecting the oikonomia, Jesus Christ transferred the gifts of His work to the Church and, through the Church, to the whole of created reality. From a human and contextual perspective, these gifts, which are like potentialities shared with all human persons, are activated through Baptism and ongoing participation in the sacramental life of the Church. For every Orthodox Christian, activating the gifts received at Baptism means following Jesus Christ and having the potential to sacrifice oneself for all people and God. This following of Christ also entails assuming and living all of humanity, just as Jesus Christ did. This theological principle and its ascetic–mystical implications were extensively discussed by Saint Sophrony of Essex, following in the footsteps of Saint Silouan of Mount Athos (St. Sophrony 1977, pp. 87–90).

Therefore, the *open sobornicity* presented by the Romanian theologian implies several crucial doctrinal precepts:

1. It presents Orthodox ecclesiology in a balanced manner, emphasizing both its static doctrinal foundation as the *Una Sancta* Orthodox Church and its spiritual and human dynamics manifested as *open sobornicity*;
2. It highlights the authentic and applied Catholic character of Orthodox ecclesiology;
3. It emphasizes the obligatory significance of "the other" for practicing Orthodox Christians and the ecumenical vocation of Orthodoxy;
4. It actualizes itself through all the positive and constructive experiences of non-Orthodox Christians gained through revelation.

Thus, Orthodox ecclesiology, as seen by Stăniloae, is far from approaching ecumenical realities superficially; it presupposes and implements them through active Christians in all services and forms. The most comprehensive ecumenical ethos and works are accomplished by the Saints. For instance, the contemporary Saint Silouan of Mount Athos, through his prayers for "all Adam" (St. Sophrony 1991, p. 222) and his participation in the human tragedy following the Fall, significantly resembles Jesus Christ as the bearer and sufferer on behalf of all humanity. In general, the Saints practiced *open sobornicity* similarly to how Jesus Christ practiced it, not merely for the sake of partaking in the divine work with everyone but also for giving each person their due place and importance within the plan of redemptive *oikonomia*. Therefore, Orthodox ecclesiology does not exclude human persons; it only excludes a lack of divine truth that should be based on revelation. It does not differentiate between human beings in terms of quality, nor between Orthodox believers and Christians of different confessions. The only difference is made by Christians who earnestly follow Jesus Christ.

4. Conclusions

This study has aimed to provide a contribution to the understanding of Orthodox theological thought regarding the ecumenical vocation of Christians in the world. It attempts to bring valuable insights regarding the process of embracing and living ecumenically with "the other", which is to say, with all of humanity in general.

To conclude, several doctrinal principles defining the concept of *open sobornicity* can be identified in Dumitru Stăniloae's thinking:

1. The Holy Trinity created humanity and the world, governing, foreseeing, and fulfilling them on the basis of absolute divine unity;
2. Jesus Christ is the guarantee and source of divine and human unity;

3. The unity of the Church is activated in Jesus Christ through the assumption of "the other" in the mystery of *open sobornicity*;

4. The ecumenical nature of the Church and the world originates in the mystery of humanity recapitulated and assumed in the unique Person of Jesus Christ;

5. The "mystery of the brother" opens the path for the Orthodox Christian to assume and live Jesus Christ's universal work in the world.

Therefore, *open sobornicity* is the foundation of and invitation for Orthodox Christians to hold in their consciousness and soul the entire world, and all of humanity and creation (see on this point the Orthodox Liturgy and its prayers for the whole cosmos/τοῦ σύμπαντος κόσμου (Μικρόν Ἱερατικόν 2023, p. 86).

This recapitulates and affirms the Christian purpose and dynamic through which the entire world is called to be gathered in a council and a synaxis of God the Father, Who will be "all in all" at the second coming of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:28). *Open sobornicity* has a solid Orthodox theological foundation and should be one of the most important aspects of the Orthodox Christian creed. *Open sobornicity*, although referring to Orthodox believers and their action of embracing both non-Orthodox Christians and the world, can be practiced by all Christians. This can be accomplished on the condition that everybody understands that "the other" is a gift from God necessary for activating their Evangelical–universal Christian consciousness and identity. It is important to understand that "the neighbour" possesses divine gifts that pertain to oneself and are embraced by oneself through the *open sobornicity* advocated by Father Dumitru Stăniloae. This is also one of the practical ways to advance along the path of Christian ecumenical unity.

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Article

An Ecumenical Spirituality

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Abstract: The modern ecumenical movement is a part of a wider ecumenism which expresses the universal character of the Christian faith. It is an approach to faith which is aware of the world-wide context of church life and the variety of the cultures and communities where it is practiced. The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia shows the importance of ecumenism because here we find a style of worship and theology which has taken a very different character from other parts of the church, especially in its relations with other faiths. Ecumenical faith recognises and welcomes difference and always seeks fresh ways of witness and proclamation. In a changing society, this ecumenical character of faith is an essential part of an effective mission and church life.

Keywords: *oikoumene*; Ethiopia; Judaism and Islam; science and faith; iconography; mission

1. The Meaning of Ecumenism

Ecumenism has a long history. The word ecumenism can be traced back to a set of Greek words relating to where people live. So, the noun *oikos* is a house, or a family or a race; the verb *oikeo* is inhabit or occupy. The phrase *oikoumene ge* is the inhabited land. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (276–194 BCE) was a polymath who was the chief librarian at Alexandria and a pioneer in the exploration of the natural world—being the first scientist to measure the circumference of the world. He coined the word geography, or writing about the earth, and used the term *oikoumene* to refer to the inhabited rather than uninhabited parts of the world. The evangelist Matthew, writing some time later, used that same term *oikoumene* also with that meaning of the universal and the world wide. A verse in his gospel looked ahead to the age to come when 'this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world (*oikoumene*) as a testimony to all the nations' (Mt 24.13). Then at the end of the gospel Jesus tells the apostles to 'go out and teach all nations' (Mt 28.19). For Matthew, the word *oikoumene* speaks of the missionary calling of the church to proclaim the gospel to all peoples and nations throughout the world.

Ecumenism is this awareness of this world wide character of the church. It describes a gospel message which cannot be restricted to one place or one people or one time. This gospel belongs in all cultures. It recognises and rejoices in difference. It is attentive and responsive to the character and conditions of the society in which it finds itself. It is faithful to the teaching and mission of Christ which is incarnated in the conditions of the place where it is lived out. In the Nicene creed we affirm our belief in a church which is not only one and holy and apostolic but also catholic and so is whole and complete wherever it is found. Ecumenism challenges us to live out our faith in this world wide, universal place where we share a common life within a faith community, scattered over the world yet gathered together by Christ. An ecumenical faith is part of this world, is shaped by it and speaks to it.

When they spoke of the *oikoumene*, the writers and readers of the New Testament would have had in their minds the Roman ruled regions around the Mediterranean. The Acts of the Apostles describes the spread of the gospel westwards through Asia Minor and to Rome and Spain beyond. There are however hints of other directions of travel for the gospel. While travelling the apostle Philip meets a court official of the candace of Ethiopia, in fact probably referring to an area of what is now Sudan (Acts 8.26-40),

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and explains to him the true meaning of the prophecy of Isaiah. From this beginning the Christian faith extended further into the Horn of Africa. Later, in around 340, the kingdom of Ethiopia became one of the first nations to become Christian, along with Georgia, and the first Archbishop of Ethiopia was consecrated. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church—to give it its full title where Tawahedo means united referring to its affirmation of the one undivided nature of Christ—has remained the church of the nation. It remained Christian in the midst of the Islamic expansion across the Middle East, thrived alongside a sometimes aggressive missionary programme by both Catholics and Protestants, and is now the second largest national Orthodox Church after Russia, with some projections suggesting it will outstrip Russia in size by 2050 (Johnstone 2011, pp. 107–9). This vibrant church life shows the ecumenical dimension of the church in its distinctive patterns of worship and spirituality. Encounter with this African form of Christianity questions and challenges a western approach to Christianity, showing how a local culture can lead to a diversity of worship and practice of the faith. Experience of this church brings both challenges and renewal.

2. The Church of Ethiopia

My first experience of the Ethiopian Church was in 1993, and since then I have made regular visits. There have been personal discoveries showing how different ways of worship and styles of theological tradition can enrich and deepen my own faith. There have also been discoveries of fresh possibilities and understandings of the identity and life of the wider church. So, for me, sharing in worship with the Ethiopian Church is a vivid example of the richness and diverse character of the ecumenical universal church, both on the level of personal faith and on the level of ecclesiastical life.

As an illustration of how the Christian faith is lived in Ethiopia, here is an account of a celebration of the liturgy in a church in Gondar in the north of the country, taken from my diary of a three-month study visit to traditional church schools in 2008. It was part of a project to encounter and meet with the students of oral methods of church education. The Ethiopian Church education system has been claimed as the oldest in the world still being taught. Boys—it is mainly boys but there are some girls too—leave their homes and study at churches and monasteries following a syllabus which includes *zema* or church hymnody, *qene*, a theological study using traditional forms of improvised poetry, *akwakwam* or the ritualised movements and music used in liturgy, and *meshaf* or the interpretation of Biblical and theological texts. I had spent time getting to know teachers and students at the traditional church schools in the city of Gondar, a centre of this ancient tradition of scholarship. As I gradually became accustomed to the way students were taught and how they understood their faith, so my own faith was disturbed and changed (Alemayehu 1971; Binns 2013, 2017, pp. 159–94).

So here is my description of the celebration of the liturgy.

'I arrived at the church on Saturday evening soon after the sun had set and as darkness was falling. We went to the nun's house—a corrugated iron shack. In one corner she had built a fire and was making a kind of bread called *sanbatkitta* which would be given out to everyone after the service. Her pile of flat loaves was growing'.

'At about 7.45 we went into the church. The church students of *qene* and *akwakwam* were gathering in the *qene mahlet* (or place of music at the west end of the church). The head of the church, clergy and teachers sat against the west wall and the students gathered around them so that they formed a square. Drums, *maqomiya* (prayer sticks) and *sistrums* (a kind of rhythmic instrument used in worship) were distributed, with a friendly rivalry and arguments as each tried to make his neighbour take the better made stick or instrument. I was given my stick and sistrum and tried to join in. The chants were long and repetitive with each lasting half an hour or more. The rhythm of the sistrums was confusing and I had to watch hard to keep in time. After a couple of hours there was a short break with prayers. All the students knew what they were doing and there were no books. The students were small in height and so looked younger than they probably were. One student was crippled,

two others were blind and were led by friends. The teachers were dressed in white for the worship. The head of the church sat in the middle presiding and remained motionless through the night. By 2 a.m. the students were tired, some fell asleep as they stood leaning on the prayer sticks, others curled up in a corner for a short rest. About 3 a.m. the clergy moved to a reading desk and sang the *kidan* a service of preparation for the *qiddase* or eucharist. At 5 a.m. the students stood to sing the last chant with enthusiasm, and when it finished, they returned to their huts to rest while the clergy sang the *qiddase*'.

'I stayed while the two priests and three deacons sang the liturgy. I watched as they came out from the *maqdas* or sanctuary and chanted the five readings from the Bible. Then as the priest washed his hands after the recitation of the creed, we all bowed to each other at the Peace. There were about thirty people in the church, some young children who received holy communion, the priest shielding the holy bread from their sight with his hand as he placed it in their mouths'.

