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Contemporary Ecumenism between Theologians' Discourse and the Reality of Inter-confessional Dialogue. Case Study: Bihor*

Mircea BRIE

Abstract. *Religious freedom after 1989 would decisively contribute to changes in the religious structure. From a religious point of view, the fall of the communist regime meant the end of a time of abuse or interdictions for many people and communities. Discussing about ecumenism and interreligious or inter-confessional dialogue in Bihor is, according to current demographic realities, a need entailed by the ethno-confessional diversity and multiculturalism specific to the area. The great religious diversity has led not only to inter-community tensions but also to a better knowledge, a phenomenon that has finally led to dialogue and relationships. There is a visible tendency towards the realization of a unity in diversity, at the same time seeing the obstacles that exist in front of this vision. Beyond the energetic discourse of high Christian officials, contemporary ecumenism has several impediments imposed by the reality of some "small" local issues that have remained unsolved throughout years. Few times, these disputes have a theological understatement meant to prevent a genuine ecumenical dialogue.*

Keywords: ecumenical movement, dialogue, denomination, conflicts, community, religious diversity, religious identity, theologians, confessional conservatism, New Europe, Bihor

Beyond the energetic discourse of high Christian officials, contemporary ecumenism has several impediments imposed by the reality of some "small" local issues that have remained unsolved throughout years. Few times, these disputes have a theological understatement meant to prevent a genuine ecumenical dialogue. Debates such as the one between the priest of the Sfânta Treime Orthodox church in Oradea and Bishop Laszlo Tokes for the sports ground of the Lorantffy Zsuzsanna Secondary-school coordinated by the "Piatra Craiului" Reformed Bishopric (that lasted for over four years) turned into a local and national media argument leading to the boycott of the Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu (September 2007) by the Reformed Bishop.

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made serious allegations regarding the “discrimination against minority churches in Romania”. The allegations of the Bishop were a consequence of the fact that he and other representatives of the Reformed Church were subpoenaed to the Supreme Court in a trial sued by the Orthodox priest Aurel Pușcaș¹. On the other hand, the Reformed official was accused of “stirring anti-Romanian spirits” and of “making God a private concern”². The tensions were encouraged and local media expanded them; thus, a natural process for interethnic and inter-confessional dialogue in the Bihor area was troubled. Beyond these tensions, most of the times isolated, and the ecumenism partisans' discourse, we can see an opening to dialogue. Most of the times, this dialogue is easy to realise due to human dialogue in the daily life of Christian confessions parishioners. Such a trend is provided by secularisation and globalisation specific to contemporary time. Interreligious dialogue is also envisaged in the process of European construction, of establishing a European identity (such a process goes beyond mere respect for European law in point of minorities' rights).

The Need for Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of European Integration

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

The new Europe will bring together a plurality of religions, traditions and cultures. The process of European integration has not only political implications, but also economic, political, social and religious implications. A political structure can not exist without religious consensus³.

But what kind of religious consensus is required nowadays? What will the religious identity of the New Europe be like? These questions need to be answered in the context of postmodernism and secularization. The Europeans are less and less interested in the church and in religion in general. René Rémond talks about Christianity being abandoned in Europe. In England and in the Scandinavian countries, only 1-2% of the population go to church regularly⁴.

On the other hand, we can also notice an ideological and religious division between Western and Eastern Europe. The Catholics and the Protestants live in the West, while the Orthodox live in the East. Moreover, if in the past Europe used to be considered a Christian continent, we can no longer assert this nowadays. On the European continent, there are millions of Muslims; only in Great Britain, Germany and France there are more than twelve million Muslims⁵. Besides the Muslims, we could also mention Judaism and the Oriental religions.

In this context, the building of a New Europe requires a coherent interreligious dialogue. The problem of the importance that Christianity had in forging the „European identity” has recently

come to the fore, in conjunction with the pressing institutional crisis created by the much disputed European constitution which was rejected by the French and Dutch referendums⁶.

The continuation of the process of European construction imposes the realization of some important progress in what the inter-cultural dialogue is concerned, meaning at the same time the realization of a bridge between religious confessions and movements that exist in Europe. The importance of this matter results from the „heritage” of the European space. The renegotiation of the socio-cultural status and the guarantee of the juridical acknowledgement of the religious phenomenon at the European level is, in this respect, the collective wish which guarantees the European identity, but also its natural borders⁷.

On the other hand, the idea of the „Christian unity” of Europe has been promoted at least at the discourse level (if we are to take into account the „no” given to the European constitution by the French for example, then we notice that the anti-Muslim discourse has been extended over the reaction of the population too) during the various projects of reformation and extension of the European Union⁸. Moreover, Christian ecumenism is seen as a crucial factor of European unity. Starting from Christian unity, they try to trace the „ideal” borders of the European Union⁹.

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

Christian unity is beyond the walls of buildings, beyond rituals, beyond dogmas – in Jesus’ being itself: it is the phreatic water and the essence that unites us, even if we want it or not, even if we know it and will find it out sometime. The need for ecumenism is synonymous with the need for spiritual maturation¹⁰.

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

- Enhancing the importance of dialogue in Europe
- The encouragement of common values and of the notion of dialogue
- The encouragement of cultural changes and of the debates

A special attention will be given to the interconfessional dialogue.

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

After the American tragedy of September 11, 2001, European governments „discovered” the importance of the interconfessional and interreligious dialogue, finally accepting the fact that the

parallel and purely theoretic approaches cannot replace the dialogue between those who make political decisions and those who represent the religions of the world, starting with the exponents of the three monotheisms. The secretary general of The Council of Europe has organised an enlarged group that will deal with this dialogue. To this, Romania will participate with an embryonic project¹¹. [the creation in Bucharest of a European observatory for multicultural and interreligious dialogue, accepted by both sides (The Council of Europe and The Romanian Government) whose mission will not be to monitor the religious fact in the South-Eastern region, but rather the organization of a dialogue between politicians and religious leaders].

The new evolution promises an improvement of the dialogue between the churches and the European institutions, but the secular modesty regarding the Christian subject will remain for a long time, in the same way as the temptation of the Church to demonize postmodernism will preserve for a while its manipulative vigour.

The European dignitaries are mainly Catholics or Protestants (we could not talk about the presence of the Orthodox, except for those from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus). It is desirable that their personal or family links with their churches (until recently important) should not „influence” their professional discourse or official statements¹².

