Ecumenical Urgency: Transcending Closed Religiosity to Achieve Spiritual Openness

A spiritual reflection on our *common way* to accomplish sanctity

Iosif Bosch (PhD; ThD)
Metropolitan of Buenos Aires and South America
President of CEICA

Introit

To begin with, I would like to first clarify that the current paper is not a classical theological dissertation on technical issues concerning the ecumenical movement – **a type of paper that I want to avoid.** Rather, I will present here a "free" spiritual reflection — as is stated in the title — on ecumenical urgencies, inasmuch as can be understood and decoded in the context of the signs of our times. Surely, the prophetic and unsettling tone and mood of this text is a direct response to these signs, as we are called to watch and interpret objectively, but always with the support and assistance of the Paraclete. My apologies if this approach disappoints the audience.

Christianity is a "**purely empirical phenomenon**" that, since its appearance on the historical scene, has been lived and interpreted — from within and from outside — through a multitude of prisms and perspectives, using clearly diverging criteria.

The consequences of these experiences and interpretations have been crystallized through the centuries in the various traditions of Christianity. Interpretations from within, and consequently (or not) hermeneutic approaches from outside, are summed up in a general conviction that Christianity is a *complex theistic system institutionalized in multiple ways* and, therefore, is necessarily **religious** in nature.

This concept, regardless of the approach to religion used — from within or from outside of Christianity — is in my opinion responsible for **limiting** and sometimes **reducing** religion's legitimate "DNA" and, consequently, the real scope of the original soteriological matrix of the "***Event Christ***" as "***universal apocalypse***" of

the Triune God, who comes to redeem; that is, of God who comes to perfect all humanity, all history, all nature.

The multiplicity of variants and versions of Christianity in general — from the most institutionalized to the freest, from the most orthodox to the most heterodox, from the most moralistic to the most liberal, from the most politicized to the most independent — exist and operate mostly within the framework of this **closed religious scheme,** that today struggles with its supposed "Manichean ***nemesis"*** presented as "spirituality." And here I would like to clarify that my position on this issue is far beyond the ordinary and reactionary conceptual opposition of "*religion vs. spirituality*" that emerges from the same aforementioned closed religious scheme.

Evidently, in this already complex landscape and panorama — which for numerous reasons I cannot delve into here — divergences, discrepancies and disagreements of various natures have been and are being created from dogma itself concerning institutionality, ethics and morality, pastoral care, mission, etc., which, of course, depend on the **self-perception** that each version of Christianity considers itself to be, and consequently impact their perception of Christianity in general.

Broadly speaking, the ecumenical movement that emerged from a healthy and urgent reaction to the great humanitarian catastrophe caused by World War II came to create a **common space** where many of these versions of Christianity could be "known" and **"*recognized*"** based on a multidimensional program that, since then, has fostered dialogue and collaboration in view of a "**unity**" which, unfortunately even to this day, cannot be agreed upon using a common criterion of what nature it should be.

However, when viewed within the scope of this **closed institutional-religious system** — with all its consequent and necessary variants — "Ecumenism" has functioned only as a **"palliator"** for a type of **plurality** that has unfortunately degenerated into the antipode of the original command of the Theanthropos Christ "*that they all may be One*" (Jn. 17:21). In my humble opinion, **the zenith of Ecumenism was reached when it began to become institutionalized in such a way that it dangerously bordered on becoming another version of Christianity itself**. Now we are experiencing firsthand the limits and weaknesses of the movement that saw its light inserted in a plethora of Christian alternatives lived and interpreted "almost" exclusively through a religious-institutional key. And obviously, a **palliator never goes to the source of the pathogen but treats to the symptom: for this reason, the disorder´s pathogenesis is still active.**

Evidently, up until now it has been empirically proven that the ecumenical movement cannot resolve the multiple divergences of the many versions of Christianity spread across a multitude of spheres and dimensions. And so, the question arises: is the ecumenical movement called to resolve these divergences? In the meantime — while this question is debated — the wounds that exist continue to fester; some go deeper; others mutating; new ones arise, and the process of dismembering the so-called "***mystical body of Christ***" endures. We are

therefore asked to reflect on how we can transcend these divergences in this context.