'The worship had taken place on several levels. In the *maqdas* or sanctuary, concealed from the sight of the people outside but audible through a loudspeaker, the holy action of the *qiddase* is performed. In the *qeddist* or chancel the prayers of the *qidan* and the *saatat* or hours are sung. In the *qene mahlet* the hymns are sung and performed through the night. I knew that outside in the church compound people are standing reading the psalter or sitting or sleeping on the ground'.

'Around 9 a.m. the *qiddase* is over, and I can go out into the bright morning sun, I am stiff and aching but am amazed at the sight which greets me. The compound which had been almost empty when we entered the church is now crowded with people all wrapped in their white robes. It is a sight of tranquillity and purity, with the light of the sun, the swaying of the green trees, the thick long grass with splashes of colour as the weaver birds dart from bush to bush. After a time of preaching with several sermons by various clergy, everyone sits in rows and the deacons bring the *sanbatkitta*, the thick dark bread made the day before, and distribute large pieces to everyone present. People talk, laugh and, eventually and reluctantly, leave'.

'On my way home, after well over twelve hours in church, I stop at the first bar I come to, and order a strong black coffee. I am exhausted'.

3. The Place of Ethiopia

I had thought that I was familiar with different kinds of church life. I have been a priest of the Church of England for forty years; during training I spent a memorable six months working at the Serbian Orthodox theological faculty in Belgrade in the 1970s and have valued relationships with Orthodox as well as Anglican communities through the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, during which I made several visits to Moscow, and the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies; then I researched the writings of the desert fathers of Palestine which led to a period at St Georges College Jerusalem, and I have visited several other national churches during further research and writing. However, I was not prepared for the unexpected and exciting experience of sharing the life of the church in Ethiopia. It showed me again the way that the church forms its identity and carries out its mission as it lives, teaches and ministers in the conditions of the society in which it is located.

To understand the unique character of the Ethiopian Church, we need to look at a map. Ethiopia—including modern Eritrea—is located in the Horn of Africa. It is linked by trade routes with the interior of sub-Saharan Africa, looks across the Red Sea to Arabia, is connected by sea and land routes to Israel/Palestine, and it is not far by sea to India and East Asia beyond. This location, at a point between Europe, Africa and Asia, shows how the ecumenical church can develop a wide diversity of worship and practice. This is show clearly by its Semitic culture, shared with the other great monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Islam, which leads to a mutual coexistence.

4. Judaism

Historians have noted the influence of Judaism religious and cultural practices. In my night worship in the church at Gondar, I was aware of the way that layout of the church mirrors that of the temple at Jerusalem with its threefold division, which in Ethiopia is usually a series of three concentric circles, with the *maqdas* or holy of holies in the centre, surrounded by the circular *qiddist* where people who will receive communion stand, then the next circle is the *qene mahlet* where the debtera perform the church's hymnody, then there is the compound or outer court where the congregation sit or stand. At the centre of every church is the tabot – which is a representation of the Ark of the Covenant which resides, we are told, in the Church of Mary of Zion at Axum (Ullendorff 1968).

I recall being reminded by a deacon in Addis Ababa that 'our Ethiopian church is very old, it was founded many centuries before the birth of Christ'. He was thinking of the great epic of Ethiopian tradition—the *Kebra Negast* or Glory of Kings—which includes a fuller account than in the Bible of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, when, after a lengthy encounter, she gave birth to a son who became king of Ethiopia and brought the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, where it is still cared for. It is a lengthy and involved account—drawing on Biblical and Quranic traditions of the Queen of Sheba, or Makeda as she is known in Ethiopia—and shows the Ethiopian vocation of being chosen by God and with a special place in the divine dispensation (Budge 2000).

Its history developed alongside those of both Judaism and Islam. Many practices are shared with Judaism. Boys are circumcised, the Old Testament dietary regulations are observed, the liturgy is celebrated on Saturday as well as Sunday, the *debtera* (who I met in Gondar) are often seen as inheritors of the Levites of the Old Testament. There has been extensive debate among scholars about when and how these traditions reached Ethiopia, but it is not necessary to identify a date or period of history. Rather it points to a shared culture and expression of faith.

5. Islam

There has also been a close relationship with Islam—after all, there are only a few hundred kilometres from the Christian capital of Axum to the Islamic heartland at Mecca. Islamic traditions of the life of the prophet tell how, when his followers were driven out of Mecca in 615 during the exodus known as the hijra, Muhammad sent eighty-two followers to the Christian king of Ethiopia because the king 'will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country'. They reported that 'the Negus (king) gave us a kind reception and we safely practised our religion and worshipped God and suffered no wrong in word or deed'. The king wanted to know more about what they taught and summoned his bishops to listen. When they heard, we are told, the king wept until his beard was wet and the bishops wept until their scrolls were wet, and the king said, 'of a truth this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche'. (Guillaume 1955, pp. 150–55). Later, when the Arab armies were spreading across the Middle East, Muhammad told them, 'leave the Abyssinians alone so long as they do not take the offensive'. Since then, Muslims have formed a significant minority in Ethiopia living—usually—peacefully within the Christian kingdom.

While not given so much attention in the histories, the Ethiopian church life is also influenced by traditions coming from sub-Saharan Africa. As in much traditional African religion, the features of the natural world—trees, hill tops, streams and caves—have a spiritual dimension, making present the high and distant god of the sky here on earth. The spirits, too, need to be respected and recognised as present in human life, with evil *djinn* avoided and the more beneficent *zar* lived with.

So, a relationship between the three faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam grew through their shared geography, culture and religious customs. The three faiths have co-existed harmoniously in one national community. There have been periods of violence and conflict in Ethiopia, most notably between 1529 and 1543, when the emir of the sultanate of Adal, Mahmad ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi, devastated the churches of the Christian highlands, in a military campaign. But through most of its history, Ethiopia has been a place where

religions have lived harmoniously and peacefully together (Ehrlich 2007). The words and ideas of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia which point to deep rooted and tragic wounds within European society are absent from Ethiopian church life.

My encounter with the life of the church in Ethiopia showed me a rich tradition of spirituality and theology. There was so much which was unfamiliar and exciting. There was the oral method of teaching and tradition of theology which has its own vitality and freshness, different and sometimes absent from the more rigid reliance on fixed written texts (Vansina 1985); there was the worship in the holy places, which were found in beautiful and often remote mountain tops or deep caves, rather than in meeting places for worship in town centres; there was the strict fasting discipline, with over 250 days a year designated as fast days, which can lead to an identification with the gospel message. Then there were the different relationships with people of other faiths, especially the monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Islam—so unlike the suspicion and hostility of many churches. This all showed me a new depth and variety of the faith of the church, and the way that the Christian faith can find alternative ways of living in the kingdom of God which are rooted in the culture and traditions of the community.

So, my time spent in Ethiopia led me to reflect again on my own faith. I had my psalter and Bible with me so that I could continue with my regular pattern of Morning and Evening Prayer, but it was unsettling and awkward to return from the intense and demanding experience of being present at an Ethiopian liturgy to turn to my Anglican forms of prayer. It was one example of that experience of entering into the experience of faith and worship of another tradition—even if only in a temporary and superficial way—and recognising the surprising, intense, emotional quality of the experience, made more engaging by the hospitality and generous friendship of my hosts. This was, for me, an ecumenical encounter, as it made me more aware of the global character of the church as it is given its own distinctive shape and life as the person and presence of Christ comes to dwell in the hearts of believers.

6. An Ecumenical Faith

Difference can be difficult for the church to accept and cherish. Histories of divisions and schisms between church communities and conflicts between religions through the ages are all too familiar. Today we experience controversy over different understandings of gender and of sexuality. Hopes of a serene and untroubled faith undisturbed by doubt or unexpected surprises are broken by these disturbing challenges of difference.

While faith may not lead to tranquillity and calmness, it gives us conviction and confidence so we can witness to the salvation brought by Christ. If our encounter with other church communities or forms of worship is a genuine and honest meeting in which we explore the unfamiliar and discover fresh insights, then faith should be open to being tested and renewed, as mine was during those nights of prayer in the Ethiopian churches.

I have been given a manuscript of a set of writings by the Russian Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (1914–2003). Metropolitan Anthony trained as a doctor and this scientific background gave him a distinctive approach to faith, as he has described in a series of writings. His biography shows how his teaching was shaped by the convergence of the traditions of the theology of the church fathers, Russian spirituality and thinking, while lived out in a western, scientific society. In the course of a lengthy series of talks on the Creed given over several years, he set out a broad and generous vision of faith. Metropolitan Anthony shows us that a mature faith is bound to be provisional and uncertain. He describes the way a scientist works, conducting experiments, collecting data, constructing a model, and then re-examining the data, showing how the model falls short and then working on a more complete and accurate way of understanding.

'When a scientist has made or has inherited a certain knowledge and added to it his own discoveries, then he tries to hold together all the elements of knowledge by joining them together, by adjusting them to one another, by building what the scientists call a model, that is a vision of the world or of a particular phenomenon in the world in which

all the elements of knowledge fit. No scientist believes that this model is in all truth an adequate picture either of the phenomena or of the world, but it allows him to hold together, as it were, in one hand all the elements of the problem'.

'When a scientist has built up a model which did not exist before her and which holds together facts which could not be joined together before, then she probably has a legitimate sense of satisfaction. But if she is a true scientist, she will then try to find out whether there is a flaw in her construction, and if there isn't, she will eagerly begin to try and find the facts which cannot fit in her model, because the advance of science is made of the discovery of such facts that explode the existing model and force the scientists individually or collectively to build another model which is more comprehensive, more refined and nearer a true image of what really is. There is an exhilarating element in scientific doubt, in questioning the model which one has held to be true or built oneself. There is a hope that it will be given to the very person who worked out this model to find the fact that will break it, smash it to pieces. At no moment does a scientist doubt the objective reality which she is trying to express by her model. What she doubts is the model, her vision, her understanding, her ability to express reality in a way which is accessible to the human mind'.

'What happens to the believer very often is that he has held a model either of God or of the world, and this model is incomplete, and often primitive. At a certain moment this model becomes untenable. And at that moment instead of rejoicing the believer is in agony, because it seems to him, wrongly, that if his model is wrong and goes, then perhaps the reality that stood behind it must go and so is untrue. But as believers we have to grasp that doubt must be treated in a different way. We have to realise that doubt means a fracturing of a limited kind of certainty. Instead of being monolithic, whole, integral, we begin to see that there may be an alternative to what we thought was the only possibility. This condition normally should grow out of an ever-increasing experience of life in its entirety, of God, of man, of oneself and of the world that surrounds us. The images which are given us when we are children cannot be carried throughout a life without change, because they were not calculated to confront the other realities which were outside of a child's experience' (Unpublished manuscript).

This account shows us how our faith must be open to what is new if it is to be an ecumenical faith. It will be rooted in a tradition and experience of faith where we have encountered the risen Christ. But it will also be directed outwards and open to insights from the rich life of other communities. It will always be a seeking to approach and grasp the gifts of the Spirit as it works in new and unfamiliar ways.

7. Rebooted Ecumenism

Within the long tradition of ecumenical faith, there have been periods when ecumenism has taken a specific form and named itself as an Ecumenical Movement. These have emerged when political and social changes in society have led to an awareness of the urgency and priority of expressing and living the universal context and identity of faith. So, the church has reflected on and affirmed this universal identity and unity of mission.