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

The interreligious and Pan-European dialogue: survey and perspectives

The term „ecumenical” was first used by the Evangelical Alliance and by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)¹³ and expresses the idea of Christian unity. According to the latest definition given to the ecumenical movement, ecumenism „covers the search for Christian unity realized by theological study, common testimony for the benefit of the universal task of mission and evangelism, but also by promoting justice and peace”¹⁴.

At the beginning of the 20th century, following the efforts of the Archbishop of Uppsala, Nathan Soderbloms, „the ecumenical movement” became typically known¹⁵ for its efforts to unite the Christian churches. The term „ecumenism” was first used by Yves Congar in his book „Chrétiens Desunis”¹⁶.

The world ecumenical movement can be divided into three main periods¹⁷:

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

The European Ecumenical Movement

In Europe, there are two big ecumenical organizations: The Conference of the European Churches – CEC and Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae - CCEE¹⁸.

The Conference of the European Churches – CEC. The Ecumenical Council of the Churches from Vancouver (1983) encouraged the formation of some regional or continental ecumenical organizations. This is how the Conference of the European Churches (CEC)¹⁹ appeared in 1959. Europe was in the middle of the Cold War and was divided into two divergent political and military blocs. In 1959 the first Conference of the European Churches took place, where 40 European churches participated. The initial purpose²⁰ of CEC was to promote reconciliation, dialogue and friendship among the European churches and to build bridges between the West and the East. They insisted on the fact that, although there was a curtain which divided Europe, there was no curtain to divide the European churches. To prove that this was how things were regarded, the 4th Assembly of CEC was organized on board of a ship in the Baltic Sea²¹, and this was due to a desire to surpass the problems associated with obtaining the visas. In the present, the declaration of purpose of CEC seeks „to build bridges between minority and majority churches, between different generations and confessions and to encourage the Christians belonging to different confessions to live in an ecumenical spirit and reciprocal respect²². That's why when the third Assembly took place, CEC had their own constitution (1964) and starting with April 1968 they had a permanent secretariat. In 2005, CEC consisted of 126 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Catholic Churches. It also had 43 associated organizations²³. The headquarters are in Geneva. The supreme authority belongs to the General Assembly who meet every 6 years. In the period between the meetings, CEC is run by a Committee who meet every year. Since 1999, besides the Conference of the European Churches, there has also been „The European Ecumenical Committee for Church and Society”. Its main duty is to involve the churches in the process of European integration, realizing the permanent contact with the European Committees, but also with other international institutions like UNO or OSCE²⁴.

*Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae – CCEE*²⁵. Not being a member of CEC, the Roman-Catholic church founded a special committee for the ecumenical dialogue with the other churches that were members of the CEC. This Committee was called the Council of the European Bishop's Conferences (CCEE) and has its headquarters in Saint Galen, Switzerland²⁶. The perspectives of the world and European ecumenical movement concern the realization of the unity among churches, in the spirit of the prayer „that Jesus addressed to His Heavenly Father for his disciples and for those who trusted in him to be one” (The Bible, John, 17, 22)²⁷. This Prayer, says Gennadios von Sassima, „needs to be understood not as a simple wish that the Lord had expressed, but as a mandate given to those who follow Him and, especially, to the churches ... Seeking the unity and the renewal of the church makes us feel deeply the huge responsibility which is placed on our shoulders, that of confessing the truth. Today's Europe needs to be led on an alternative way in order to reach a life of communion in diversity”²⁸. The perspectives are those of hope, unity and renewal. There is a visible tendency towards the realization of a unity in diversity, at the same time seeing the obstacles that exist in front of this vision²⁹. A big step forward in Europe was made by the cooperation between CEC and CCEE to organize the European Ecumenical Assemblies and to elaborate the document entitled *Charta Oecumenica*.

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

It is known that ecumenism is regarded with suspicion in certain milieus that are in the churches that participate to the dialogue. The supporters of the antiecumenical way of thinking fear that the ecumenical movement can degenerate into a pietistic sentimentalism, irresponsible in relation to doctrine, or into a syncretistic metaconfessional utopia, or into a pan-humanistic ideology, which is based on an egalitarian philanthropic concept, or into a transactionist ethos, according to which the Truth of faith is relativized into a „human family” lacking a distinct profile. In such circumstances, ecumenism becomes not a solution, but part of the problem: it leads neither to Christian Unity, nor

does it allow the followers of Jesus to discuss honestly about some issues which can not be turned into an object of political „negotiations”.

Like the postwar multilateral diplomacy, the ecumenical movement has some standards, its own conceptual vocabulary and an institutional network supported by subscriptions, but it has remained quite far from the ecclesial „field” of the member churches³¹.

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

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

The decades of dialogue have defused the obsession of the Papal Primacy (in favour of conciliarism), have eliminated the ecclesiologic outlooks associated with Vatican I („there is no salvation outside the Catholic church”), have asserted that the unity is not hindered by the problem of the sacerdotal celibacy (obligatory for the Catholics, optional for the Orthodox), have rejected – with traditional arguments – the perspective of women ordination, have accepted the homology of the sacramental theology – independent of the variety of liturgical forms – they adopted texts of compromise on the most sensitive topics like uniatism and proselytism and have established the practice of the ecumenical prayers in an irenic spirit³².

In spite of the many significant evolutions, the dialogue between the Orthodox and the Catholics stagnates, without explanation from the Greek-Catholic patrimonial litigation and the ecclesial crisis of identity of „the uniate” communities. At the start of the 3rd millennium – at a European level too - it is still far from playing an important role on the agenda of the political and civil society. This dialogue, which started several centuries too late, distorted by the postwar history, discouraged by the post-totalitarian confusion and though always nourished, remains a semi-civilized territory, which the next generations will approach from the same need for progress and „miracle”³³.

The ecumenical movement is led today, at different levels, by churches which act through synodic organisms (like the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, the regional ecumenical organizations, sub-regional associations and the National Committees of the churches), world Christian communities, ecumenical communities, missionary organizations, faculties and theological associations, ecumenical institutions and training centres for the secular, as well as organisms or specialized ministries, international ecumenical organisations and many other ecumenical organizations. It is obvious that the ecumenical movement goes beyond any institution and includes all those who aspire to unity and dream of hearing a common Christian voice uttering the present important questions³⁴.

