

# Ecumenism in the Context of European Secularization

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## **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes ecumenism in the context of contemporary European secularization, identifying the relationship between religious culture and the influence of secular European thought on Christian mission. The study examines secularization as a major challenge for Christianity and evaluates ecumenism as a possible theological and ecclesial response. An analysis of recent theological perspectives is conducted, with particular contributions from Orthodox and Romanian theology. The paper highlights the tensions and risks of ecumenism, as well as the benefits of interfaith dialogue. It concludes by emphasizing the necessity of theological discernment in the European secularized context.*

## **Keywords**

*ecumenism, European secularization, Church unity, interfaith dialogue, ecclesiology, patristic tradition, religious pluralism, theological discernment.*

## **Introduction**

Contemporary Europe is undergoing a profound process of cultural and religious transformation, marked by secularization. European secularization cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between the “religious” and the “secular.” As Lucian Hölscher points out, the terms religion, secularity, and secularization have undergone complex semantic developments, often being used in contradictory ways by both supporters and critics of modernity (Hölscher, 2011: 66). In this sense, secularization must be understood as a historical process specific to Western modernity, which has reshaped the role of religion without completely eliminating it from social life. This phenomenon does not exclusively denote a withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, but rather a redefinition of the relationship between faith, society, and state institutions within a pluralistic and post-Christian context.

In this context of secularization, ecumenism emerges as a theological and ecclesial response to the fragmentation of Christianity and its progressive marginalization in a secularized Europe. At the core of the

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ecumenical movement lies dialogue. This ecumenical dialogue represents an initiative aimed at sharing the common elements of the Christian faith within an interconfessional framework. This endeavor does not pursue proselytism, but rather aims at promoting the promotion of an authentic mutual understanding, deepened through the practice of open and responsible dialogue.

The motivation for choosing the topic *Ecumenism in the Context of European Secularization* arises from the convergence of two major processes that define contemporary ecclesial reality: the intensification of secularization in the European space and the reconfiguration of ecumenical discourse within Christianity. On the one hand, secularization has led to a decrease in the visibility and public authority of the Churches; on the other hand, ecumenism has become one of the main strategies through which Christianity seeks to articulate a common presence within a pluralistic society. Thus, the necessity of a responsible theological analysis can be emphasized—one that takes into account both the challenges of European secularization and the complexity of contemporary ecumenical discourse. The present study aims to provide a balanced framework for reflection, capable of avoiding both doctrinal relativism and confessional isolation, thereby contributing to a mature understanding of ecumenism in today's Europe.

### **Purpose and Methodology of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze ecumenism in the context of European secularization, highlighting both its theological and missional potential, as well as the limits and risks that arise when inter-Christian dialogue is detached from clear ecclesiological criteria. The study seeks to clarify how ecumenism can function as a responsible response to the marginalization of Christianity in Europe, without leading to the relativization of the truth of faith or to the dilution of confessional identity. This work aims to bring into dialogue Western perspectives on ecumenism with Orthodox and Romanian theological reflections, in order to highlight both convergences and significant tensions, with the goal of critically evaluating the different models of ecumenism promoted in contemporary European contexts.

Methodologically, the research adopts an interdisciplinary theological approach that combines ecclesiological analysis with elements from the history of ideas and perspectives on the relationship between religion and secularity. The primary method employed is the critical analysis of theological texts and representative documents of contemporary ecumenical discourse, examining both their doctrinal content and the context in which they were formulated.

In addition, the study employs a comparative method to relate different theological positions concerning the unity of the Church and ecumenical dialogue. This approach allows for the highlighting of differences in emphasis between Western ecumenism—often oriented toward consensus and institutional cooperation—and ecumenism inspired by Orthodox theology, which emphasizes the continuity of Tradition and the centrality of dogmatic truth.

Furthermore, the research is guided by a fundamental ecclesiological criterion: fidelity to the apostolic tradition of the Church. Therefore, the methodology seeks to avoid both the reduction of ecumenism to a pragmatic instrument and a confessional isolation devoid of dialogue. Within this methodological framework, the study adopts a balanced approach, aiming to provide a rigorous and nuanced analysis of ecumenism in contemporary Europe, contributing to a responsible theological reflection on Christian unity in a society marked by secularization.