In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine ended the period of persecution of the church with the Edict of Milan (313 CE). Now that the church had a recognised place in the Empire, it needed to define its beliefs and overcome division. A series of councils met beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325 and ending with a second Council of Nicaea in 787. These councils are called Ecumenical Councils because of their bringing together all parts of the church in the formulation of faith—although different communities give ecumenical authority to a varying set of councils. Then, many centuries later, after the end of the First World War, when nations were seeking to build a new international order and the League of Nations was being set up, an encyclical letter was sent by Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople in 1920 which he addressed to 'all the churches of Christ wherever they may be . . .' calling for a world-wide fellowship of churches. This was the start of the modern ecumenical movement and led to the decision to set up a Council of Churches

taken in 1937, although its formation was delayed by ten years as a result of World War II. Its website states that its membership now consists of 352 churches representing over 580 million Christians. It continues to meet, sharing gifts of its churches and seeking to respond to the needs, challenges and sometimes persecutions which its members face.

A rebooted ecumenism, an ecumenism for our age, is a response to the character and the demands of the society in which we live. It challenges faith to become rooted in the society in which it lives, to be aware of the variety of ways that faith is lived and expressed, and to seek to live out faith in ways which enable its members to deepen and enrich their own faith, and enable the church to live out its mission to the world. In a world where travel is fast and convenient, where communication is instant and easy, where both ecclesiastical and faith communities live and work together, then that readiness to embrace and rejoice in diversity which is true ecumenism must be a continuing tradition of faith. Our rebooted ecumenist is constantly challenged and disturbed by encounters with other Christian traditions. But as well as being disturbed, she is also enriched and renewed by these fresh insights. She will also turn towards the world, recognising that the Christian Church has to live in and witness to that changing community in which it lives.

8. An Ecumenical Mission

Back in England, after those visits to Ethiopia, I continue to worship but now in my own home church communities. I live a few miles from the Anglican cathedral at Lichfield, a little north of Birmingham, and I value its openness to the city around it and its inclusion of different expressions.

In recent years, I have a watched a set of huge icons being painted and hung in the nave of the cathedral. There is the Annunciation in two panels on either side of the nave, and a huge hanging two-sided icon with the crucifixion on one face and the risen Christ on the other. It was painted (I avoid the practice of referring to icons as 'written', since the Greek *grapho*—from which iconography is derived—simply means to make a mark on paper and so can apply to painting as well as to writing, and so we can keep the obvious idea of icons being painted) by members of the Bethlehem Icon Centre located in the town of Christ's birth under the protection of the Greek Melkite Patriarch of Antioch and staffed by painters of different churches across the Middle East. They set up a studio in the transept of the cathedral throughout a summer and invited members of the congregation to see the icons being created. It was dedicated and hung at the centre of the cathedral in September 2018, watching over those who come in and showing God's love for all who worship.

Then in the apse to the east of the High Altar is the newly refurbished shrine of our founder St Chad. It contains a relic of the body of the saint which was presented to the cathedral by the Roman Catholic diocese of Birmingham in a moving ceremony in 2022. In this dedication service, the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches expressed their shared faith and mission. The presence of both the icons—painted by artists from Bethlehem—and the relic of the saint—given by the Roman Catholics of Birmingham—express a shared mission to the people of the Midlands and of Birmingham. The east end is now a remodelled space as a shrine of silence and a destination of pilgrimage.

In the hot summer of 2022 and then again in 2023, the cathedral and city council built a sea-side resort outside the great west doors of the cathedral for children and their families to relax in. There was a beach with a large area of sand in which children could come and play, with deck chairs for parents and friends to rest and meet, an ice cream stall to offer refreshment, and a boat which was also a play area. During the school holidays, the cathedral became a place for the children of the city to come and play, and for adults to rest and enjoy warm sunshine. A visit to the cathedral in the summer has become a time of joy and celebration, with people from the town relaxing at the doors of the cathedral.

Lichfield Cathedral, with its three spires, dominates the city skyline. It is home to many groups and events. The icons, the shrine and the beach are just some examples of the variety and creativity of the life of the cathedral. It is an example of how one community has tried to open its life to other traditions of faith and welcome to its doors that community

where it is set. This, for me, is an example of an ecumenical spirituality. It has embraced and explored the riches of a different tradition in the placing of icons at the centre of the building. It has shared with a neighbouring church in the setting up of Chad's shrine. It has worked with partners in the wider community in opening up to welcome all who come. This has the marks of an ecumenical spirituality—ecumenical because it is open to and engaging with the wider community or *oikoumene*; ecumenical because it has listened to and learned from traditions of other parts of the church; ecumenical because it is rooted in and relates to the society around it—witnessing to the presence of the one God incarnate in his world. When I visit the cathedral, it shows me how the relationship with the city and the life of different Christian communities can help us grow together to become a whole church and enjoy our faith in many ways.

9. Conclusions

Ecumenism is the often unsettling and constant reminder that each of our local churches and communions are not the only manifestations of truth, but they belong within the *oikoumene*, that world-wide community of faith. It affirms that we as the church are entrusted with a message of salvation for the world. The ecumenical movement is that tradition which responds to the gift and challenge of the universality of the church.

The church today proclaims and lives its faith in a rapidly changing world with a new awareness of the variety of nationalities, cultures and faiths. This leads to a call for a new, rebooted ecumenism, in the faith and life of us all. While the ecumenical movements have given life to the church at moments of special need, the true ecumenism is a way our faith in a universal or ecumenical church is lived. An ecumenical faith grows out of our faith in Christ given through the gift of the Spirit at our baptism and shown in our worship and discipleship. It leads us to recognise that this membership is of a world-wide church, an *oikoumene* which embraces all inhabitants of this universal community. The diversity of this multi-racial and multi-ethnic community, set within a globalised political, economic and social process, forms the backdrop of our discipleship of Christ. Ecumenism is the way that become the church. It leads us to rethink our priorities and our faith. It is always present and so is always in the course of being re-booted. It leads us together into the fulfilment and joys of the Kingdom of God.

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Towards an Orthodox Acceptance of Geopolitical Responsibility: Building an Orthodox Agenda Based on Peace Ethics

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Abstract: Because of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the question about the capacity of the Eastern Orthodox Church to act as a geopolitical actor and to explore its role on the international stage is more urgent than ever. The aim of this paper is to stress the importance of providing an ethics of peace regarding the Ukrainian conflict, following the classical methodology of social ethical research: (1) I begin by paying attention to the context; (2) I then analyse it according to the normative principle of social ethics; finally, (3) I try to respond to the following question: What could be done to improve the current situation?

Keywords: Orthodox Church; ecumenism; social ethics

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1. Introduction[1]

Following the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the question about the capacity of the Eastern Orthodox Church to act as a geopolitical actor and to explore its role on the international stage is more urgent than ever. The attitude of local Orthodox churches regarding current political challenges reveals huge fractures within Orthodoxy. Due to the different political context of each local Orthodox church, which ranges from dictatorship to democracy, Orthodoxy is divided in its theological response to the social and political questions it confronts (Bremer et al. 2022).

Could the Eastern Orthodox Church play a role in the process of reaching a ceasefire and peace in Ukraine? The Orthodox Church can act either at the ecumenical and pan-Orthodox level or, given that it is the nation's largest NGO, by influencing political decisions at national level. It is precisely the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) that plays such a role, even though it promotes the opposite agenda, legitimating war. The war in Ukraine challenges the *status quo* of Eastern Europe, further spurs the ideological dichotomies of the local Orthodox churches and could lead to more nationalistic conflicts and ecclesial tensions. For this reason, developing an ethics of peace at the international level and of reconciliation at the personal level is the present imperative of the Orthodox Church.[2]

The starting point for this text is the current international situation caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and it attempts to stress the social-ethical dimension concerning the role and contribution of the Eastern Orthodox Churches as geopolitical actor and peacemaker. The aim of this paper is to stress the importance of providing an ethics of peace regarding the Ukrainian conflict, following the classical methodology of social ethical research: (1) I begin by paying attention to the context; (2) I then analyse it according to the normative principle of social ethics; finally, (3) I try to respond to the following question: What could be done to improve the current situation both on local and regional level?

2. The Context of War, Nationalism, and Legitimisation

Since the 24th of February 2022, the Russian Federation has been conducting a major scale military invasion of Ukraine, provoking an armed conflict between the two countries

that could escalate in a nuclear disaster (either through a nuclear attack or an explosion at a nuclear plant), and officially annexing territories from the Eastern part of Ukraine, on 29 September 2022. The armed conflict started earlier (2014), through the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the Donbas war, both of them triggered by the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in the same year. Since 2014, the existing tensions and conflicts in the region have grown, reverberating into the ecclesial level through the attempt to create the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018, independently from Moscow, with the canonical support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EP). The ROC perceived this as a canonical invasion of its ecclesiastical jurisdiction. As a result, it broke immediately the Eucharistic communion with the EP. In the same vein, Vladimir Putin—in his address of 21 February 2022—considered the creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as a first step towards the destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and used it as argument for justifying the necessity of military measures which started a few days later.[3]

So, the current war in Ukraine represents the climax of accumulated not only political, but also ecclesial tensions between Russia and Ukraine. The incapacity of the local Orthodox Churches to deal not only with the nationalistic tendencies that currently dominate their contexts, but also with the totalitarian experiences of the 20th century still remains a reality. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2022, Irina Scherbakowa suggested twenty years ago that the insufficient reckoning with the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) will lead to war (Cf. Gabriel 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Should not the Churches have been perhaps the factors initiating such a process of remembering the past? The answer would certainly be to some degree ambiguous because the history and the current situation of Orthodoxy in Ukraine reveal inner-Orthodox tensions, not least its Church's long-term canonical dependency on the ROC, which, in turn—as it becomes increasingly clear—remains in a strong connection to the Russian state. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), any imitation in Russia of the Western model of liberal democracy with its so-called 'universal values' has failed, leading to a "failed secular Modernity". The result consists of the establishment of an alternative to the Western model. At its core, as at the core of the war narrative, stands undoubtedly the nowadays intensely discussed teaching of "Russkii Mir", which contains both a strong imperialist dimension (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine as parts of the same spiritual structure) and the identification of the messianic role of Russia in the world as defender of "traditional values"—as opposed to the Western concept of moral order (which for both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Putin regime is decadent).[4] This type of messianic, eschatological and metaphysical narratives, as Cyril Hovorun notes, has occurred systematically since the beginning of the war, trying to legitimise it (Hovorun 2022). Related to this connection between state and history, tradition and religion, which is strongly ideologized by Putin's regime, Tamara Eidelman suggests ultimately that the current Russian political regime "can be described as fascist" (Eidelman 2022).