The ecumenical dialogue is practically based on the phenomenon of the concentric circles. What is important is in fact how much the parts have in common or how far a Christian denomination has gone from the doctrinal, administrative and juridical point of view. The closest to one another are the sister churches that keep the doctrine, sacrality and spirituality in the line of the apostolic tradition unaltered, going to the Christian groups and denominations that deny any traditional hierarchy or institutional aspect³⁵.

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

The dimensions of ecumenism

There are three fundamental dimensions in the exigencies imposed on the ecumenical movement: the theological ecumenism, the secular ecumenism and the spiritual ecumenism. Beyond these, at the European level, we can also notice another dimension of ecumenism: the cultural ecumenism which has social practices and behaviours which converge towards globalization³⁶.

The theological ecumenism is the dialogue among theologians belonging to different Christian confessions, among different churches. „The way of ecumenism is the way of the church. All those who pray to God in the Holy Trinity and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour participate to this movement of union. Thus, the universal church is the people that find unity in the Trinity. „*De unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs, adunata*”, said Saint Ciprian. The importance of an ecclesiology of the communion is obvious. Back in 1947, Wisser Hooft stated: „If there were an ecclesiology accepted by all (Christians), the ecumenical problem would be solved

and the ecumenical movement would be superfluous, because in matters of faith we are confronted with the fundamental truths like ministry, hierarchy and primacy". After 50 years, there has been some progress; there are common points, but not yet a consensus.

The secular ecumenism means the cooperation among Christians in various activities for the benefit of the people. The pluralist societies are less and less interested in the dogmatic divergences. The credibility of Christians is measured by way of the quality of the common engagement in the service of man and humanity. „The painful image of humanity today imposes on all Christians the mandatory task of making obvious the fact that the technical and scientific achievements are not enough to create a world society without the spiritual, religious and moral basis, without Jesus Christ, the one who gives the world love, peace and justice.” (Patriarch Athenagoras, 1987) The reconciliation between man and God, between man and his fellows, between churches are the main purposes of the secular ecumenism.

The spiritual ecumenism is another dimension of the ecumenical movement. There is no genuine ecumenism without an inner transformation, a renewal of the soul, a self-denial, without humbleness, kindness and a desire to serve others. The soul of this renewal is prayer. The „ecumenical” prayer, the community of prayer of the brothers and sisters in Christ expresses the evangelic truth of the statement „Your father is one, in heaven” (Matthew 23, 9). Although divided, they are united in Christ with a strong hope, entrusting the future of their union and communion to Him⁶. The preoccupation for unity cannot be absent from the intimate dialogue between any Christian and God. Each prayer is the full and unconditional sacrifice offered to the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

The interreligious dialogue is not only an exchange of ideas, but also an exchange of gifts, as it is founded on prayer. It means a mature way of thinking, a desire for reconciliation and unity in truth. It is not only a renewal of the way in which you express your faith, but also of the way you live it. It is a dialogue of salvation. When Christians pray together, the purpose of the unity is closer. Christ is present in this communion of prayer; He prays in us, with us and for us. The ecumenical prayer is in the service of the Christian mission and of its credibility. An example is the week of prayer for the unity of Christians³⁷. „The dialogue is the last fibre of creation” – father Stăniloai once said and this dialogue is put into practice by all sides³⁸.

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

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

Depending on the domains within which the ecumenical mandate is applied, in the Protestant world, taking into account the diversity of the Protestant and Neo-Protestant denominations, an intraconfessional and an interconfessional ecumenism are brought into discussion.

The intraconfessional ecumenism represents the existence of a pluralism in the same denomination. Karl Barth said: „We are not unanimous where we should be as a church, meaning in the substance itself of the Christian faith ... We are not united in Christ”.

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

So far, the interchristian dialogue has brought forward three hypothetical models of church unity:

- *The organic unity* (according to which the ultimate loyalty of each Christian concerns the whole body of the Church and not only some of it). This model requires the consensual suppression of the separate confessional realities and the reformation of the local churches as members of the Universal Church.
- *The conciliar fellowship* – which claims that all local churches should confess periodically a common credo, in a conciliar environment: from this perspective, the diversity of the Christian world is unnatural, as a consequence of the fact that „the people of God” appear through the natural insertion of the Gospel into all the cultural texts on the Globe.
- *The communion of communions* – a concept that was suggested in the 1970s by the cardinal Willebrands, who assumes that the present „confessions” are a bunch of „ecclesial types” reunited in fact by the dogmatic, sacramental communion and by a unique sacerdocy. In other words, „confessions are the forms and expressions of ecumenism”- the Bishop of Rome being only „the servant” and guarantee – of this unity in diversity³⁹.

The European Ecumenical Assembly – Charta Oecumenica

The European interconfessional dialogue was strongly intensified through the tight cooperation between CEC and CCEE. The fruit of this cooperation consists in two important projects: the first project is the European Ecumenical Assembly and the second is Charta

Oecumenica. It is an important document both as a constructive philosophy but also as a test of the distance between the Christian vision on „the future of Europe” and the vision of the European political class: in fact, the level of address differs fundamentally, because the churches want communitary and personalist democracies, while politicians envisage a pragmatic Europe, based on guaranteed civil rights and on secular moral standards⁴⁰.

The European Ecumenical Assembly is an ecumenical project with a calendar of three conferences: Basel (1989), Graz (1997) and Sibiu (2007). The European Ecumenical Assembly has been the greatest ecumenical event since the beginning of the 3rd millennium.

The European Ecumenical Assembly reunites the traditional churches of Europe. Part of the Conference of the European Churches are the Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican churches⁴¹.

The First European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA1) was organized in Basel, Switzerland, between 15-21 May 1989, with the theme „Peace and justice”⁴². More than 700 delegates from all Europe participated to this event. The conference proposed three steps to be followed in order to continue the initiative of the assembly:

- establishing a period every year, from a week to ten days, in which to pray and discuss in order to promote justice, peace and integrity of creation.

- organizing an ecumenical group that is supposed to promote the process of reconciliation, after the meeting of Basel.

- organizing a second European Ecumenical Assembly after about five years.