### **Literature Review and the Contemporary Relevance of Ecumenism in a Secularized Europe**

The modern ecumenical movement emerged from the awareness that division among the Churches constitutes a scandal for Christian witness and weakens its capacity to engage coherently with the contemporary world (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 15). The foundation of this movement is multidimensional, encompassing theological, secular, spiritual, and cultural dimensions (Brie, 2009: 21). Ecumenism does not merely aim at pragmatic cooperation among denominations but seeks the restoration of the visible unity of the Church in fidelity to the apostolic tradition. Moreover, the desire for Christian unity has never been more intensely felt than in the twentieth century (Attwater, 1961: 977).

In a narrow sense, the term ecumenism may refer only to the tendency, aspiration, and action directed toward restoring the unity of Christians within a single Church (Stoian, 1994: 89). However, in a broader sense, it denotes the totality of initiatives that promote dialogue, rapprochement, cooperation, and convergence among Christians and among different confessions, aiming to build a framework of communion without abolishing confessional diversity (Hooft, 1954: 735). According to Nelson and Raith, ecumenism refers to the ensemble of activities, initiatives, and theological reflections through which Christians and Christian Churches, starting from the common confession of Jesus Christ, seek to overcome historical divisions and achieve deeper and more visible forms of unity in faith and Christian life. In this sense, ecumenism includes both practical efforts toward rapprochement between Churches and the theological study of their relationships, with the aim of manifesting Christian unity in faith, practice,

and common witness (Nelson and Raith, 2017: 4–5, 10–11). In other words, ecumenism is grounded in dialogue, which seeks to overcome prejudices generated by a superficial understanding of the various nuances of the Christian faith, offering an open space in which substantial theological arguments can be presented and examined.

Within this dialogical context, Father Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes the relational dimension of knowledge, affirming that “I cannot know myself unless I know you and a third” (Stăniloae, 1995: 17). In the same line of reflection on the relationship between confrontation and dialogue, Father André Scrima observes that opposition to the other does not always constitute the surest path to discovering and affirming one’s own identity, stating that “to oppose the other is not always the surest way to discover and sustain oneself” (Scrima, 2004: 214). This perspective is also supported by research in the field of communication, which highlights the existence, within the structure of human personality, of a zone accessible to conscious control and a “shadow zone” that is not directly accessible to the individual but can be partially revealed through relationships with others, insofar as communication is effective (Dinu, 2007: 69). Thus, dialogue becomes an essential instrument for self-knowledge, even though it involves the risk of confronting a less favorable self-image. Dialogue therefore constitutes an authentic alternative to polemics. As it has been emphasized, “knowledge of the one next to me and of the one among us does not imply compromise or tension, but transparency, appreciation, and acceptance” (Coman, 1999: 15).

However, as Jeffery notes, ecumenical dialogue must be grounded in a series of fundamental principles in order to be effective, namely: the honesty of both dialogue partners, which entails recognizing the integrity of the other’s position; the existence of a common basis, indispensable for dialogue; a profound knowledge of one’s own position; a sincere willingness to understand the perspective of the other; the willingness to listen mutually; the critical acknowledgment of one’s own failures through an attitude of repentance; openness to change, without which dialogue loses its effectiveness; and the personal character of the encounter, since authentic dialogue cannot be impersonal (Jeffery, 1969: 106).

Despite these dialogical efforts, the modern ecumenical movement is marked by internal tensions (Brie and Brie, 2008: 104). These tensions become particularly evident in the Orthodox context, where ecumenism is perceived either as a missionary necessity or as a threat to dogmatic identity. Doru Nastașă emphasizes that the lack of a common and coherent position on ecumenism risks deepening theological confusion and internal divisions within the Orthodox space (Nastașă, 2017: 3). This ambivalence makes reflection on ecumenism not only relevant but indispensable.

At the same time, recent perspectives on ecumenism highlight the possibility of a renewed dialogue centered on lived ecclesial experience and the work of the Holy Spirit. Emilio Alvarez proposes the concept of an “ecumenism of the Spirit,” which goes beyond mere institutional agreements and emphasizes the spiritual communion among historical Christian traditions (Alvarez, 2016: 144). This approach opens new directions for reflection in a Europe marked by religious pluralism and the relativization of truth.