The main problem, of course, precedes this discussion. The basis, indeed, is found in the **experience** and **interpretation** of what Christianity itself is. If we plainly accept the presupposition that Christianity is a religion, then all its operation, capacity, and influence on man as an individual and mankind as a whole will be experienced and interpreted in the same key. This is not our case.[1] Risking scathing criticism, I will assume from now on the implications of an "unorthodox" reading. I hope it's worth the effort.

A new initiative: breaking down stereotypes of old schemes. The double opposite experience as a motive.

"What difference does it make if I end up praying in a church or in Mecca?
What difference can there be between Union and Separation?[2]

We were asked to reflect on how we can transcend the divergences and discrepancies among Christians in this context. The question, although brutal, is sincere and necessary: **is it possible to transcend serious divergences and disagreements among Christians across all levels within the current context of Ecumenism?**

If are to be optimistic, then there is a *conditio sine qua non*. In my view, this transcendence can indeed be accomplished through **sincere, direct and effective ecumenical dialogue based on spirituality** — and, why not — the mysticism of each Christian Tradition. And I do emphasize that this innovative kind of dialogue must not be based on static schemes or merely through *religious-dogmatistic*[3] structures, but it must rather go even further, by taking advantage of the experience that every sacred institution pursues: the **living experience of God**. It is upon this point that all Christian Traditions must converge, as from the base to the top of a pyramid.

An ecumenical dialogue based on spirituality as a **living** and **real** experience — or ***ascesis*** — must, in turn, have as its motive another equally essential one: the **multiple-relationality of man.** That is, how a human being in today's world, both here and now, axiomatically has a relationship with God, with one's neighbor, with nature and the entire cosmos – the common home that we have inherited and are called to manage.

---

1. ΡΩΜΑΝΙΔΟΥ, Ι. Σ., *Δογματική καὶ Συμβολική Θεολογία τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Καθολοκῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, Τόμος Α', Πουρναρᾶ, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1999, pag. 10-11: «Μὲ τὴν ἔννοια θρησκεία ἐννοοῦμεν κάθε ταύτισιν τοῦ ἀκτίστου μὲ τὸ κτιστόν καὶ μάλιστα κάθε ταύτισιν παραστάσεων τοῦ ἀκτίστου μὲ νοήματα καὶ ρήματα τῆς ἀνθρώπινης σκέψεως, ποὺ εἶναι τὸ θεμέλιον τῆς λατρείας τῶν εἰδώλων.»

2. FAKHR AL-DIN IRAQI, *Destellos de la Divinidad*, EDAF, Madrid 2008, pag.14.

3. *Dogmatistic*, not dogmatic or doctrinal.

Without these two deep approaches and openings to **reality** in its two dimensions, that is, in both a **current empiricism** — what we actually live — and in an **evolutionary-ascetic empiricism** — what we are called to live — any "confluence" of the diverse Christian Traditions in any type of dialogue can only remain in the past classic academic schemes, consequently failing to transcend the "object of study" as an **experience lived together**.

I propose another inverse scheme by using the severe challenges which afflict us — and humanity as a whole — so that Christians hailing from all denominations and spiritualties can collaboratively join together within the framework of each one's own path of evolution, in order to find a solution to what prevents us from "**relating**" ourselves in a healthy way through the aforementioned multi-dimensionality. Furthermore, I humbly posit today that any other initiative which is not based on **reality as it is**, is mere academicism or mere utopia. It is time for ecumenical dialogue to bear fruit and not decant into a type of encyclopedism only useful for some "experts."

And so, there is a need for a new scheme, structure, and dynamic based on the reality that we ourselves — within the framework of our *beliefs* or *dis-beliefs* — build and propagate. It should be an applicable and effective scheme initiated and crafted out of our own failures and sin -ἁμαρτία- as human beings. While this may seem ***oxymoronic,*** it is nonetheless a powerful paradox. For by uniting and dynamically relating to each other through the common "sin" of humanity, we can transcend it, but with a common denominator: fidelity to our own Tradition in "**unity**" and "**diversity**" in order to achieve a common and palpable goal.