The Second European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA2) took place in Graz, in Austria between 23-29 June 1997. 700 delegates from 124 churches, that were members of CBE and from Episcopal Conferences of the CCEE, participated. Among the participants, there were also about 150 representatives from the ecumenical and ecclesial movements, guests from other continents and from other religious communities and up to 10000 guests from all Europe⁴³. The theme of the conference was “Reconciliation. A gift from God and Source of New Life”. Viorel Ioniță, representative of the Romanian Orthodox Church at CEC says: “EEA2 elaborated a final document, a fundamental text”, which consisted in the fundamental declarations related to the theme of the Assembly and developed ethical directions for reflection, a set of “Operative Recommendations”. The second operative recommendation invited all the churches of Europe to “elaborate a common document containing a series of obligations and fundamental ecumenical rights. This recommendation represented the basis for the so-called *Charta Oecumenica*⁴⁴ which can be considered the most important initiative of EEA2”⁴⁵. *Charta Oecumenica*, signed in April 22nd 2001 at Strasbourg contains the premise for the development of the cooperation among the churches of Europe. *Charta Oecumenica* is the most important document of the European ecumenical

movement and the clearest evidence of the interconfessional dialogue open among the Churches of Europe⁴⁶.

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

- Rome: 24-27 January 2006, under the motto “The light of Christ shines upon all. Let’s discover in Christ, the crucified one, the new light on the way of the European Christians’ getting closer to one another”. 150 delegates from Europe participated to the assembly.
- The local ecumenical events organised at the end of the year 2006, especially prayers together under the motto: “The light of Christ shines upon all. Renewal and unity at the local level”.
- Wittenberg: 15-18 February 2007 organised with the purpose of presenting the Protestant heritage to Europe
- Sibiu: 4-9 September 2007. 2500 delegates from all Europe participated to Sibiu.

At Sibiu, the suggested theme was “The light of Christ shines upon all. Hope for renewal and unity in Europe”. Concerning what was expected from EEA3, the Pope Benedict XVI declared: “*We have set off together on a common road, we have prayed and worked together in order to create an atmosphere dominated by trust and reciprocal understanding. We have all tried to live a spirituality that is rooted in the word of God. We hope to re-arouse the enthusiasm for the ecumenical way through prayers and action.*”⁴⁷. Walter Kasper expressed his hope that ecumenical Christianity would become the nucleus of a renewed European culture⁴⁸.

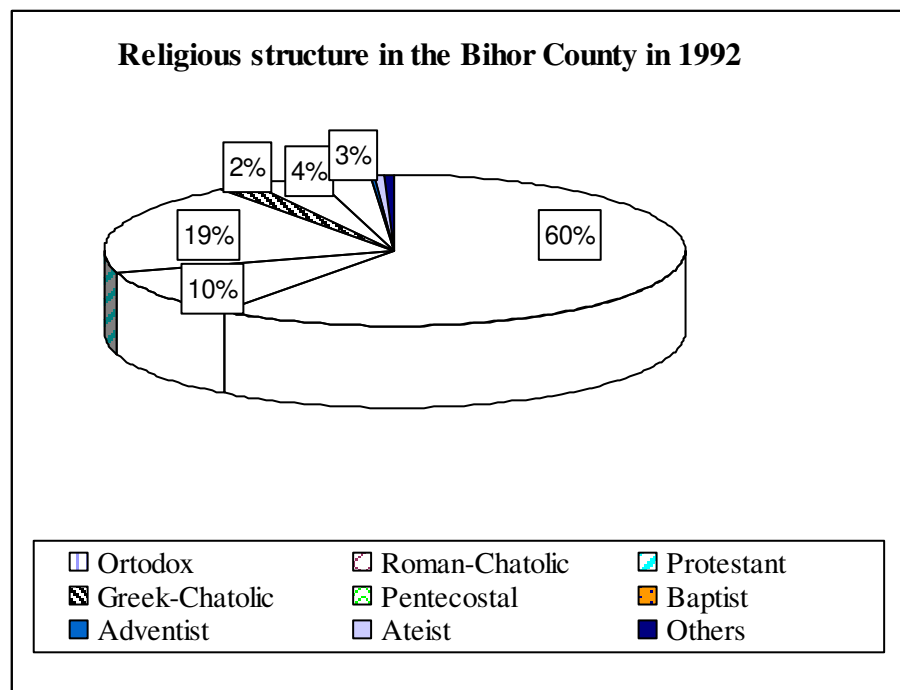
Vincenzo Paglia considers that *„the different European traditions – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – need to find new ways of working together in order to trace a way on which the Europeans to live the great humanistic values and offer them to the entire planet”*. The European Ecumenical Assembly,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

„I remember with great satisfaction the atmosphere created at Sibiu in September 2007, where under the same roof or in the same square, the Christians belonging to different confessions declared Christ the Light of the World, Unique Lord and Redeemer”, stated Lucian, Bishop of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș-Blaj, Major Archbishop of the Romanian Church united with the Greek-Catholic Rome⁴⁹.

Premises of ecumenism and interconfessional dialogue in Bihor. Urban – rural comparative approach

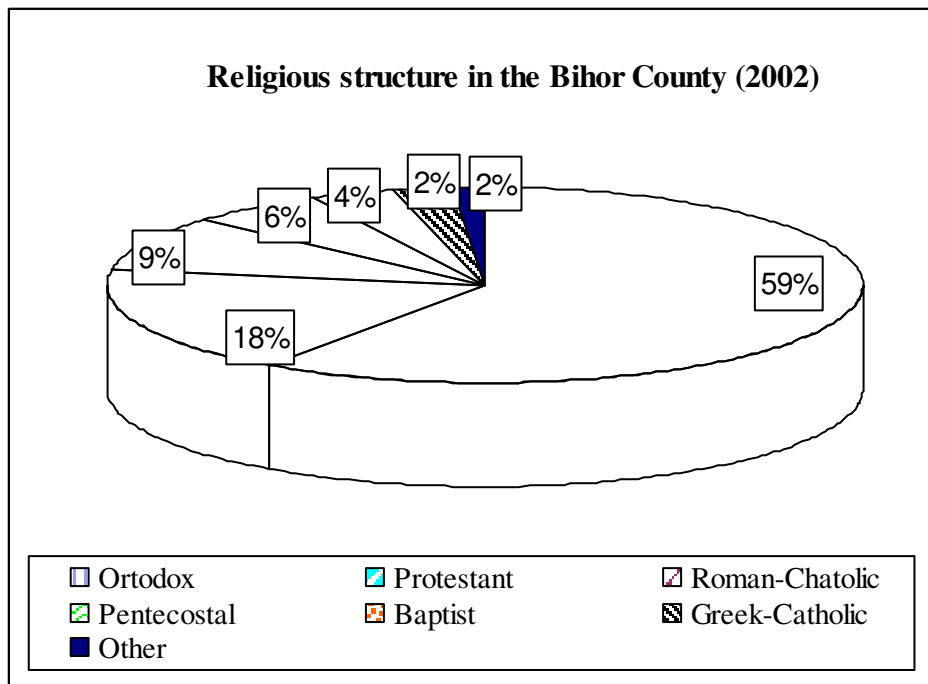
Discussing about ecumenism and interreligious or inter-confessional dialogue in Bihor is, according to current demographic realities, a need entailed by the ethno-confessional diversity and multiculturalism specific to the area. The great religious diversity has led not only to inter-community tensions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