The contemporary relevance of ecumenism in Europe is closely linked to the deeply secularized context in which the Churches carry out their mission. Secularization has produced not only a decline in religious practice but also a structural shift in the way faith is perceived in the public sphere. Christianity is no longer regarded as a common normative reference, but rather as one among multiple religious or cultural options available to the modern individual. In this framework, the lack of unity among the Churches becomes more visible and more problematic, as it weakens Christianity’s ability to offer a coherent response to the challenges of contemporary society. Thus, in a secularized Europe, according to Zucca, ecumenism can no longer be understood exclusively as an internal project of the Churches, but as a necessity related to the public witness of faith (Zucca, 2012: vii–viii).

In this context, ecumenism becomes an instrument through which the Churches can overcome confessional isolation and formulate common positions in response to ethical, social, and cultural issues. However, the relevance of ecumenism cannot be evaluated solely in pragmatic terms. From a theological perspective, the unity of the Church is not determined by the social effectiveness of the Christian message, but by fidelity to revealed truth. Georges Florovsky warns that ecumenism risks becoming sterile if it is detached from the patristic tradition and from the ecclesial consciousness of the Church. “The ecumenical problem is not a matter of negotiations between Churches, but a matter of reunion in truth” (Florovsky, 1989: 67). Florovsky’s warning is that ecumenism becomes sterile if it is reduced to compromises or institutional arrangements without a return to the truth of the undivided Church. For Florovsky, ecumenical dialogue is legitimate only insofar as it remains anchored in the living experience of the Church and in the continuity of Tradition (Florovsky, 1989: 67).

The relevance of ecumenism is further intensified by the context of globalization, which has increased contacts among different Christian traditions and generated both new forms of cooperation and new tensions. Recent studies on ecumenism in a global context show that Christian unity can no longer be approached exclusively from a European or Western perspective, but must be understood within the dynamics of a global, plural, and diverse Church (Cavanaugh and Avis, 2004: 19). This reality calls for a

reevaluation of classical models of ecumenism and a heightened attentiveness to local and confessional experiences.

Within this complex framework, ecumenism emerges as a topic of utmost relevance, but also as a field that requires theological discernment. The major challenge lies in articulating a unity that does not sacrifice the truth of faith in favor of cultural consensus, but rather offers an authentic and responsible witness in a Europe marked by secularization and pluralism.

## **Chapter I**

### **European Secularization: A Challenge for Christianity**

European secularization represents one of the most complex processes that have shaped the modern history of the continent, with profound implications for religious life, ecclesial structures, and the relationship between Church and society. In contemporary literature, secularization is no longer understood as the mere disappearance of religion, but as a structural transformation in the way faith is integrated into the public sphere and individual consciousness (Hölscher, 2011: 55–56). This transformation directly affects Christianity, which loses its position as a dominant cultural reference and is compelled to redefine itself within a pluralistic context.

A first defining element of European secularization is the progressive separation between religion and state institutions. The modern European state, grounded in the principles of neutrality and freedom of conscience, has limited the normative role of religion in public life, transferring it into the sphere of personal choice. According to Zucca, European secularism does not imply the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, but rather the delimitation of its normative authority. In this sense, secularism “does not refer to the relationship between the state and religion, but to the way in which political organizations manage diversity,” and religion remains a legitimate actor in public life, without being able to claim a privileged status or a moral or political monopoly over the state (Zucca, 2012: 94–95).

At the same time, secularization has led to a fragmentation of religious experience, fostering the emergence of an individualized religiosity detached from communal traditions. Lucian Hölscher emphasizes that modernity has transformed religion from an integrative social reality into a subjective option shaped by individual preferences (Hölscher, 2011: 63). Within this framework, the Church is no longer perceived as the necessary space of salvation, but as one among many institutions offering meaning and identity.