Modality: an inclusive therapy based on "*mea culpa*"

> *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."*[4]

What should unite us? 1. Christ 2. The very will and attempt of human beings to transcend – which is a common denominator to all confessions and spiritualities. Having therefore decoded and identified our "failures" -or sins- or the degenerative tendencies of mankind *hic et nunc*, it is necessary to take responsibility for them, without guilt or remorse. In this atmosphere, is a manifest enough? Is one document enough? Is a protocol enough? Not anymore. It even sounds extemporaneous. **The way in which "religious" leaders can mobilize and make other people aware is to sensitize them through their own example.** It is therefore imperative to avoid fighting against any type of "*Pharisaism,*" which is the worst enemy and temptation for *"religious managers."* That is why I spoke of an ecumenical movement based on the implicated individual's multifunctional asceticism, in order to project it to all men and women.

---

4. Mt 23:23-24.

That is why the suggested modality eminently results as **inclusive** and **therapeutic**. Notwithstanding, true healing begins with the religious leadership and should be proclaimed and projected to all the men and women who want to follow this proposal. Only then can a natural cohesion be achieved between the proclaimers and the recipients of the proclamation. The result of this coherence is the guarantee that it is not mere a hollow announcement, but rather, a genuine **testimony** of what has already been lived and experienced.

Challenge: The root of the religious opposition sin

"The ego derives grim pleasure and satisfaction from suffering and from all levels of lack of integrity: pride, anger, desire, guilt, shame, and sorrow. The secret pleasure of suffering is addictive. Many people dedicate their entire lives to it and encourage others to do the same. To stop this mechanism, you have to identify the pleasure of the compensation and surrender it voluntarily to God."[5]

Referring now to a key issue, I think we can all agree that the "***failure***" of humanity is based on a very deep-rooted spiritual pathology which is unfortunately naturalized, advertised and even advised: **egoism**. Egoism manifests itself with serious symptoms in man's **multiple-relationality**. Man as a victim of the systemic fantasy of the "ego" — especially on the religious level — necessarily produces a ***de-generation*** in his ways of relating to everything he/she considers as "***separate***" from any entity that she/he believes to be.

Of course, due to the necessary "**separation-distinction**" presupposed by the **natural and open alterity converted into a closed sameness**, the egoic system projects toward itself a cosmogonic — and essentially a phantasmagorical — image of reality. The only option of relating to this antagonistic "**exterior**" is by a based-on-"**power**"-relationship, as a systemic and organic dynamic allowing the ego to submit the "detached" to its "needs" and "pleasures."

It is quite clear that the aforementioned vision of reality is obtuse and imaginary. Therefore, the consequent negative counterpart towards everything that is not the ego is seen as opponent. The ego's own dynamic always presents a protagonist (ego) vs. antagonist (non-ego). In this atmosphere, man's ability to discern is invalidated. And the double engine at the heart of this system that drives defense or attack actions is both one and the same: fear and hedonism. Fear (guilt) makes man's attack to defend himself from the supposed danger; hedonism is to indulge. And in this, there is no measure since there is no proportion and no discernment.

Orthodox Christians call this primary and extremely dangerous passion "***philautia,***" which is the indiscriminate love or affection for the image that man has of himself through a system of closed and exclusive thoughts, feelings, sensations, and customs which are self-managed and fed back through the consent or validation of qualified external factors (as both accessories and disposable, be it parental, social, religious, or ideological). The "mother of all man's passions," ***Philautia*** **is the love for fallen and degenerated nature** — *insofar as it has lost*

---

[5]. HAWKINS, D.R., (Ed. Scott Jefrey) *Disolver el EGO*, El Grano de Mostaza, Barcelona 2020, pag. 27.

its legitimate gender — that systematically tends towards involution due to the continuous alternate mechanisms of defense and complacency[6].