In 1992, there was the following confessional structure of the county:



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

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



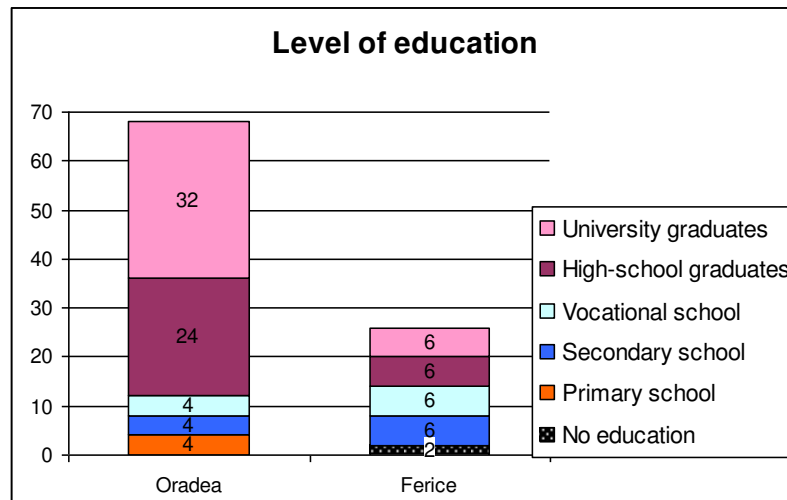
Source: National Statistics Institute, *Population census in 2002*

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

In order to seize the degree of opening of the Oradea inhabitants to interreligious dialogue, we start with our own research by carrying out a comparative investigation in the urban and rural environments. We therefore resorted to an inquiry based on an interview applied to some people (lay parishioners or ecclesiastics) with different religious convictions. From a methodological point of view, we chose Oradea and the village of Ferice (commune of Buntești) in order to see the more acute conservatism in the rural area.

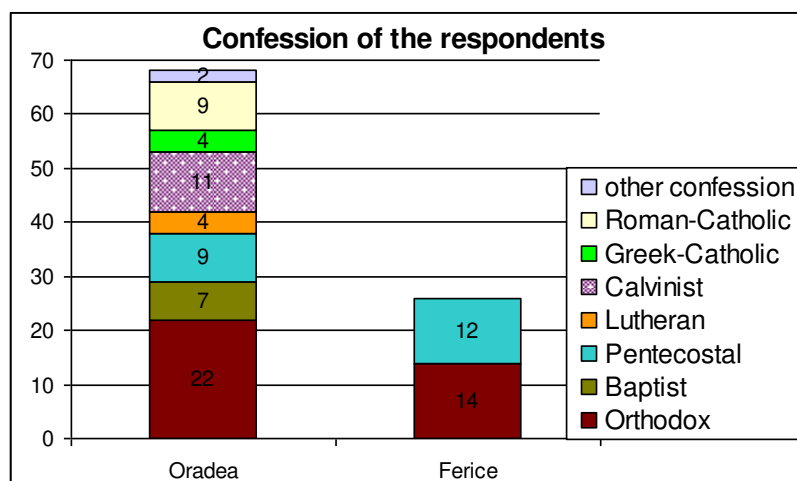
In our investigation, we started from the premise that in a city like Oradea, with a complex population in point of ethno-confessional structure, modernism and even post-modernism has led to a greater flexibility in perceiving religious behaviour. On the other hand, in the village of Ferice, located in the hilly area of the Beiuș Depression, the population is less receptive to contemporary changes. The reduced community here is “compelled” to dialogue irrespective of their confession yet respecting the conservatory traditional norms characteristic of each confessional group. Another aspect worth mentioning is the fact that in Oradea there is a much higher religious diversity than in Ferice, where there are only two confessions (Orthodox – 2/3 and Pentecostal – 1/3).

68 interview guides were spread in Oradea and 26 in Ferice. They were relatively equally distributed according to sex and age of the respondents.



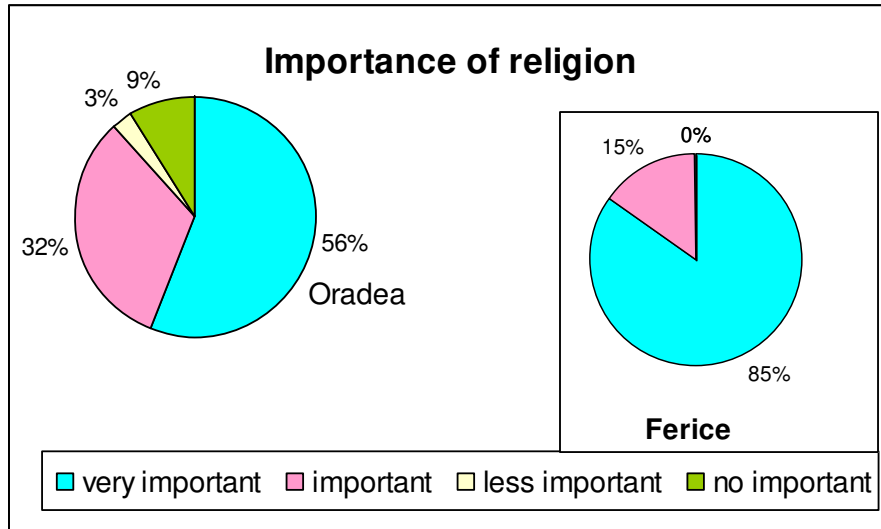
We think that the respondents' level of education can trace certain trends concerning the respondents' opening to interreligious dialogue. If in the case of Ferice, there is a relatively balanced distribution, in Oradea the higher education is predominant (which is due to the reality of the city in the first place: here, there is a much higher number of higher education graduates). From this point of view, we expect a different expression in the two places concerning religious issues, particularly the "litigious" ones.