This reconfiguration of religion particularly affects Christianity, which is a profoundly communal and ecclesial faith. In a secularized context, the absence of a common Christian framework amplifies the visibility of confessional differences, which come to be perceived not as expressions of ecclesial diversity, but as signs of fragmentation within the Christian message. This difficulty is further accentuated by the fact that, as Nelson and Raith note, Christian unity presupposes a gradual process in which confessional differences diminish as the Churches advance toward full visible communion (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 16–17).

The process of European secularization is not uniform, but marked by significant historical, cultural, and political differences. This contextual diversity complicates any unified analysis of European secularization. While in Western Europe secularization has manifested through a deep institutionalization of the separation between religion and the public sphere, in Central and Eastern Europe the trajectory has been distinct, being strongly influenced by the experience of communist regimes. Analyses presented in the volume *Religion and Secularity* show that, after 1989, the visible return of religion in these societies did not automatically lead to a coherent and stable reintegration into the public sphere, but rather to ambiguous and tension-filled forms of coexistence between religious tradition, the memory of ideological repression, and the demands of pluralist modernity. In this context, religion continues to play an important symbolic and identity-forming role, without fully regaining the integrative and normative function it had held in premodern societies (Hölscher and Eggert, 2011: 35–38, 77–108).

From a theological perspective, secularization does not represent only an external pressure exerted upon the Church, through which the public influence of religion is weakened, but also brings to light internal tensions related to the understanding of ecclesial identity and ministry, as well as the inability of the Churches to offer a unified witness. In the face of religion's withdrawal from the public sphere, the Church may be tempted either to adapt uncritically to the dominant values of secular society or to retreat into a defensive confessional isolation. However, in response to the challenges posed by secularization, Van der Borght observes that "faithfulness to Christ's calling requires historical and ecclesial discernment, without abandoning one's own identity and without reducing mission to a self-referential exercise" (Van der Borght, 2007: 59).

In conclusion, European secularization constitutes an ambivalent framework for Christianity. While it limits the public role of the Churches, it also compels a clarification of theological identity and a rethinking of the forms of ecclesial presence in society. This challenge creates the premises

for the emergence of ecumenism as a theological response—a theme that will be analyzed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter II**

### **Ecumenism: A Theological Response to the Secular Context**

In the context of European modernity, marked by pluralism and the weakening of a common Christian framework, ecumenism emerges as a theological and ecclesial response to confessional fragmentation. In fact, the modern ecumenical movement arose from the awareness of the scandalous nature of Christian division, and ecumenical initiatives developed out of the need for a common public witness, since the division of the Churches affects the visibility and coherence of Christian proclamation within a shared social space (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 14–15). According to Nelson and Raith, ecumenism begins from the theological premise of the unity of the Church in Christ, a unity that precedes and judges the historical separations among confessions, which are perceived as an ecclesial anomaly requiring resolution (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 16).

From an Orthodox perspective, ecumenism is inseparable from the problem of truth and Tradition. Georges Florovsky insists that ecumenical dialogue cannot be reduced to an exchange of opinions or to institutional compromise, but must be a process of common return to the sources of the faith, especially to the patristic experience of the early Church. “The path to Christian unity does not pass through negotiations or compromises, but through a common return to the faith of the Fathers” (Florovsky, 1989: 39). For Florovsky, Christian unity cannot be constructed through doctrinal negotiation, but through the rediscovery of apostolic continuity.

This perspective is further developed in contemporary theological reflections on Nicene ecclesiology. The Nicene Creed expresses a fundamental dogmatic consensus of the undivided Church, particularly regarding the confession of the one God and Christological identity, thus providing a common theological reference point for ecumenical reflection (Seitz, 2011: 27). “*Nicene Christianity suggests, in short, that the future of a renewed ecumenism cannot focus solely on the grammar of Christian faith and practice, excluding a form of order that ensures that the Church’s ordinary language does not slip into a kind of Christian pidgin—or worse, become an entirely different language*” (Seitz, 2011: 17).