If this system is active in a human being, he/she will not be able to relate in any other way with his/her spiritual congeners and with all fellow human beings. As long as the **fear-guilt** and **pleasure-pain** complex controls the inner man — a recurrence of ancestral sin in the operation of our nature[7] — he/she will continue to "perceive"[8] the Divine out of this **perverted, closed and exclusivist system**. This system, *also called religiosity,*[9] leaves no room for theological, philanthropic,

---

[6]. LARCHET, J.C., *Terapéutica de las enfermedades espirituales*, Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca 214, p. 137: "La filautía-pasión es una perversión de esta filautía virtuosa. Consiste, por el contrario, en el amor propio –en el sentido original y no edulcurado de este término-, es decir, en el amor egoísta a uno mismo, en el amor al yo caído, apartado de Dios y vuelto al mundo sensible, que lleva desde entonces una vida carnal y ya no espiritual. Por esta última razón, la filautía se define generalmente como un amor o una pasión por el cuerpo y por sus inclinaciones apasionadas."

[7]. LARCHET, J.C., *Terapéutica de las enfermedades espirituales*, Op. Cit., pag. 44-115.

[8]. ΑΓ. ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΥ ΠΑΛΑΜΑ, *Ὑπὲρ ἱερῶς ἡσυχαζόντων*, Λόγος 1, 2-3, 30-2, 52-54: «Οὐχ ὅτι τὸ παθητικόν μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς κακῶς ἐπαναστὰν αὐτὰς τε διέστρεψε καὶ τὸ διορατικόν αὐτῆς συνέχεε καὶ μακρὰν ἐποίησε τῆς ἀρχετύπου καλλονῆς;» En realidad se trata de lo contrario, que es "la ignorancia de Dios", aún a pesar de que Dios se siga revelando de la misma manera: ΑΓ. ΜΑΞΙΜΟΥ ΟΜΟΛΟΓΗΤΟΥ, *Πρός Θαλάσσιον*, PG 90, 257D: «Παθῶν γὰρ γίνεται διδάσκαλος τοῖς σωματικῶς αὐτῆς μεταλαμβάνουσιν, τῶν θείων αὐτοῖς λήθην ἐπάγουσα·» 260AB: «Τοῦ ξύλου δὲ νῦν τῆς παρακοῆς ἐμνήσθην παροδίκως, δείξαι θέλων ὡς ἡ περὶ Θεὸν ἄγνοια, τὴν κτίσιν ἐθεοποίησεν· ἧς ὑπάρχει λατρεία σαφής, ἡ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ γένους τῶν ἀνθρώπων φυλαυτία· περὶ ἣν ἐστιν ὥσπερ τις μικτή γνῶσις, ἡ τῆς ἡδονῆς πείρα καὶ τῆς ὀδύνης·»