At the pan-Orthodox level, the Russian aggression in Ukraine reveals the incapacity of the local Eastern Orthodox Churches to articulate an ethics based on peace and reconciliation. Moreover, the ROC supports actively the war in Ukraine, providing the main ideological narrative behind the military conflict. According to the sermon of Patriarch Kirill of 6 March 2022 (Sunday of Forgiveness), the military intervention in Ukraine is more than a "physical war". It is a "metaphysical war" because it is about remaining able to follow God's law. The example of God's law supposedly being violated is the organization of "gay parades" in Ukraine (Kirill 2022). Further, according to Patriarch Kirill the war is not an offensive, but a defensive one. Russia only defends its borders, claimed Patriarch Kirill in his sermon of 3 May 2022. The legitimacy of war as a good fight, as well as a spiritual fight, also comes up in his sermon on 26 September 2022, in the context of a partial mobilisation of the Russian army, in which Patriarch Kirill affirmed that dying for the country is equivalent to a sacrifice. Such affirmations are not isolated, but they are recurring systematically in Kirill's sermons. The professors of the Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute have argued against Patriarch Kirill's teaching about fighting and dying for the

motherland constituting some sort of "martyrium": "Every year, the nations of the world commemorate those who gave their lives to defend their country. Even if it is heroic, this gift, however, is not holy and it does not mean that those who died in this manner will have their sins absolved. It is God who forgives sins and not a heroic act, however remarkable it may be"[5]. The distinction between being a hero of the nation and a saint of the Church is crucial for Orthodox theology. The position of the Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute needs an urgent reception at ecclesial level.

In response to the attempts of the ROC to legitimise the Russian aggression in Ukraine, a number of significant Orthodox theologians published, the "Declaration on the 'Russian World' (Russkii Mir) Teaching", which rejects the concept, together with ethno-phyletism, from a theological perspective. Likewise, the document rejects "any Manichean and Gnostic division that would elevate a supposedly holy Eastern Orthodox culture and its Orthodox peoples above a debased and immoral West" (§4). The same position against the active role of the Russian Orthodox Church persists in many open letters issued both by institutions such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), as well as by theologians from different parts of the world. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the president of Germany, stressed in his speech to the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches the responsibility of Christian churches to condemn the war and its nationalistic ideology. Concretely, the Christian delegations at the WCC meeting had the opportunity to demand the Russian delegation to stop supporting the war.[6] This, however, did not happen, raising strong criticism against the leadership of WCC.

The next section of this paper explores the need of the Orthodox Church to become a peacemaker in matters of geopolitics.

3. The Orthodox Church as Pacemaker in Geopolitical Context: Political, Theological, and Social Ethical Reflections

Conflicts are inherent in human communities, and they could easily escalate to armed conflicts. War represents perhaps the biggest injustice that can happen to a community. It has something irrational in it. Nations are fighting each other in order to implement a political agenda, to change existent borders, or even, when war takes a genocidal turn, to annihilate each other. We may ask, then, what could be, in the context of war, the role of the Orthodox Church? In the case of the Ukraine conflict, three aspects are crucial: First, the Russian invasion in Ukraine is the biggest military operation in Europe since the Second World War, albeit not being the first war since then (for instance the Yugoslavian wars between 1991 and 2001, the Chechen–Russian conflict, the Transnistrian conflict, the Russo-Georgian war). Secondly, by invading Ukraine the Russian Federation violated international law (the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994), putting in danger smaller and weaker countries such as the Republic of Moldova, and creating a precedent for China to invade Taiwan. Thirdly, the Russian Federation is a nuclear power capable to use nuclear weapons, putting also in danger the entire world. Because of this danger and on the basis of civil casualties together with the destruction of Ukraine, including critical infrastructure (schools, hospitals, train stations, power plants etc.), this war is, at least from a Christian ethical point of view, certainly unjustifiable.

3.1. Biblical and Theological Approach to Peace

The problematics of war and peace in the Bible are extremely complex. It is not possible to stress in this article all the dimensions of peace and the development of different peace visions in the Bible. According to Eberhard Schockenhoff, the Bible doesn't possess a linear progress from a God of anger and wrath in the Old Testament to a friendly and loving God in the New Testament. Although some passages from Sacred texts regarding war/warfare and peace are drawing on violence or war, the significance of peace is crucial in the Bible. Therefore, it is appropriate to speak in the Biblical tradition about an early dominant tendency of overcoming violence (Schockenhoff 2018, pp. 395–499).

As reflected in the Old Testament, the history of Israel has been shaped by a great number of conflicts and wars. These are to be seen in connection with the inherent imperfection of human beings, who are tainted by sin (Gen 11,6). Violence is already present in the first narrations of the Bible, depicted in the fratricide murder in the story of Cain and Abel.

The classical term for war in the Bible is the noun "milchamah", which occurs 320 times; the term "cherem" that means to "ban", to "annihilate" (Dt 20:10–18) is important, too: In the context of conquering Jericho, Joshua ordered the utter destruction of the city and annihilation of all captured people, excepting Rahab and her family (Jos 6,21–22). The verb for "making war" is "nilham", which appears 164 times. In the pre-exile part of Israel's history, Yahweh is even depicted as a "warrior" (Ex 14,14; 15,3); he helps his armies triumph in battles (see The Song of Deborah, Jud 5,23). God takes part effectively in the battle, drowning the Egyptian army (Ex 15). God is conducting war through Israel against the foreign cult of another people within the territory of Israel, or nations are used to punish Israel for its sins and disobedience (Jes 10,5–6). A mitigation of the warfare in Israel is coming up in Dt 20,1–15, in which certain social categories are exempt from enrolment in the army. In a further step, the victories and defeats of Israel depend on its obedience or disobedience to God's law. This assumption of warfare is more widespread in the prophetic literature. For instance, the collapse of Judah in 587/6 BCE is the result of its disobedience from the God's law: "Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem, or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? You have rejected me, declares the Lord; you keep going backward, so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you—I am weary of relenting" (Jer 15,5–6).

In the time of prophetic literature the importance of dissociation from warfare is also starting to rise. Messiah is called "Prince of Peace" (Jes 9,6), who will establish in his kingdom a peace for which there "will be no end" (Jes 9,7). Ultimately, Yahweh will make a "covenant of peace" with its people which will be "an everlasting covenant" (Ez 37,26). Peace becomes a central element of the prophet's vision, and it is integrated in the concept of justice and universalised: „And the work of righteousness will be peace; and the effect of an upright rule will be to take away fear for ever" (Jes 32,17). Having trust in God's action and intervention in history is actually the appropriate response to the demand for war preparation, armour supply, and military planning (Jes 30,15–17). This is the first strong Biblical narrative of overcoming violence and war. Although wars/conflicts are common in the life of Israel (as ultimately in each community of human beings), they belong to the fallen world and are not idealised. In the Eschaton, peace (*shalom*) will prevail; that means that there will not be any kind of conflict and violence (Jes 11,6–8).

The New Testament essentially embraces these prophecies of a Messiah who brings peace. The birth of Jesus according to Luke represents a cosmic event which in the first instance releases peace on earth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on the earth peace among men with whom he is well pleased" (Lk 2,14). The kingdom of Jesus—even in this world—is not from this world (Joh 18,36), otherwise—says Jesus to Pilate—". . .my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place" (Joh 18,36). The kingdom of Jesus is not a physical place, but a spiritual engagement to confess the "truth" (Joh 18,37), "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rm 14,7). To achieve it, an ethics of Christians life is necessary, in which again "peace" is a normative orientation: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rm 12,18). In the Epistle to the Hebrews, God is called a "God of peace" (Hebr. 13,20). In the Deutero-Pauline Tradition, the Gospel of Jesus is summed up by the author of Ephesians as a message of peace: "He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near" (Eph. 2,17). Or: "fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6,15).

Although the New Testament offers a strong narrative of peace, in some passages even calling for strong pacifist attitudes (for example, "love of enemies" in Mt 5,44), there are nevertheless some texts which seem to interrupt the narrative of peace brought by

Jesus. Throughout the history of Christianity, especially in the cases when the Church was instrumentalized by the political power, these passages were used to justify violence and war. According to the Gospel of Mattew, Jesus did not come to bring "peace", but "the sword" (Mt 10,34). In Luke, Mary's Song mentions: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Lk 1,52–53). Last but not the least, the discourse of Jesus from the Book of Revelation to the Church of Thyateira reveals the image of a God still capable of (violent) punishment (Rev 2,23–24).

Thus, it is obvious that there exists in the Holy Scripture a dialectic of peace and war/violence. This dialectic is to be overcome in the eventual state of eschatological peace—peace which can only be achieved partially in history. However, peace remains a fundamental pillar of Christian life. Biblical texts that convey a potentially violent symbolism, or that can be interpreted in an ambivalent manner, are interfering with the peace narrative and represent a significant ethical challenge for Christian theology and the Church.

3.2. Liturgical Approach to Peace

The Holy Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church is built on the central idea of earthly anticipation of the eschatological promise of cosmic peace. The Holy Liturgy is a utopia of peace, an anticipation of the eschatological peace promised by the prophets and sung by the angels at the birth of the Child. It represents the hope of a world without violence, which in this world is only partially possible. This should constantly challenge the theology and (social) ethics of the Church.

The beginning of the Holy Liturgy is first of all the Son of God's bloodless sacrifice, i.e., completely devoid of violence, and it is preceded by the repetition of a verse from the Gospel of Luke that affirms that the birth of the Messiah is strongly linked with a message of peace: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Lk 2,14). That shows that the Holy Liturgy shares the cosmic mandate of peace, which includes, of course, both the earthly dimension of peace ("...on earth as it is in heaven", Mt. 6,10), as well as the interpersonal dimension of peace (Mt. 5,9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" sings the Choir during the Third Antiphon). Already from its beginning, the Holy Liturgy qualifies each attitude of war and violence, putting before the community the image of a reconciled and peaceful relationship between people and God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

In matters of political authorities and army, the text of the Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom asks for peace: "For civil authorities and our armed forces, grant that they may govern in peace, Lord, so that in their tranquillity, we, too, may live calm and serene lives, in all piety and virtue" (*The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*). It is obvious that the Liturgy legitimises only a peaceful way of governance. In the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, there are more details regarding the prayer for political leaders and conflicts: "Remember, Lord, this country and all those in public service whom you have allowed to govern on earth. Grant them profound and lasting peace. Speak to their hearts good things concerning your Church and all your people that through the faithful conduct of their duties we may live peaceful and serene lives in all piety and holiness. Sustain the good in their goodness; make the wicked good through Your goodness. [...] Deliver this community and city, O Lord, and every city and town, from ... invasion of foreign enemies, and civil war" (*Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great*). This prayer makes it clear that the Liturgy delivers a crucial function of social criticism, making impossible any kind of legitimisation of the state of war.