In a secularized Europe, the appeal to the Nicene heritage becomes a theological strategy for recovering unity without relativizing truth. In a highly significant essay, *Orthodox Ecumenism in the Nineteenth Century*, Florovsky recalls that the Great Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (1917–1918), in its final session (20 September 1918), adopted the following

resolution, upon the proposal of the Section for the Union of Christian Churches (Chair: Archbishop Eudokim of North America): *“The Holy Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, observing with joy the efforts of the Old Catholics and Anglicans toward union with the Orthodox Churches on the basis of the doctrines and traditions of the ancient (Old Catholic) Church, blesses the labors and efforts of those who seek the path toward union with the aforementioned friendly Churches. The Council authorizes the Holy Synod to organize a Permanent Commission, with sections in Russia and abroad, for the removal of obstacles to union and for promoting, as far as possible, the rapid attainment of the final goal”* (Williams, 1996: 147).

At the same time, Western ecumenism has been strongly influenced by the cultural context of modernity and pluralism. In his analysis of contemporary ecumenism, William T. Cavanaugh shows that, in many current contexts, relationships among Churches are shaped more by political, cultural, and social factors than by deep ecclesiological convergences. His case studies demonstrate that forms of ecumenical cooperation often emerge as pragmatic responses to crises, tensions, or shared interests, thus configuring a contextual and functional ecumenism rather than a unity grounded sacramentally or dogmatically (Cavanaugh, 2020: 21). This type of ecumenism risks transforming Christian unity into an administrative project adapted to the demands of secular society.

An alternative direction is proposed by the pneumatological theology of ecumenism. From a pneumatological perspective, Emilio Álvarez argues that Christian unity cannot be reduced to formal institutional agreements, but must be understood as a dynamic process led by the Holy Spirit, manifested at the level of the spiritual, liturgical, and ecclesial life of communities, thereby preparing a deeper communion within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church (Álvarez, 2016: 9–13). In this view, ecumenism is not merely a project of theological commissions, but a living reality expressed in prayer, liturgy, and shared ecclesial experience. This approach offers an important corrective to excessively institutionalized ecumenism.

Nevertheless, ecumenism as a theological response to secularization remains ambivalent. On the one hand, it offers the possibility of a common witness within a pluralistic society; on the other hand, it risks being diverted by the cultural pressures of modernity. Van der Borgh emphasizes that any form of ecclesial cooperation must be supported by a clear ecclesiology and a proper understanding of ministry within the Church; otherwise, ecumenism becomes purely functional (Van der Borgh, 2007: 63).

Therefore, ecumenism can be understood as a necessary theological response to the European secular context, but only insofar as it remains faithful to revealed truth and ecclesial tradition. This tension between

necessity and risk will be analyzed in the following chapter, dedicated to the problems and limits of contemporary European ecumenism.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Tensions and Risks in European Ecumenism**

Although ecumenism presents itself as a necessary response to the fragmentation of Christianity in a secularized Europe, it is accompanied by numerous theological tensions and risks. These become particularly evident when inter-Christian dialogue is detached from clear ecclesiological criteria and becomes subject to the cultural pressures of modernity. In the context of modernity-generated pluralism, ecumenism risks being perceived more in terms of social efficiency and cultural adaptation than as an endeavor to rediscover unity in ecclesial truth, with unity being evaluated by its capacity to produce social transformation and communal cohesion. As William T. Cavanaugh notes, “David Martin has argued that Pentecostalism best prepares Latin Americans to confront and adapt to modernity” (Cavanaugh, 2004: 33).

A first major risk of European ecumenism is the theological ambiguity of its language. Recent ecumenical documents often employ terms such as “unity,” “reconciled diversity,” or “partial communion” without providing sufficient dogmatic clarification. Doru Nastașă observes that this ambiguity creates ecclesiological confusion, especially within the Orthodox context, where the unity of the Church is understood as a full and indivisible reality (Nastașă, 2023: 12). The lack of theological precision risks turning ecumenism into a vague discourse devoid of normative force.

An emblematic case of these tensions is the Synod of Crete (2016) and the way its documents were received in different local Orthodox Churches. Critical reactions highlighted concerns regarding the implicit recognition of the ecclesial character of heterodox communities and the use of language that does not clearly reflect patristic ecclesiology (Nastașă, 2023: 18). Nastașă emphasizes that the problem is not dialogue itself, but the lack of a firm distinction between confession and dialogue, between truth and ecclesial diplomacy (Nastașă, 2023: 27).