[9]. In this passage Saint Maximus explains clearly and emphatically how the dynamics of the ontological decline of ancestral sin works and operates on the knowledge of fallen man. It reaches the point where man confuses God with the creations and worships them: this act demonstrates the primary and most basic form and version of religion. ΑΓ. ΜΑΞΙΜΟΥ ΟΜΟΛΟΓΗΤΟΥ, *Πρός Θαλάσσιον*, PG 90, 257 ABC: «Τὸ τοίνυν κακόν ἐστιν, ὡς προέφην, ἡ ἄγνοια τῆς ἀγαθῆς τῶν ὄντων αἰτίας· ἥτις τὸν μέν νοῦν πηρώσασα τὸν ἀνθρώπινον, τὴν αἴσθησιν δὲ τρανῶς διανοίξασα, τῆς μέν θείας γνῶσεως παντελῶς αὐτὸν ἀπεξένωσεν· τῆς δὲ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐμπαθοῦς ἐπλήρωσε γνώσεως· ἧς πρὸς μόνην τὴν αἴσθησιν ἀνέδην μεταλαμβάνων κτηνῶν ἀλόγων δίκην ὁ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ εὑρῶν διὰ τῆς πείρας τῆς φαινομένης αὐτοῦ σωματικῆς φύσεως συστατικήν τῶν αἰσθητῶν τὴν μετάληψιν, εἰκότως οἷα τοῦ νοητοῦ κάλλους ἤδη τῆς θείας ὡραιότατος διαμαρτήσας, τὴν φαινομένην κτίσιν εἰς Θεόν παρεγνώρισεν, διὰ τὴν αὐτῆς πρὸς σύστασιν σώματος χρείαν, θεοποιήσας· καὶ τὸ σῶμα τὸ ἴδιον οἰκείως ἔχον κατὰ φύσιν πρὸς τὴν νομισθεῖσαν εἶναι Θεὸν κτίσιν, κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἠγάπησε, κατὰ πᾶσαν σπουδήν, διὰ τῆς περὶ μόνον τὸ σῶμα φροντίδος τε καὶ ἐπιμελείας, λατρεύων τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα. Οὐ γὰρ ἄλλως δύναται τις λατρεύειν τῇ κτίσει, μὴ τὸ σῶμα περιποιούμενος· ὥσπερ οὐδὲ τῷ Θεῷ τις λατρεύειν, μὴ τὴν ψυχὴν ταῖς ἀρεταῖς ἐκκαθαίρων. Καθ' ὅ σῶμα τὴν φθοροποιόν ἐπιτελῶν λατρείαν ὁ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ καθ' ἑαυτοῦ γενόμενος φίλαυτος, ἡδονήν εἶχεν ἀπαύστως, καὶ ὀδύνην ἐνεργουμένην· ἐσθίων ἀεὶ τοῦ ξύλου [Al. Τὸ ξύλον] τῆς παρακοῆς, τοῦ καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ κατ' αὐτὸν μεμιγμένην κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν διὰ τῆς πείρας ἔχων τὴν οἴησιν [Fr. γνώσιν]. Fr. John Romanides is quite clear and acute in his vision on religion as a **neurobiological decease** as a result of fallen nature. ΡΩΜΑΝΙΔΟΥ, Ι. Σ., *Δογματική καὶ Συμβολική Θεολογία τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Καθολοκῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, Τόμος Α', Πουρναρᾶ, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1999, pag. 9. According to Ch. Giannaras religion is a way of expressing the survival instinct that tries to protect the individual against insecurity and phobias, which generate uncertainty before fear and panic of death. This empowerment is achieved through supernatural "convictions", with ethical and moral "principles" and with the "certainty" of the eternal extension of their existence. Ultimately, religion for Giannaras *"nurtures the super-ego, offers self-confidence, hedonistic*

pastoral, or ecumenical initiative. No matter how altruistic it may be, there is no possibility for a lasting and cardinal result.

Unfortunately, according to spiritual law this is axiomatic.

Ecumenical Therapeutics: *"metanoia"* as the recognition of the divine origin and destiny

"Thus, then, God made man innocent, upright, virtuous, without pain or worry, splendidly clothed with all virtue, adorned with all goods "like a second cosmos". He was small in size, another adoring angel, composed, watchful and protector of the visible creation, initiate of the intelligible. He reigned over what is on earth; but he was ruled from Above."[10]

The neuralgic point in this new proposal for confluence between the various Christian confessions from a ***spiritual-empirical*** point of view is identified with their own very objective: pursuing **union** with the Triune God. However, that union, for which the various confessions instrumentalize different exoteric and esoteric practices, is conceived while having the common understanding that there is a **primitive** and **primordial relationship** between the Creator and his creation.

Without any exaggeration, I would argue that there is an "***original relational mutuality***" between a Deity and its creation. In the Judeo-Christian Tradition this concept is referred to the "**reality**" of man being created in the "***image and likeness***" of the Creator Himself. Man, according to Christian theology, is a **mediator** [11] between the Creator and all creation due to his ontological characteristics.

The very root of this "**degeneration**", this "**fallenness**" from the original nature of man — and therefore from the initial and divine destiny that man originally has — is his **denial** of God. Having broken this original communion, man's ego arises coupled with the subsequent consequences that we have briefly described above. This, through its current ascetic and mystical practices, is perhaps one of the most important challenges of today's Christianity: to make men and women aware of their divine origin and destiny. Today, the main problem is that each man has become a "god" but without God, perhaps ignoring that from the beginning he was destined — and is destined — to become God with God, by God, for God.