The nationality of the interviewed people is also important due to the analysis: in Ferice, all inhabitants are of Romanian nationality, while in Oradea, the population is more complex (considering this aspect, the interview guides were applied to the main ethnic groups).



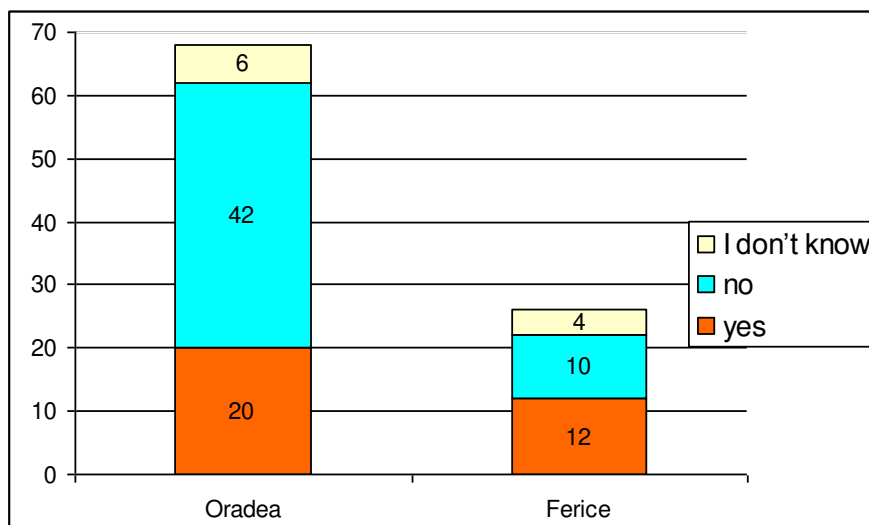
The confessional distribution of the interviewed people shows to a certain extent the confessional structure of the population. This distribution is important to our survey in order to

seize de degree of opening and acceptance of dialogue from a confessional point of view (irrespective of their means of expression). The answer to the question *How important is religion to you?* differed depending on the settlement environment, as well as their confession, age and level of education.



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

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

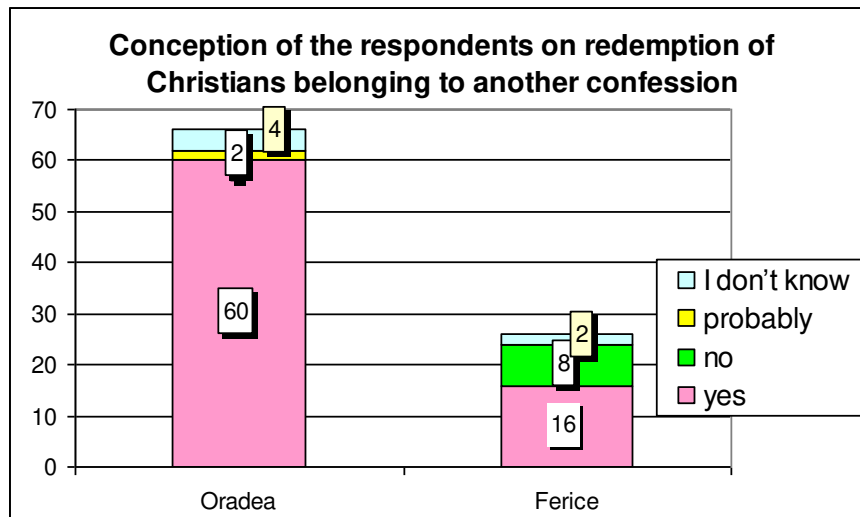


The answers to the abovementioned questions as shown in the chart above seize a greater opening of the inhabitants in Oradea to accept the fact that “Truth” is not the monopole of their own

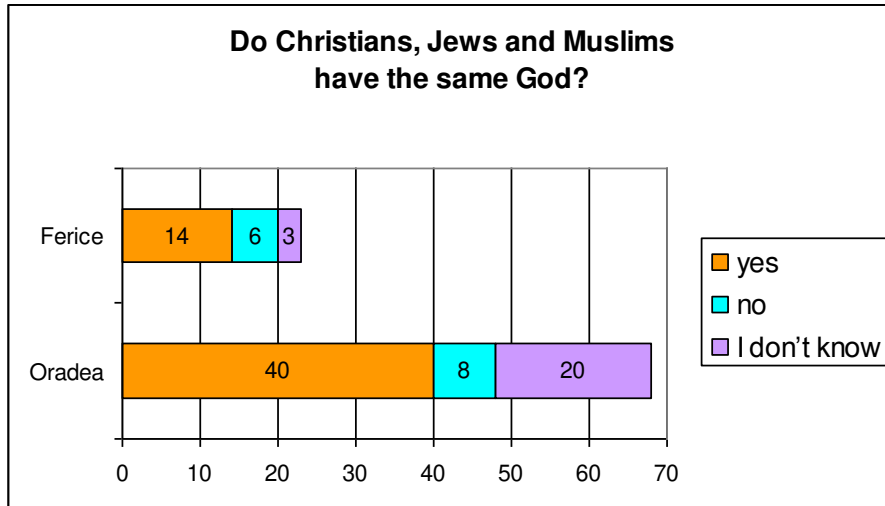
confession. Such a premise is highly important in the equation of building a real dialogue between confessions. Orthodox and Pentecostals in both Ferice and Oradea proved to be the most exclusivist and certain on detaining the monopoly on the “Truth”. The most open proved to be the Lutherans and the Calvinists, as well as the Baptists (100% of them accepted that the “Truth” did not belong to their own confession).