Note should be taken of the liturgical paradox in relation to the state of war, especially in connection to the war in Ukraine: On the one hand, Russian clerics support actively (or are forced by the Church hierarchy to express their support for) the war in their sermons, which is against the spirit of the Liturgy; on the other hand, they confess in the Liturgy the purpose of peace, which goes against Patriarch Kirill's sermons regarding the Ukrainian

war. Perhaps this violation of "liturgical consciousness" is what led to the "Appeal of the Priests of the Russian Orthodox Church for Reconciliation and Cessation of War" (Clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church Appeal for Reconciliation and an End to War 2022), signed by almost three hundred clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church in spite of the predictably severe consequences from Russian authorities. These official positions of Church authorities in support of the war are revealing once again of the existing hiatus between the spirit of the Liturgy and its ethical implementation. This ambivalence—which extends to include a considerable number of canonised soldiers or war-mongering rulers and emperors—remains an open question in the Eastern Orthodox Church, both throughout its history and today.[7]

4. Rebooting Ecumenism: Building a Christian Social Agenda Based on Peace Ethics

In Christian theology, as we have seen, living in peace is a high commandment for the life of Christians. Because in liberal democracy the institutions play a fundamental role in generating and preserving justice, the Church as a civil actor (in some countries the most important civic actor) has the responsibility to suggest an orientation for its members regarding such complex theological and ethical issues. The commandment of peace should therefore define not only the private life of the Christian, but also the social dimension of the Orthodox Church as a whole. In this matter, the Orthodox Social Documents "For the life of the World" is stating: "The Orthodox Church, moreover, recognizes and affirms the responsibility of legitimate government to protect the vulnerable, to prevent and limit violence, and to promote peace among persons and between peoples. [. . .] One of the primary purposes of any government is defence of the lives and welfare of those who shelter under its protection. But government achieves this best when working to reduce violence and to encourage peaceful coexistence, precisely by seeking to institute just and compassionate laws and to grant equal protection and liberty to all the communities over which it may exercise power, including ethnic or religious minorities. The use of force must always be the last resort of any just government and must never become excessive" (FLW §45). Reality reveals indeed an opposite image: Several Eastern Orthodox churches ignore the desideratum of peace, and they support the nationalistic or imperialistic agenda of the state. Regarding the long tradition of "Byzantine Church-State Symphony"[8], the risk of renouncing the social obligation of the Church in favour of a political agenda is a reality nowadays in Russia and a permanent danger for several other local Orthodox churches. For instance, Patriarch Kirill's declaration of 18 October 2023 concerning Russia's nuclear arsenal is highly relevant in this matter: "They [Igor Kurchatov and his colleagues, n.n.] created the weapon under the protection of Saint Seraphim of Sarov because, by ineffable divine providence, this weapon was created in the monastery of Saint Seraphim"[9]. This statement shows the disastrous consequences which an Orthodox leadership subservient to state imperialist ideology can inflict on ethical judgement. It is a responsibility of the other Eastern Orthodox Churches—and in a broader sense of all Christian churches—to criticize and condemn such positions which claim to come from a spiritual and ethical perspective. Regina Elsner emphasizes the lack of fact-based development of themes concerning violence, ideology, acceptation of the war on behalf of the Church, which led to WCC's failure to establish a coherent theology of peace (Elsner 2023). The ecumenical task of promoting peace should be therefore taken much more seriously, not only as a present-day challenge for the Churches, but as "raison d'être" of the ecumenical movement.

The Orthodox acceptance of a geopolitical responsibility consists basically in assuming unity of faith not only at the local level, but also at the regional level, expressing common values which should be rooted in the Gospel and in the Church's tradition. In this context, promoting peace should be on the current geopolitical agenda of all Orthodox Churches. The aim is ultimately an ethical and theological one: on the one hand to provide for the international community a more credible narrative for stopping violence and promoting peace; on the other hand, the Church, as anticipation of the Kingdom, actualizes in this way its worship in history. An Orthodoxy with two different (even opposite) voices is not

only confusing for the others, but also dangerous for the inner Orthodox dynamic, causing polarity and making complicated even the synodality and unity among the local Orthodox Churches. Cyril Hovorun's analysis of the WWC's approach to the war in Ukraine in Karlsruhe in 2022 is eloquent. Through the war propaganda of the ROC, the mission and work of WWC and of its general secretary Ioan Sauca was close to being compromised (Hovorun 2023).

I would therefore like to stress in what follows the local and regional level of an Orthodox agenda based on peace ethics using as a case study the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[10]

4.1. National Level

The socio-political context of the last couple of years emphasizes a stronger come-back of the selective reading of history. The Covid pandemic has weakened significantly democratic institutions worldwide, leading to an increasing tendency of authoritarianism and distrust regarding international institutions. At the same time, there is the general disappointment of post-communist countries that had hoped for a much better life after the fall of communism and after joining the European Union. This has created a sort of scepticism regarding the imitation of the Western liberal democracy model (Krastev and Holmes 2020).

The rise of populist politics consisting in a very critical stance towards and even the rejection of the positive role of international democratic institutions (using instruments of manipulation such as conspiracy theories, propaganda, and fake news), enforced the idea that the national state is in danger to lose its distinctive identity in history or even to disappear. Thus, affirming and defending national interests and the so-called "traditional values" has become normative for many states, but at the cost of weakening their solidarity with other states (as in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which supports the Russian Orthodox Church's justification of the Ukrainian war). When it comes to socio-political challenges, local Orthodox Churches generally follow the agendas of their respective states, to the point of making their prophetic role in society and in the world a nation-related matter, instead of grounding it in Scripture and in the Tradition of the Church. For instance, despite abundant evidence, only eleven of the sixteen autocephalous Orthodox Churches have so far condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Demacopoulos 2022).

The ecclesial nation-wide crisis in Ukraine, involving several competitive Orthodox jurisdictions is still not canonically resolved. Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, there were at least two major Orthodox Churches with contradictory narratives in the Ukrainian society: on the one side, there was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), canonically under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, led by the Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky), which shares a narrative of unity with Russia, relating to a common spiritual und historical heritage. The UOC enjoys the canonical recognition of all another local Orthodox churches as part of the Russian Orthodox Church. On the other side, since 2018 there has also been an Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), legitimised and recognised in 2019 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and then by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Church of Cyprus, but not by all the other local Orthodox churches. Led by the Primate Metropolitan Epiphaniy (Dumenko), it shares a narrative of independence, of separation from the influence of the ROC in its internal affairs. Although particularly during the war hundreds of parishes belonging to UOC shifted to OCU, the difference in terms of ecclesial infrastructure between OCU and UOC is still in the favour of UOC; in terms of public support of Churches, "the OCU seems to be stronger" (Bremer 2022; Németh 2023).

A significant development of the ecclesial landscape in the Ukraine consists in the attitude of the Primate of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy. He has criticised the Russian aggression in Ukraine, distancing itself from the Russian Orthodox Church. As a member of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations, Metropolitan Onufriy signed on 23 February 2022 an appeal to Vladimir Putin to stop the war[11], and, on 6 April

2022, a "Statement on the Genocide of the Ukrainian People committed by the Russian Troops in the Kyiv Region"[12]. Finally, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church he leads announced on 27 May 2022 its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate.[13] Whether after the war they will return under Moscow's jurisdiction or they will be united with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine under the jurisdiction of Constantinople is not clear at this time.[14] Anyway, the aim of reaching a ceasefire and peace as consequence of condemning the Russian aggression by all Churches and religions in Ukraine has not brought the expected result. Apart from the common condemnation of the Russian aggression in February 2022 by the UOC together with all religions and confessions of Ukraine, the ecclesial relationship between the UOC and the OCU is governed by a spirit of rivalry and conflict. Therefore, the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine need first of all to reach bilateral peace, reconciliation, and unification.[15]

Despite the common condemnation of the Russian aggression, supported ideologically by the Moscow Patriarchate, the war seems to be decided exclusively on the battlefield, and with a huge cost of human lives. Thus, the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine—as well as the international diplomacy—have been unable so far to bring a substantial political or diplomatic contribution in order to stop the war and to achieve peace. This reveals that the pacifist vision of the Christian Churches may be rooted in an optimism that is not realistic in this case.

As a conclusion, the question arises as to which realistic contribution the Churches could indeed bring on a national level in the present situation? The Russian aggression is certainly not caused by religion, but it is nevertheless legitimised through it. The function of legitimizing and de-legitimizing war remains in this case the most important political instrument of Orthodoxy on a national level. The fight against the Russian war propaganda machine, which is actively supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, and the delegitimization of war at the local level is currently perhaps one of the most important contributions that Orthodoxy– supported on the ecumenical level—could and should bring. Promoting narratives as forgiveness and reconciliation in its society will be one of the most important tasks of all Churches in the Ukraine after the end of the hostilities. Likewise, a major positive role of churches (including the Greek Catholic Church) has consisted until now in the distribution of international material support destinated to the Ukrainians affected by the war or more generally supporting the population, as well as in pastoral aid to soldiers and families affected by war.

4.2. Regional Level

On the regional level, it is crucial to notice that until now not every local Eastern Orthodox Church condemned immediately the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Although the United Nations General Assembly has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine with a strong majority of votes (141 countries voted in favour of this resolution; 35 countries abstained, including China; 5 countries opposed the resolution, namely Belarus, Eritrea, Syria, North Korea, and Russia itself) (United Nations General Assembly 2014), of the 16 local Orthodox churches no less than 5 defend or remain silent regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine.[16] The only active voice of Orthodoxy outside of Ukraine against the war is the Ecumenical Patriarchate, both through the voice of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and through its document "For the Life of the World" (2020). The social concept of the Ecumenical Patriarchate condemns generally in very strong terms war as "the most terrible manifestation of the reign of sin and death in all things" (§42) and as *ultima ratio* that should also be integrated in an ethical framework: "The use of force must always be the last resort of any just government and must never become excessive"[17]. On the other hand, the ROC social document "The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" (2000) condemns the war as "evil" (Chapter VIII), but under some special circumstances it permits it: "In this regard, the question whether the Church should support or deplore the hostilities needs to be given a special consideration every time they are initiated or threaten to begin" (VIII.3.)[18]. It is obvious that by developing its social

concept the ROC is thus also providing its own benchmark by which to consider when a war is legitimate and when it deserves its support, as is the case nowadays in Ukraine. So, at the first glance, Orthodoxy as geopolitical actor continues to be fractured: Several nations from Eastern Europe are captive primarily to their nationalist past, distinguishing in an artificial manner between "we" (as a specific ethnic group that is always "innocent", "good" and frequently "disadvantaged" in relation to other ethnic groups or nations) and "others" (other ethnic groups, nations or even sexual minorities that threaten to steal "our" "innocence" and "goodness"). Therefore, the "others" both inside or outside the country are merely put at a disadvantage, through a selective reading of the past and, as we have seen, in an ecclesial context, even through a selective reading of the Bible and Liturgy. In this case, pan-Orthodox relations are massively hampered, and ecumenical statements with are calling for socio-political action are made superfluous (as obviously was the impact of the ROC at the Assembly of WWC in Karlsruhe in 2022).

In order for Orthodoxy to make a more substantial contribution to socio-political issues, and to make her voice better heard across the international community, it needs urgently to establish new ecclesial models in order to reorganise itself on a Pan-Orthodox level. This question is generating much interest nowadays among theologians, who are seeking to identify models at the intersection of synodality and primacy.[19] On the one hand, such a synodal initiative was taken at the Council of Crete (2016), when Patriarch Daniel of Romania proposed that the Primates of Orthodox Church should meet regularly, in order to discuss the present theological and political challenges in the region: "During the deliberations of the Holy and Great Council the importance of the Synaxes of the Primates which had taken place was emphasized and the proposal was made for the Holy and Great Council to become a regular Institution to be convened every seven or ten years" (Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, §1).[20] The suggestion was agreed on by the Synod, but was never really implemented, although it is absolutely imperative. The Social document "For the Life of the World" (2020) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate could represent a starting point for a common vision of the world, which could be discussed and adapted in such a regular Institution of the Pan-Orthodox expression of synodality. The major obstacle to such a Synaxis of all Primates is the fact that the local Orthodox Churches are principally oriented to their observance of national agendas, acting according to national sympathies, "captive" to their own statutes endued with competences only at national level. This attitude must be viewed critically, especially from a social-ethical perspective. On the other hand, the failure to find consensus for establishing an Orthodox synodal system at the Pan-Orthodox level has amplified certain tendencies towards the development of a stronger ministry of primacy at the universal level. The recent example of 2018 of attempting to solve the pastoral and canonical crisis inside Ukraine through the recognition from Constantinople of a new Orthodox Church has not resolved the Ukrainian ecclesial crisis. On the contrary, it has radicalised the ROC. So, this model of primacy certainly does not function more efficiently than the synodal one. It may seem surprising, but it appears that the local Orthodox churches among themselves need nowadays an inner kind of ecumenism.