A much more radical theological critique is articulated by Saint Justin Popović, who considers modern ecumenism to be one of the manifestations of secularized “European humanism.” From this perspective, the unity of the Church is not the result of institutional agreement or doctrinal compromise, but an ontological and pneumatological reality, since “the entire life of the Church takes place in the Holy Spirit,” and any ecumenical endeavor that relativizes this truth risks departing from the very ecclesial consciousness of the Church (Popović, 2011: 45). For Popović, unity can be achieved only

in the fullness of the truth of Christ, and any form of unity constructed outside of it is illusory.

Another significant risk of European ecumenism is the functionalization of unity. In many Western contexts, ecumenism is justified by the need for social cooperation, the defense of common values, or the strengthening of Christianity's influence in the public sphere. Aurel Pavel and Ciprian Iulian Toroczcai warn that such an approach risks transforming unity into a pragmatic means subordinated to criteria of social efficiency, rather than an ecclesiological reality grounded in dogmatic truth. *"The realization of unity among Christians is, in fact, the search for the Tradition of the early Church; it is a 'vertical' union, as the living of life in the Spirit and the correct confession of its teaching, not a 'horizontal' one, at a purely human level"* (Pavel and Toroczcai, 2015: 62).

In conclusion, the tensions and risks of European ecumenism cannot be ignored or minimized. Theological ambiguity, the relativization of truth, the pressures of secularization, and the functionalization of unity constitute real challenges that call for theological discernment and fidelity to the Tradition of the Church. These risks do not invalidate ecumenism as an endeavor, but they require a critical reflection on its forms and limits, opening the way for a more responsible approach, which will be analyzed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Perspectives and Directions for a Responsible Ecumenism**

Following the identification of the tensions and risks of European ecumenism, it becomes necessary to outline responsible theological perspectives that allow for inter-Christian dialogue without doctrinal compromise and without uncritical adaptation to the demands of secular culture. A responsible ecumenism cannot be conceived as a mere instrument of social cooperation, but must be grounded in a clear ecclesiology and in fidelity to revealed truth. As Nelson and Raith state, "in short, ecumenism and mission are closely intertwined in the history of the modern ecumenical movement" (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 24).

A first essential direction is the re-anchoring of ecumenism in the Tradition of the Church. Georges Florovsky emphasizes that Christian unity cannot be achieved through the negotiation of confessional differences: "the true path to Christian unity is not through negotiations and compromises, but through a common return to the Fathers, that is, to the experience of the undivided Church" (Florovsky, 1989: 67). This patristic orientation provides a normative criterion for ecumenical dialogue and limits the risk of dogmatic relativization in a secularized context.

At the same time, recent reflections on Nicene ecclesiology indicate that the Nicene Creed represents a common foundation for ecumenism. The volume *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* argues that Christian unity can be articulated around the dogmatic consensus of the early Church without ignoring subsequent historical differences. The authors maintain that authentic ecumenism cannot be built on minimal compromises, but on the fundamental doctrinal consensus of the early Church, paradigmatically expressed in the Nicene Creed. This common doctrinal core offers a “theological grammar” capable of sustaining inter-Christian dialogue without denying or homogenizing later historical differences. In this sense, Nicaea is not viewed merely as a historical reference, but as a normative criterion for articulating unity in truth. “Christian unity can be articulated around the dogmatic consensus of the early Church, as expressed in the Nicene Creed, without ignoring the historical differences that later emerged” (Seitz, 2011: 41). In a secularized Europe, the appeal to the Nicene heritage enables the formulation of an ecumenism centered on truth rather than compromise.

Another important direction is the clarification of the relationship between ecumenism and mission. Van der Borght shows that the unity of the Church is not an end in itself but is inseparable from the missionary vocation of Christianity (Van der Borght, 2007: 74). In this sense, responsible ecumenism must avoid both aggressive proselytism and purely functional cooperation, orienting itself toward a common witness that respects the identity of each tradition.