This common crucial point makes us understand that man is not God and is not divinized. For man cannot transcend alone, but only through a healthy "**relationship**" and a direct experience with everything that surrounds him. Because according to this perspective, everything that surrounds man is part of him. Indeed, man, as well as all creation, is a **reflection** — more or less luminous,

---

indulgence, sacralized narcissism." ΓΙΑΝΝΑΡΑ, Χ., *Ένάντια στὴ Θρησκεία*, "Ικαρος, Άθήνα 2006. pag. 19.

[10]. SAN JUAN DAMASCENO, *Exposición de la Fe,* Ciudad Nueva, Madrid 2003, pag. 116.

[11]. SAN JUAN DAMASCENO, *Exposición de la Fe,* Ciudad Nueva, Madrid 2003, pag. 115.

more or less opaque — of the very Deity that continuously reveals, preserves and perfects all things. Recognizing himself as a **silent echo of the Divine**, man can understand and above all should experience that there is no healthier relationship than **love**: **paradoxically this is the core of *metanoia!***

Of course, this last section may perhaps seem quite romantic, even utopian. This does not bother me. Are not the mystics and ascetics of all religions ultimately hopeless romantics and utopians? Of course, if this remains only on the human level, it necessarily becomes embedded in a rancid and sterile chimera. In any case, as I mentioned before, it is urgent to focus on these two contrasting realities: on one hand, God, and, on the other, man's failure. Between these two realities stands out what in the Christian Tradition is called "**Grace**", that is, God who continuously gives himself to be lived and experienced through his infinite uncreated energies in an eminently erotic and loving relationship.

Metanoia is not remorse or mere repentance; it is a wider spiritual process involving all human existence. It is the radical conversion of man's heart, which is the core of all his existence. It is a process by which man is empowered in order to recognize himself as being-in-relation. Therefore, recognizing oneself as a **reflection-echo** of God Himself — all the while maintaining the ontological otherness — implies a **paradigm shift** in the way of relating. The person who recognizes himself in this way never imposes himself, nor exercises sovereignty over anyone or anything, but lives life as "**communion,**" as "**relationship**" between all created entities, recognizing each other as mirrors which reflect divine glory, divine splendor, divine Eros. Individuals are no longer protagonists, for now another conception is born: "**person,**" that is, ***being-in-relation-to***. **Sameness-property** loses its domination over the assimilated in humanity **otherness-alterity** — *unity-in-diversity* —as the mystical body of Christ Himself.

I would like to emphasize the following point: if we lose our sight on God while performing our awareness raising strategies — whether for the union of Christians, the poor, the environment, etc., or for any other purpose no matter how pious it is — **the game is lost**. A secularized and anthropocentric "religion" is yet another ideology not far, not different, from politics.

Corollarium

This reflection is another call insisting almost *ad nauseam* that an ecumenism based on the parameters of a rigid, inflexible and closed religious dogmatistic institutionality is already out of time. As I have expressed already, it is necessary to come together with another methodology and alternate dynamic based on a genuine, inclusive and transformative spiritual practice that endorses, sustains and legitimizes the entire process of encounter — again relationship — with new and creative parameters.

I have gone to the heart of the matter. It is not plain ideology, nor utopic Romanticism: I have already expressed myself regarding the subject. Nevertheless, I consider it is absolutely necessary to go to the core of the problem, even

problematizing the confessions themselves from their own interior and from the collaboration schemes that we observe here today. I repeat: a system of theistic ideas may well be a mere ideology. What is indispensable is that Christian confessions recognize themselves as "**means,**" even beyond their own institutionality to transmit living God's revelation/*apocalypse*: that God, the God of our fathers, is nothing more than absolute and universal "**relationship,**" "**gift,**" and "**openness**" to all humankind without any distinction.

Only then we will understand how Christ's love is continually moving the entire universe to unity and reconciliation. Only then we will become his faithful collaborators and will avoid betraying him.