Due to the lack of a Pan-Orthodox Institution of the Orthodox Church, which should be capable to generate consensus concerning problems with which the Church is confronted, it becomes clear that local Orthodox Churches are acting rather as individual entities. They are not prepared to act as one geopolitical actor, and to share a common vision concerning the world. As a result, the local Orthodox Churches are not assuming common ethical principles, although they should offer a common witness of the Gospel. Ioan Moga is right to affirm that shaping peace cannot be articulated by each confession regardless of the other parts of Christianity, but as an ecumenical task (ecumenism is at its core a project in the service of peace). "Charta Oecumenica" of 2001 should be rediscovered and the engagement of the Churches for peace, reconciliation and justice should be renewed (Charta Oecumenica, III.7. Participating in the building of Europe, III.8. Reconciling peoples and cultures) (Moga 2023). These very different social-ethical positions of the local Orthodox

Churches on the issue of war and its consequences clearly affect ecumenical cooperation. As a result, the potential role of Orthodoxy as a geopolitical actor and potential peacemaker is considerably weakened.

5. Conclusions

As the prestigious magazine *The Economist* titled its edition of 12 November 2022, the peace in Ukraine can only be "imagined" at this stage. It is impossible to predict exactly when and under which conditions peace will be achieved in the current conflict in Ukraine. The guiding question of this paper was whether the Orthodox Church could play a substantial role in order to help establish peace in Ukraine and to also explore this question from a socio-ethical perspective and in its ecumenical significance. The war in Ukraine caught local Orthodox Churches unprepared in terms of the need to formulate an ethics of peace, a theology of peace even, which all Orthodox Churches ought to advocate, in order to delegitimise violence and to promote peace negotiations. The conflict in Ukraine has revealed the limits of the current organisational model of Orthodoxy. Each local Orthodox Church must finally accept that although its focus remains predominantly on its national reality—while engaging on occasion in very close relationships with the state—the geopolitical context of each local Orthodox Church's region can no longer be ignored. It is crucial for Orthodoxy to develop a credible common witness of the Gospel, to engage in the genuine peacekeeping mission of ecumenical dialogue, in order to fulfil its eschatological character in the world: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21,4). The Church is called to be the antechamber of the Kingdom of God, a "foretaste and experience of the eschaton in the holy Eucharist" (Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, §1), which despite its existence within a particular culture, has to rise above it. The eschatological conscience must be stronger than the nationalistic one. Otherwise, the result is the inability of the Church to speak with a common voice, as in the case of the necessary condemnation of the Russian aggression by the entire Orthodox Church, still a disputed matter to this day. This should be the starting point for a social-ethical ecumenical engagement of the Christian Churches especially in Eastern Europe.

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Notes

1. The current form of the article, much improved and expanded, is based on my presentation following the invitation received from Univ. Prof. Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu, Ph.D. hab., Ph.D.h.c to speak at the International Conference "Geopolitical Challenges of the Russian-Ukrainian War, from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean", 3–5 November 2022.
2. I am aware of the large body of literature dedicated to this topic from very different perspectives. Theological scholars with very professional expertise in the study of Orthodox Church are constantly relating about the situation in Ukraine in context of war, too (see, for example, the contributions of Thomas Bremer, Regina Elsner, Thomas Németh and Cyril Hovorun on the war in Ukraine).
3. Address by the President of the Russian Federation (2022), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828, accessed on 1 August 2023.
4. Both ideological components, the "Russkiy Mir" and "traditional values", came up in the last decades und were promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church under the Patriarch Kirill and supported by Putin. See: (Metropolitan 2019). And the essay of Vladimir Putin: (Putin 2021). For a critical engagement with Russian doctrine "Russkiy Mir", see: (Coman 2023).
5. Communiqué du Conseil des enseignants de l'Institut de Théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge (Paris)—4 Novembre 2022 (2022), https://orthodoxie.com/communique-du-conseil-des-enseignants-de-linstitut-de-theologie-orthodoxe-saint-serge-paris-4-novembre-2022/, accessed on 22 August 2022.
6. "There are also representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church here today. The fact that they are here is not something we should take for granted in these times. I expect this Assembly not to spare them the truth about this brutal war and the criticism of the role of their church leaders" (Steinmeier 2022).

[7] See more on this huge complex topic: (Adamsky 2019; Paulau 2023).

[8] The Byzantine symphony is a widely debated concept. For more details see the following sources, primarily relevant to the field of political theology: (Papanikolaou 2012).

[9] Patriarch Kirill says Russia's nuclear weapons created 'by divine providence' to keep country 'free and independent', https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/10/18/patriarch-kirill-says-russia-s-nuclear-weapons-were-created-by-divine-providence-under-the-protection-of-saint-seraphim-of-sarov (accessed on 8 November 2023).

[10] The socio-ethical analysis of Regina Elsner is worthy: (Elsner 2022).

[11] Ukrainian Council of Churches Calls on President Putin to Stop the War (2022), https://vrciro.org.ua/ru/statements/uccro-calls-on-president-putin-to-stop-the-war, accessed on 2 September 2022.

[12] Statement on Genocide of the Ukrainian People, Committed by Russian Troops in the Kyiv Region (2022), https://vrciro.org.ua/ru/statements/uccro-statement-on-genocide-of-ukrainian-people-committed-by-russian-troops, accessed on 2 September 2022.

[13] Resolutions of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022 (2022), https://news.church.ua/2022/05/28/resolutions-council-ukrainian-orthodox-church-may-27-2022/?lang=en, accessed on 13 September 2022.

[14] Thomas Nemetz undertakes a pertinent analysis regarding the unclear status of the UOC (Németh 2023).

[15] Despite the intervention of Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine in 2018–2019 and formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the problem of self-identity of the Churches still persists. See the analysis of Myroslava Rap which is still relevant: (Rap 2015). See likewise the pertinent analysis of Regina Elsner concerning the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine after the canonical intervention of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine in 2018 and 2019 (Elsner 2019).

[16] The Russian Orthodox Church, the world's largest Orthodox Church, supports and defends the war; The Serbian Orthodox Church supports Russia, avoids using the word "war" in this context, and helps only those Ukrainians who belong to the Moscow Patriarchate. The old Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem remain to this day silent regarding this war. See: (Demacopoulos 2022).

[17] For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church (2020), https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos, accessed on 22 August 2022.

[18] The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (2002), https://russianorthodoxchurch.ca/en/social-concepts-index, accessed on 22 August 2022.

[19] For a current discussion on this topic, see: (Moga 2022).

[20] Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (2016), https://www.ecumenism.info/archive/docu/2016_great-holy-council_message.php, accessed on 28 October 2022.

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Essay

Fire, Beards, and Bread: Exploring Christian East–West Relations à Propos of Edward Siecienski's (Latest) Work

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Abstract: The debate on Christian East–West relations usually centres on the "usual suspects": papal primacy, the *filioque* and core doctrine in general, the interpretation of Scripture, ecclesiology, and so on. This review article of Edward Siecienski's *Beards, Azymes, and Purgatory* explores *other* issues that divide East and West, particularly those that may be approached via material ecologies: Fire, Beards, and Bread. "Bread" as in the debate on the Azymes, following Siecienski's 2023 book; "Beards" as in the beardfullness or beardlessness of clerics; and "Fire" as in *ignis purgatorius*, yet at an even wider scale, the very fire of Gehenna: the question of the hereafter and the location of the dividing line between doctrine and *theologoumena.* Thus, a wider spectrum of the debate emerges, with which the present review article aspires to familiarize its readers.

Keywords: purgatory; beards; azymes; Eucharist; Catholic Church; Eastern Orthodox Church; A. Edward Siecienski

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1. Introduction

Which issues divide the Christian "East" from the Christian "West", in this particular case meaning the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church? Received wisdom, as well as the practice in ecumenical dialogue, has it that the precise nature of primacy in the Church and the *filioque*, i.e., the question of the procession of the Paraclete, are the thorniest of issues—although a closer scrutiny would reveal that the two Churches have arrived at an astounding degree of mutual understanding on the latter, leaving only the former as the unresolved issue *par excellence*. However, it was not always so. It is indeed the case that the predominance of these two topics is also a testimony to the unprecedented degree of mutual theological understanding and knowledge between "East" and "West" in our era, as it demonstrates an agreement concerning the comparatively relative nature of other points of contention, even if these occupied centre stage in earlier times. Yet examining the history of "other issues" can be particularly educational—not only in surveying the past of the East–West schism, but also in view of the way forward—by properly understanding *how* certain issues come to the fore, or disappear from it, together with the role of historical contingency, the difference between doctrine and *theologoumena*, and the licitness of local traditions without normative universal claims.

Luckily for us, both in the academy and in the Church at large, now we have a master scholarly chronicler in our midst, covering both the "core" and the "other" issues. Edward Siecienski's magisterial volumes on *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Siecienski 2010b) and *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate* (Siecienski 2017), as well as the recent *Beards, Azymes, and Purgatory: The Other Issues that Divided East and West* (Siecienski 2023), all published by Oxford University Press, meticulously chronicle the sources, theologies, and the *development* of the debates on a temporal horizon spanning from the early Church (or the Old Testament, where applicable) to the modern and contemporary eras, century by century. These are three truly indispensable *summae*; the importance of the fact that potent and as-concise-as-possible overviews of all these

developments (otherwise spanning a vast archipelago of sources, documents, debates, and figures) are available and accessible to scholars/academics, the faithful at large, clergy and theologians, and—importantly!—members of the various dialogue committees, central and peripheral alike, cannot be overestimated. In a certain sense, this trilogy of Siecienski books can by itself, if widely read and studied, aid in "rebooting ecumenism", as this special journal issue of *Religions* would have it.

This is more or less what we—i.e., Andrew T. J. Kaethler, Andreas Andreopoulos, and myself—were thinking back in 2019, when only *The Filioque* and *The Papacy and the Orthodox* were authored and published, à propos of which we convened the international conference *Mapping the Una Sancta: On Orthodox-Catholic Ecclesiologies Today* on the island of Syros, Greece (an island inhabited by a population of roughly 50% Roman Catholics and 50% Eastern Orthodox believers, and thus unique for the purposes of that gathering). Now, a volume based on the conference and its editorial aftermath has been published in open access by Winchester University Press, titled *Mapping the Una Sancta: Eastern and Western Ecclesiology in the Twenty-First Century* (Mitralexis and Kaethler 2023), with chapters by Dimitrios Bathrellos, John Behr, Johannes Börjesson, George E. Demacopoulos, Adam A. J. DeVille, David W. Fagerberg, Jonathan Goodall, David Bentley Hart, Christos Karakolis, Norm Klassen, Marcello La Matina, Nikolaos Loudovikos, Andrew Louth, Giulio Maspero, John Milbank, Thomas O'Loughlin, Jared Schumacher, Edward Siecienski, Manuel Gonçalves Sumares, Vincent Twomey, and Anna Zhyrkova, together with the conveners' chapters. One could be excused to say that this another attempt at "rebooting ecumenism", and this time a bottom-up attempt, given that this was not in any way part of official Church dialogues.