A significant contribution to the reconfiguration of contemporary ecumenism is offered by pneumatological approaches. Emilio Álvarez proposes a perspective centered on the work of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the Church’s unity. According to Álvarez, communion among Christians already exists at the pneumatological level, even if it is not yet fully expressed institutionally (Álvarez, 2016: 148). This perspective offers an important corrective to excessively bureaucratic ecumenism and emphasizes the spiritual dimension of unity.

At the same time, the experience of Romanian ecumenism highlights the necessity of contextual discernment. Octavian Bârlea shows that interconfessional dialogue in Romania has been shaped by specific historical and cultural factors, which require an approach different from Western models (Bârlea, 2010: 53). A responsible ecumenism must take these differences into account and avoid the uniform application of models foreign to the local context.

In conclusion, the perspectives for a responsible ecumenism in a secularized Europe require a synthesis between fidelity to Tradition,

openness to dialogue, and engagement with the contemporary context. Ecumenism can neither be abandoned nor absolutized. It must be practiced as an act of theological discernment, oriented toward unity in truth and toward the common witness of the Christian faith in a society marked by secularization.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of ecumenism in the context of European secularization has shown that Christian unity is not merely an abstract ideal, but a theological and missional necessity in a society marked by pluralism, relativism, and the marginalization of religion. European secularization has created an ambivalent framework: on the one hand, it has limited the public influence of the Churches; on the other hand, it has highlighted the fragility of a confessionally fragmented Christian witness.

Ecumenism thus emerges as an inevitable response to the crisis of Christianity's credibility in contemporary Europe. However, the analysis has also shown that ecumenism is not without risks. Theological ambiguity, the relativization of dogmatic truth, and the functionalization of unity constitute real dangers, especially within a secular context that favors cultural consensus at the expense of revealed truth (Pavel and Toroczkai, 2015: 79).

Therefore, ecumenism cannot be evaluated solely in terms of its social effectiveness, but must be judged in light of fidelity to the Tradition of the Church and ecclesial consciousness. Only a theologically grounded ecumenism can avoid turning inter-Christian dialogue into a form of uncritical adaptation to secularization.

From a theological perspective, ecumenism lies at the intersection of ecclesiology, missiology, and pneumatology. The present study has shown that the unity of the Church is an ontological reality grounded in Christ, not merely a historical or institutional project. Georges Florovsky emphasizes that the Church is one by its very nature, and that historical divisions cannot annul this reality, but rather wound it (Florovsky, 1989: 82).

The proposed theological synthesis highlights the need for a balance between two extreme tendencies: on the one hand, the absolutization of ecumenism as a universal solution to the crisis of Christianity; on the other hand, the rejection of inter-Christian dialogue in the name of confessional self-isolation. Responsible ecumenism emerges as an act of theological discernment that seeks unity in truth rather than doctrinal compromise.

Within this framework, pneumatological perspectives on ecumenism, such as that proposed by Emilio Álvarez, make a significant contribution by

emphasizing that unity is effected by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, even beyond visible institutional boundaries (Álvarez, 2016: 151). This approach complements, without contradicting, traditional ecclesiology, offering a dynamic vision of Christian unity.

For the contemporary European Church, ecumenism represents both a challenge and an opportunity. In a secularized society in which Christianity no longer holds a privileged position, the common witness of believers becomes essential. However, this witness cannot be built on fragile or ambiguous foundations.

At the same time, the European Church is called to assume a prophetic role within a secularized culture, without diluting its message. Ecumenism can support this mission only if it is practiced as an expression of fidelity to Christ rather than as a strategy of institutional survival.

Future directions for reflection on European ecumenism must take into account the complexity of the contemporary context. A first direction involves deepening the dialogue between patristic ecclesiology and emerging forms of pneumatological ecumenism, in order to evaluate their compatibility and limits. A second line of research concerns the relationship between ecumenism and the globalization of Christianity. Recent studies show that the dynamics of Christian unity can no longer be analyzed exclusively from a European perspective, but must be integrated into a global framework that includes experiences from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Chow and Wood, 2016: 213).

Finally, an essential direction is the evaluation of the impact of secularization on ecumenical theological discourse. As Europe becomes increasingly pluralistic, the risk of excessive adaptation of theological language grows. Future research must examine how ecumenism can remain faithful to revealed truth while offering an intelligible and relevant response to contemporary society.

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