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

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

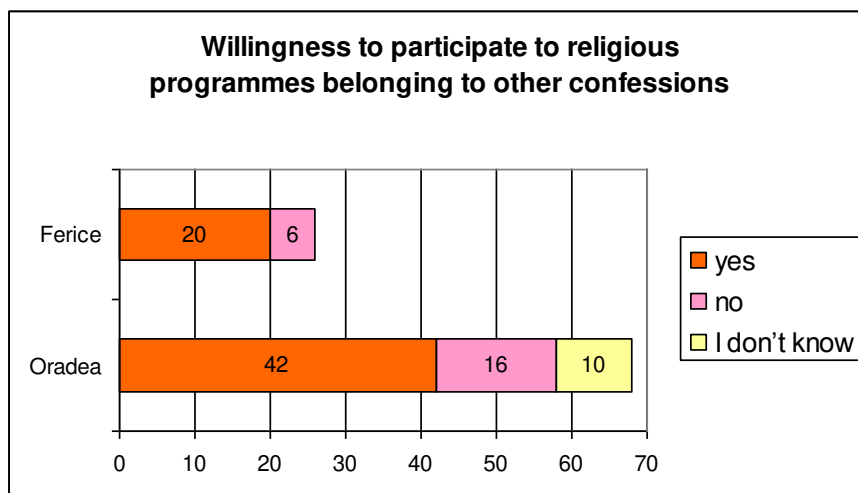


From the perspective of worldwide ecumenism, an interesting question is the following: *Do you think that Christians, Muslims and Jews pray to the same God?*



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

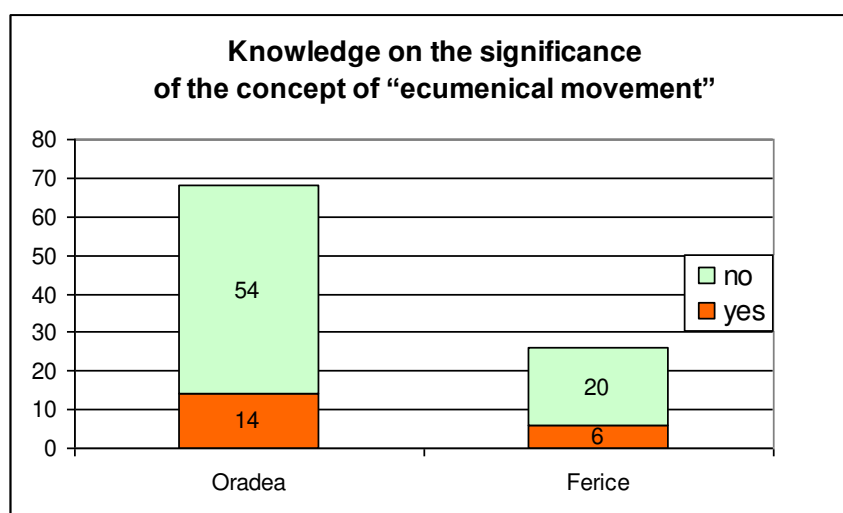
The following question, *Are you willing to participate to religious programmes with adepts from other confessions/religions?* confirms the fact that most respondents are willing to participate to religious programmes specific to other confessions.



However, we identify an important number of persons who do not wish to participate to religious programmes belonging to other confessions (23.5% out of the total number in Oradea and 23.07% in Ferice), which shows reticence towards the specificity of other confessions. God is unique, there is a possibility of redemption for all; however, we do not accept this dogmatically – seems to confirm the investigation.

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

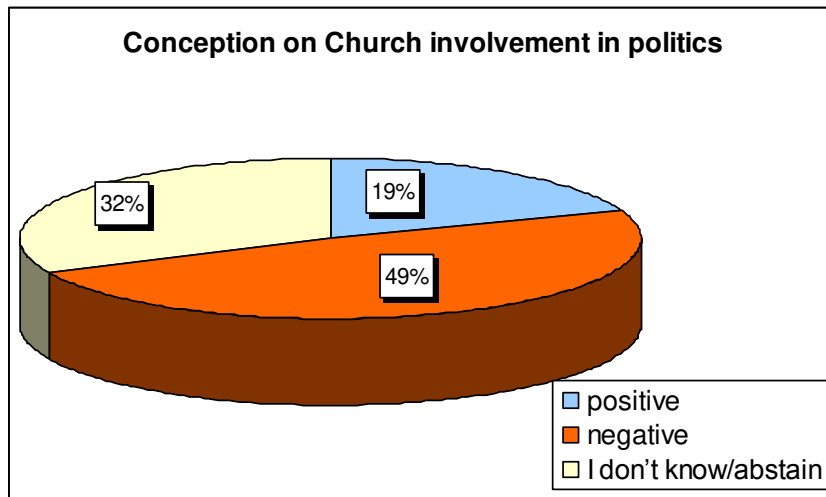
The extent to which the inhabitants of Bihor are willing to accept ecumenism is not totally related to the acceptance of dialogue amongst confessions. Most respondents do not even know the real significance of the term ecumenism. Such a reality makes us believe that the ecumenical movement, at least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



The following questions: *What do you know on the European ecumenical movement? Do you consider that the ecumenical movement is a good thing? What do you know on the Charta Oecumenica?* showed the lack of knowledge and information that the people in Bihor have on the issue of ecumenical movement. Despite the fact that religion is considered as important, the people in Bihor prove their concern with religious issues and also that they are “avoided” by the respondents’ confessional conservatism.

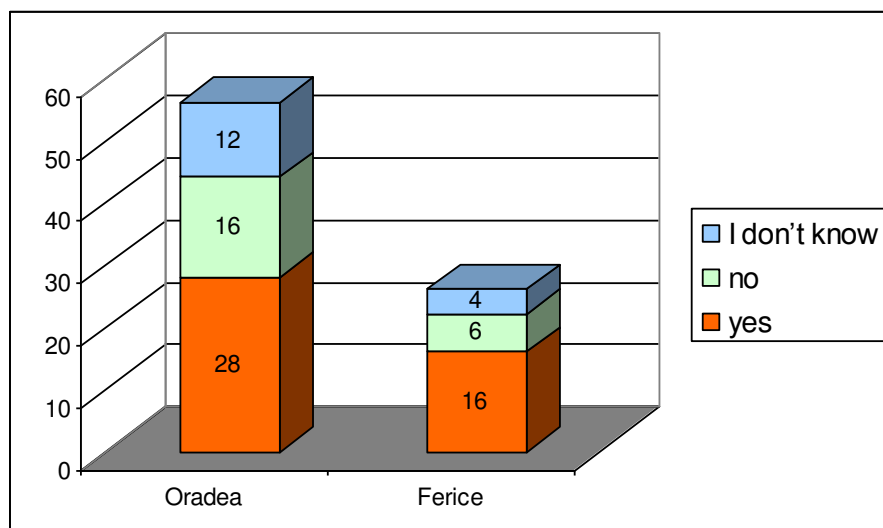
They know next to nothing even on the Third European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu in September 2007: if 17.6% in Oradea have heard of the event, none of the respondents in Ferice heard of it. In exchange, most agreed to participate to a charity action with parishioners from other confessions.