However, all of this was before Siecienski's recent *Beards, Azymes, and Purgatory: The Other Issues that Divided East and West* (Siecienski 2023), with the "other issues" of which I would like to engage in this discussion of the book, while noting that there are *yet further* issues to be resolved as well before healing the schism, such as the fate of matrimony and its dissolution across the Church(es). However, before embarking on those other issues, I would like to draw the reader's attention to what is by far the most oft-discussed point of contention, the Papacy, for a very particular reason. We tend to think of the differences between the Churches as emerging at *some* particular point (or cultivated during a particular period), after which a bifurcation emerges: Church X goes that way, Church Y goes the other way, either instantly or gradually. However, a very brief summary of Siecienski's treatment of the Papacy and the Orthodox shows that, more often than not, there are indeed zig-zags along the way; ebbs and flows, disappearances and reappearances of issues and differences, and so on. Understanding how this is the case in what is arguably *the* currently irreconcilable difference between the Orthodox and the Catholics—i.e., primacy and its nature—prepares us for understanding how easily a similar picture might emerge when surveying other differences as well.

2. Ebbs and Flows of the Papacy

The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate (Siecienski 2017) begins with an investigation into the historical person of Peter, followed by a careful analysis of Peter's portrayal in Scripture, given that the invocation of New Testament events and material plays such a crucial role in the debates on Apostle Peter and the nature of the papacy that were to follow. Subsequently, Siecienski explores the references to Peter in patristic exegesis and the role of the church of Rome in the patristic period. He moves on to the following turning points in this discussion, including the Photian schism, the Great Schism of 1054, and the Gregorian reform (which appears to have been a considerably greater schism than the Great Schism itself).

The Fourth Crusade, the Lyons councils, and, of course, Ferrara-Florence, the union that did most to cement division and schism, are all events that come into focus as the centuries pass. Following the Fall of Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire, Siecienski examines the "silent centuries" before concentrating on Vatican I and the particularly challenging problem of the content that was attributed to the papacy by *Pastor Aeternus*. A much more optimistic picture of East–West relations and a degree of near convergence—or rather, serious discussion—on the subject of primacy, and by extension the papacy, is painted in the twentieth century, particularly after Vatican II, with advancements that were unthinkable just a few decades earlier. However, Siecienski warns that based on previous historical experience, an overabundance of enthusiasm and haste could end up producing the opposite effect from the one intended, an exercise in *discernment* being the key.

Aside from two givens—namely, that (i) the precise nature, power, and role of the papacy is the single most significant factor dividing East and West, even more so than important doctrinal issues like the *filioque*, and that (ii) the most maximalist of papal claims appear during the historical periods of their minimum enforceability—one can discern certain distinct key points of divergence, each of which leads to the next: (a) whether Matthew 16:18 refers to the *person of Peter* or to the faith/confession of Peter and, in other readings, by extension to the faith/confession of all disciples, Apostles, and Christians; (b) whether Peter's exceptionalism is translated to the exceptionalism of his successor, i.e., to the bishop of "his see", if we are to use this anachronism; (c) whether and how Rome, and Rome *only*, is this see; (d) cognately, whether Rome's undisputed primacy is due to imperial/political or Petrine/Apostolic reasons; (e) what is the content and extent of the primacy of the bishop or Rome, particularly in the universal church; and finally, (f) how this primacy is or is not compatible with the Eastern system of the *Pentarchy* (and, by extension in the future, (g) exactly how this would work out in a hypothetical union or intercommunion of the churches in today's utterly different landscape)—this is, at least, how I attempted to recapitulate it in a book review (Mitralexis 2018).

However, one of the most fascinating elements in this historical tour is again the fact that it negates the picture of the papacy's development painted in the popular imagery: that of a linear and ever-growing claim to authority and power, while the Christian East resisted due to merely upholding an earlier arrangement and reality (after all, as remarked earlier, "the most maximalist of papal claims appear during the historical periods of their minimum enforceability", yet one may discover many more "easter eggs" in the book itself). Today's intra-Orthodox (or, as it should perhaps be called after the 2018/19 Moscow–Constantinople schism, inter-Orthodox) discussion on the nature of primacy adds another layer to this historical complexity. Point being, the history of controversies is complicated, non-linear, and often *messy*: everyone who aspires to have an educated opinion on the state of (dis)union today must have a thorough grasp of the differences' historical itinerary. Let us now move to the "other issues", following *Beards, Azymes, and Purgatory* (Siecienski 2023), for as Siecienski says concerning these other issues, "if ecumenical dialogue truly aims to heal the millennium-old schism between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, it will certainly be necessary to retrace the steps that separated them in the first place". Yet apart from the standard themes discussed today, such as *filioque* and the papacy, "there is another level where one is forced to admit that the immediate cause of the schism was the simple fact that half the church used leavened bread and the other unleavened bread. One is forced to admit that beards (or their lack) among the clergy was seen as reason for breaking Eucharistic communion. One is forced to admit that divergent understandings of the soul's fate after death helped poison the last attempt at repairing the breach at Ferrara-Florence. The 'other issues' cannot, and should not, be laughed off" (Siecienski 2023, pp. x–xi).

3. Of Bread

Let us now return to the review article of Siecienski's 2023 book. Although we tend to consider it a non-issue in contemporary official ecumenical dialogues and a matter of preference within each respective tradition, the question of whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in the Eucharist was for centuries a core dividing issue between East and West, both before (from the tenth century onwards) and after the 1054 AD schism: "it is a historical fact that the debate over Eucharistic bread, and not the Filioque or the power of the pope, was the immediate cause of the schism that eventually split the Christian world" (Siecienski 2023, p. 116). However, this was primarily a dividing issue *sub specie Orientis*, as ("unleavened") Western Christians would mostly not regard the "Eastern" use of leavened bread in the Eucharist as scandalous, acknowledging the practice's antiquity and licitness, yet preferring unleavened bread themselves; in contrast, Eastern Christians would elevate the Western use of unleavened ("dead") bread into a major ecclesial deal breaker, indeed a heresy, considering the practice incompatible with Church tradition and theology, as well as a Judaizing tendency. Westerners were thus "azymites" (ἀζυμίται, from ἄζυμος, i.e., unleavened bread), which over the centuries became one of the main words used for "othering" Western Christianity. Of course, the crude summary above does not do justice to a nuanced subject, which Siecienski masterfully expounds. The issue itself is indeed rather complicated, as it is connected to questions concerning the status of leaven in Scriptures and in patristic authors, in the type of bread used in the Last Supper—which, in turn, depends on the dating of the Last Supper, itself differing in the Synoptic Gospels' consideration of it as a Passover celebration versus the Gospel of John, according to which it took place just before the Passover Festival, hence allowing for two contradictory Scripture-based positions on the matter—and in the practice of the early Church when Christians "came together and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

However, apart from these questions, it is indeed true that the use of azymes instead of "normal" leavened bread in the Eucharist by the West was a rather late development ("it seems that the use of leavened bread throughout the West was normative until the ninth to tenth centuries"—Siecienski 2023, p. 108). So it was that Byzantine Christians ("the Greeks") saw it as a departure from tradition and an innovation in nothing less than the core sacrament of the Church, and so it was that the Latins never demanded a change in Byzantine practice: rather than that, they only urged that the Greek attacks on the use of azymes cease and that the Byzantines acknowledge the legitimacy of Latin practice in the same way that the West recognised Greek practice as legitimate. The use of azymes by the Latins—which appeared on nearly every list of Latin errors from the eleventh century, when the dispute first started, through to the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438/39—was widely believed to be the primary cause of the schism until it was later superseded by the *filioque* and the papacy (Siecienski 2023, p. 8). Of course, polemics run both ways: in the eleventh century, Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida (of Great Schism fame) would *inter alia* frame the azymes as a *practical* choice with grave consequences for those that do not opt for them, given the "problem of crumbs falling indiscriminately during the breaking of the bread" (Siecienski 2023, p. 125) and charging the Greeks with carelessness and flippancy concerning this high sacrament, since normal, leavened bread for the Eucharist may be prepared by anybody, while the Greeks would sometimes "make use of bread that has been bought from the people's shops of trade . . . [and] handled by someone's unwashed and filthy hands" for the Eucharist (Siecienski 2023, p. 125), whereas a type of bread especially prepared for the Eucharist removes this obstacle. Later, in the 1252 *Tractatus contra Graecos*, azymes are listed as one of the five church-dividing issues, the others being the *filioque* and its addition to the creed, primacy, and purgatory (Siecienski 2023, p. 175).

It is important to note that the precedent of the Ebionites' and the Armenians' use of unleavened bread for the Eucharist had preconditioned the Byzantines to think of such a practice as an outright heresy, or at least think of it as concomitant of lapsing into heresy, when they encountered the new Latin practice; if somebody celebrates the Eucharist in the

way earlier heretics did, then they must too be heretics, and their use of azymes must be related to some greater heresy (Siecienski 2023, pp. 112, 117).

As with many of the seemingly lesser church-dividing issues, the ebb and flow of the pre-eminence of the azymite controversy was also correlated with historical contingency. The crusaders' sack of Constantinople in 1204 and the subsequent, albeit short-lived, establishment of the Latin empire naturally amplified enmity: the number of anti-Latin polemical works increased, although during this time, the main Orthodox grievances shifted from azymes to the papacy and the *filioque*. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Orthodox had written more than forty books on azymes, the majority of which were polemical critiques of Latin usage, which was considered alongside the two "great issues" to be the most obvious indication of the heretical nature of the Latins (including treating any altar on which an azymite Eucharist had been celebrated as defiled) (Siecienski 2023, p. 151). Today, as Siecienski observes, not only are azymes not on the official agenda of theological dialogues between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church, they are remarkably absent even from the rhetoric of online polemicists (Siecienski 2023, p. 186). The issue seems to be now considered ancient history.

Yet apart from the traditional, theological, patristic, and scriptural basis for the preference for leavened or unleavened bread in the Eucharist, one cannot help but ponder at the sheer *materiality* of this central dividing issue: rather than a highly theoretical theological question on the relations between the persons of the Trinity or on the hypostasis of Jesus Christ or on the nature of the Church, a *visible* and *material* difference—the type of bread used in the centralmost Christian sacrament—constituted the *visible* point of difference and potential invalidation of a Church; matter matters. And, going beyond the historical nature of the azymite controversy, it is crucial for us to devote attention to contemporary challenges for the material basis of the Eucharist and to their theological treatment. For example, while "bread"—leavened or otherwise—and "wine" are rather ubiquitous in the geographies where Christianity first flourished for two millennia, the context of global Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, or otherwise), in parts of which wheat and bread or even wine are rather exotic and mainly imported rather than the epitome of local agrarian life, raises new questions and challenges for the precise nature of the unconsecrated Eucharistic elements.

