

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

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 Chrysavgis 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



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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 (Fedotov 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 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 Alongside 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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