As far as the involvement of the Church in politics is concerned, the people in Bihor were in the first place against the presence of the Church in politics; then, they abstained from answering this question as they were neither for nor against it.



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

At the question *Are you willing that your child should learn in a confessional school in the future?*



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

From this survey, we can draw certain relevant conclusions:

- ❖ God is unique, all have the opportunity for redemption; yet parishioners from different confessions won't accept the others dogmatically
- ❖ In general, Orthodox, Catholics and Greek-Catholics feel close to one another. The same holds true in the case of Neo-Protestants (Pentecostals, Baptists and Adventists) or Protestants (Lutherans, Calvinists).
- ❖ The extent to which people in Bihor are willing to accept ecumenism is not totally related to accepting dialogue amongst confessions. Most respondents are not aware of the real significance of the term ecumenism. Considering this reality, we may think that the ecumenical movement, at least in the Bihor area, is mostly an issue of debate amongst theologians and less the wish or interest of parishioners belonging to different confessions.
- ❖ Despite the fact that religion is considered very important, the people in Bihor show in this context a concern for issues relating to religion, as well as the fact that they are "avoided" by the confessional conservatism of the respondents.
- ❖ People in Bihor are in the first place against the presence of the Church in politics but they agree to a great extent to State funding the activity of religious cults.
- ❖ Respondents in the rural area are clearly against women being ordained in church, while inhabitants of the urban area are more open to such an option.
- ❖ People in Bihor know next to nothing on ecumenism, but they and their children are willing to find out more.

Conclusions

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

The ecumenical movement is led today, at different levels, by churches which act through synodic organisms (like the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, the regional ecumenical

organizations, sub-regional associations and the National Committees of the churches), world Christian communities, ecumenical communities, missionary organizations, faculties and theological associations, ecumenical institutions and training centres for the secular, as well as organisms or specialized ministries, international ecumenical organisations and many other ecumenical organizations. It is obvious that the ecumenical movement goes beyond any institution and includes all those who aspire to unity and dream of hearing a common Christian voice uttering the present important questions.

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

The new evolution promises an improvement of the dialogue between the churches and the European institutions, but the secular modesty regarding the Christian subject will remain for a long time, in the same way as the temptation of the Church to demonize postmodernism will preserve for a while its manipulative vigour.

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

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

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⁴ Reen Remond, *Religie și societate în Europa – secularizarea în secolele al XIX-lea și XX, 1780-2000*, (Iași: Polirom, 2003), 10.

⁵ Remond, 217.

⁶ Wojtek Kalinowski, "L'imaginaire religieux dans la construction européenne", in *Religion(s) et identité(s) en Europe. L'épreuve du pluriel*, ed. Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean, Patrick Michel, Enzo Pace, (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2008), 297-298.

⁷ Kalinowski, 298.

⁸ Patrick Michel, "Religion, identité nationales, identité européenne", in *Religion(s) et identité(s) en Europe. L'épreuve du pluriel*, ed. Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean, Patrick Michel, Enzo Pace, (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2008), 315.

⁹ Jean Gueit, "L'œcuménisme chrétien comme facteur décisif de l'unité européenne?", in *Géopolitique du christianisme*, ed. Blandine Chélini-Pont, Raphaël Liogier, (Paris: Ellipses Édition Marketing S.A., 2003), 89-91.

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¹² Baconsky et. al., p. 54.

¹³ Daniel Buda, "Un scurt istoric al mișcării ecumenice moderne", in *Elemente de istorie, doctrină și practică misionară: din perspectivă ecumenică*, ed. Nicolae Moșoiu, (Sibiu: Editura Universității "Lucian Blaga", 2006), 87.

¹⁴ Apud Moșoiu, 60. Nicolae Moșoiu includes in his work the text *Raportului final al consultării referitoare la "Ecumenismul în sec. XXI"*, translated into Romanian by Aurel Pavel (in the original "Rapport final de la consultation sur "l'œcuménisme au XXI^{ème} siècle" (30 novembre-3 décembre 2004)", in *Istina*, L, 2005, 95-106).

¹⁵ Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 87.

¹⁶ Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 87.

¹⁷ Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 89-90.

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- ¹⁸ Gueit, 98.
- ¹⁹ See the official website of this organization - www.cec-kek.org (accessed February 20, 2009).
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- ²³ Daniel Buda, "A Treia Adunare Ecumenică Europeană", 26.
- ²⁴ Buda, 118-119.
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- ²⁹ Von Sassima, 4.
- ³⁰ Moșoiu, 61.
- ³¹ Teodor Baconsky et. al., 47-48.
- ³² Teodor Baconsky et. al., 50.
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- ³⁵ Alexandru Buzalic, *Ekklesia*, (Blaj: Editura "Buna Vestire", 2005), 22.
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- ³⁹ Teodor Baconsky et. al., 51.
- ⁴⁰ Teodor Baconsky et. al., 52-53.
- ⁴¹ Gueit, 98.
- ⁴² Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 120.
- ⁴³ Buda, "Un scurt istoric", 120.
- ⁴⁴ See <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/charta.shtmlch> (accessed February 20, 2009).
- ⁴⁵ Buda, 120.
- ⁴⁶ The main ideas expressed in Charta Oecumenica are: (1) We believe "in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church", (2) Called together to unity in faith, (3) On the way towards the visible fellowship of the churches in Europe, (4) Proclaiming the Gospel together, (5) Moving towards one another, (6) Acting together, (7) Praying together, (8) Continuing the dialogue, (9) Our common responsibility in Europe, (10) Participating in the building of Europe, (11) Reconciling peoples and cultures, (12) Safeguarding the creation, (13) Strengthening community with Judaism, (14) Cultivating relations with Islam. See <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/charta.shtml>.
- ⁴⁷ Daniel Buda, "A Treia Adunare Ecumenică Europeană", 31.
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