4. Of Beards

While clerical beards, or the lack thereof, were indeed vested with theological, patristic, and traditional significance from some point in time onwards, it would not be too fanciful to assume that the main reason beards became a central topic (since "the beardlessness of the Latin clergy was cited as a reason for breaking communion with Rome prior to all the subsequent arguments about the orthodoxy and liceity of the *filioque* in the creed", Siecienski (2023, p. 5)) was their sheer nature as *obvious*, *visible* (and *material*) indicators of difference and otherness. Clerical beards or beardlessness became a visible signifier of identity. This is of import, since in contrast to azymes—which might seem trivial today, yet the problem concerned the Church's core sacrament and its Eucharistic elements; as such, it indeed had a theological significance–identifying clerical beards or beardlessness as a church-dividing issue seems like the very line dividing theological differences from the aversion to the traditions of other local churches, i.e., a certain "ecclesial culturomonism", if we are to put it thusly. Today, properly distinguishing theological disparities from differences in local traditions or *theologoumena* is the very starting point for any theological dialogue that would make sense, and retaining a diversity of traditions *while* pursuing and guaranteeing doctrinal unanimity on core issues *sine qua non*—and being able to distinguish which is which—seems the only possible way to intercommunion.

Returning to beards, in Part I of the book, Siecienski offers a fascinating cornucopia of information, sources, and stories on beards in the scriptural and patristic tradition and in the East–West polemic from the ninth to the fifteenth century and to our era (including the reassessment of beards today, not least among hipsters and online bards of beards

with a staggering ability in producing historically informed literature on the topic). An interesting recurring theme is the implicit and, at times, explicit sexualization of facial hair on both sides of the razor and the East–West divide. There seems to lie beyond all the appeals to tradition, scripture, and the Fathers an understanding, by those who abhorred shaven clerics, of shaving the beard as pursuing the appearance of a young boy or of a woman, which "often carried with it the implication that one wanted to play this role in some sort of 'unnatural' sexual act" (Siecienski 2023, p. 5). On the other side of the spectrum, a preference for shaven clerics seemed to entail a regard of facial hair as virile and attractive—perhaps *too* virile and attractive for the needs of celibate Western Christian clerics having forsaken marriage. Much later than the Schism, Eastern cultural (rather than theological) enthusiasm for beards took new turns, even beyond clerical beards and particularly in Russia, with the archbishop of Rostov in 1460 pronouncing the shaved as "abandoning the image of God", the 1551 Stoglav Council forbidding shaving since it was "not an Orthodox, but a Catholic tradition", Ivan the Terrible being credited with saying that "shaving the beard is a sin the blood of all martyrs will not wash away", and Patriarch Adrian of Moscow decrying in 1690 those with Westernizing tendencies and saying that "by shaving, [they] made themselves look like apes and monkeys" (Siecienski 2023, pp. 71–72). Later, things changed somewhat with Peter the Great, but that is a different story.

Yet this is only one piece of the larger puzzle and picture that Siecienski paints. Importantly, the pre-eminence of beards as an arena for polemics started to recede in conjunction with the rise of the importance of *filioque* and the papacy alongside with azymes as dividing issues, plus purgatory after the thirteenth century: "by the time negotiations began for another reunion", i.e., between Lyon and Ferrara-Florence, 1274–1438, "clerical beards, like most of the other 'errors' on the Byzantine lists, were simply no longer regarded as essential" (Siecienski 2023, p. 69).

5. Of Fire and Eschatology

The previous two issues largely belong to the past; they are instructive today insofar as they demarcate, in different ways, the line between local traditions, *theologoumena*, and polemics on the one hand, and substantial theological disparities on the other. The third issue, however, can rather easily be described as immensely more interesting today from a theological perspective. The question of "purgatory", while nominally so, is anything but limited to the acceptance or rejection of a Catholic doctrine that first took institutionalised shape in the thirteenth century (during which "the Greeks, who had remained content with the fathers' ambiguity on the fate of souls after death, were puzzled by the language and concepts being employed by their Latin counterparts and responded with more questions than answers. . . . In fact, it was Pope Innocent IV's desire to impose the teaching on the Greeks that led to the 1254 definition of Purgatory that eventually became the doctrine's 'birth certificate'", Siecienski (2023, p. 233)). It is indeed a wider question concerning the Christian witness on the hereafter, and whether this should be largely clouded in reverent silence in its details, apart from Jesus Christ's and the Nicene Creed's explicit utterances on the matter, or detailed and developed in a quasi-architectural way, as is the case with a clear tripartite division of the hereafter. It is, one thinks, not utterly unfair to opine that the Catholic Church's insistence on the *universal* normativity of its *entire* doctrinal deposit *and more* (i.e., everything that is considered binding for the universal Church) leads to an emphatically cataphatic stance on issues where the Orthodox are more reserved and apophatic as far as final and normative statements are concerned, and that this raises a further issue in a path towards eventual intercommunion. For example, though purgatory might not be figuring heavily in ecumenical debates right now, in contrast to the papacy and *filioque*, could there be an end of the road *without* considering it and arriving at some consensus (even if the Roman Catholic Church has never *formally* defined it in binding detail, apart from asserting her belief in it (Siecienski 2023, p. 275n2)? On the other hand, and in spite of sporadic utterances by bishops, primates, or even saints, as well as local traditions, *theologoumena,* and so on (for example, the tollhouses tradition), the Orthodox

Church is exceedingly thin on specific binding doctrinal assertions on the *details* of the hereafter save the obvious, scriptural, and creedal, i.e., the *Parousia*, the final judgement, heaven and κόλασις: a place of κολασμὸς that is αἰώνιος—whatever that might mean, given contemporary research on the very *meaning* of the term in the early Christian, late antique and patristic context (Ramelli and Konstan 2013)—and the (bodily) resurrection of all. For, as David Bentley Hart very aptly and accurately puts it, "Orthodoxy's entire dogmatic deposit resides in the canons of the seven ecumenical councils—everything else in Orthodox tradition, be it ever so venerable, beautiful, or spiritually nourishing, can possess at most the authority of accepted custom, licit conjecture, or fruitful practice" (Hart 2015). Reverent silence on such matters might indeed be wise since, despite the rare impression sometimes given in particularly long-winded preparatory meetings (of a more bureaucratic nature) for ecumenical dialogue, no committee member has reposed in advance of its participation in the meeting.

The theological development and history of purgatory and its reception in the East as portrayed by Siecienski is too interesting to sum up here; let it suffice to say that, all along, a point of convergence was the acknowledgement by both Catholics and Orthodox, following scriptural and patristic witness, of the importance and potency of prayers for the dead, prayers that can indeed achieve some change—this by definition entailing the conviction that the moment of death does not conclusively seal the fate of *every* person forever, hence inferring some sort of "middle state". Siecienski guides us through the various interpretations, in East and West, of the Gospels, Paul, Origen, Augustine (for whom, interestingly, the eternal fire "was both real *and material*" (Siecienski 2023, p. 225)), and the patristic texts in general on this and on the "purifying fire" both before and after the formation of the doctrine of purgatory in the West. As already noted, the subject is much more nuanced—and interesting—than a mere question of the East's "acceptance" or "rejection" of purgatory (both at Ferrara-Florence and way beyond), or at least something *like* purgatory; Siecienski (with Constas and Bathrellos as potent secondary sources on the Orthodox patristic reception as well as *theologoumena* on the hereafter) chronicles the differences and exchanges concerning a fascinating variety of crucial theological issues, such as the ebbs and flows of theologies emphasizing God's justice and punishment on the one hand and God's love and forgiveness on the other. The summary treatment of modern and contemporary authors by Siecienski is also commendable—see, purely indicatively, (Siecienski 2023, pp. 305–11) for recent Orthodox responses and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's (later Pope Benedict XVI) insights. One cannot help but note that while Siecienski remarks that "neither side expressed great interest in renewing their earlier debates about Purgatory and the state of souls after death", noting "the previous century's general disinterest in eschatology" as partly responsible (Siecienski 2023, p. 305), it is Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas, a crucial figure in late 20th century ecumenical dialogues, who based a considerable extent of his theology on eschatology.

6. A Concluding Reflection

Siecienski concludes *Beards, Azymes, and Purgatory* (Siecienski 2023, p. 311) by mentioning the debates, both within Orthodox Christianity and beyond, sparked by David Bentley Hart's universalist *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (Hart 2019)—although "universalism" here means anything but a simplistic, happy-ending version of the salvation of all, given Hart's "purgatorial" reading of scripture, the fathers, and tradition. This debate might indeed provide an opportunity for rebooting ecumenism, as it forms an invitation to discuss what we *do not* know (and *cannot* know) in detail from a bindingly doctrinal point of view, i.e., not in order for the Catholics and the Orthodox to arrive at (joint or not) conclusive doctrinal utterances, but in order for them to jointly explore what they had been slightly too eager to opine about in the past. These current debates take place in the context of a wider reassessment of sources, on the basis of reliable critical editions of texts that would be undreamt of in previous centuries, if not decades, together with reliable translations (e.g., (Origen 2017), or Maximus the Confessor's works

translated by Fr. Maximos Nicholas Constas) and reassessments on the meaning of crucial terms such as αἰὼν, as previously mentioned; on the hereafter in general (e.g., Ramelli 2013; plus the layperson's version, Ramelli 2019); on what Origen *actually* said and contributed to, juxtaposed to what was remembered as "Origenism" in later centuries; and so on, including the question of the synodical condemnation (i.e., at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, 553 AD) of Origen—but not Gregory of Nyssa!—and of a particular iteration of ἀποκατάστασις, a synodical condemnation that we today know as spurious. This is a discussion to which Siecienski himself has contributed in his "(Re)Defining the Boundaries of Orthodoxy" (Siecienski 2010a), and Hart summarizes it as follows: "it is true that something remembered by tradition as 'Origenism' was condemned by someone in the sixth century, and that Origen was maligned as a heretic in the process; and it is also true that for well more than a millennium both those decisions were associated with the Council of 553 by what was simply accepted as the official record. But, embarrassingly, we now know, and have known for quite some time, that the record was falsified ... The oldest records of the council ... make it clear that those fifteen anathemas were never even discussed by the assembled bishops, let alone ratified, published, or promulgated. ... The best modern critical edition of the Seven Councils—Norman Tanner's—simply omits the anathemas as spurious interpolations. Even if the anathemas had actually been approved by the council, they no more constitute a serious condemnation of Origen than they do a recipe for brioche" (Hart 2015). Revisiting the distinction(s) between the actual Origen, the remembered "Origen", Origenism and "Origenism", together with the torrents of concomitant theological issues of all shapes and colours, could perhaps, curiously enough, help re-articulate and re-frame the *desiderata* of Orthodox-Catholic dialogue—not by addressing this or that particular and partial issue, but by calling on the Churches to offer a robust witness of their faith, theology, community, history, and practice beyond all that is simply considered a given, and hence almost never properly or critically revisited from the perspective of ecclesiality.

Discussing all this anew, and together, would constitute a part of what we could term *an ecumenism of failures* (to borrow a phrase by Christos Yannaras), a readiness to discern what we *lack*, what we *do not know*, what is only due to unfortunate historical contingency and what *is not*, and a realization of what we ought to explore *together*—including what remains yet unchartered—while preserving the distinction between the effable and the ineffable: the cataphatic and the apophatic. Rather than resulting in a relativization of doctrinal issues for the sake of an ecumenical zeal, this would be quite the opposite: allowing for the actual witness of the faith, for *doctrine* rather than *theologoumena* and historical contingencies, to occupy centre stage in the dialogue, and for ecclesial theology itself to flourish. Such an undertaking would be, at a minimum, rather interesting.

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