

**Salome ESEBUA**  
Vytautas Magnus University

**Malkhaz SONGHULASHVILI**  
Iliia State University, Georgia

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# Involvement of the Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement in the Context of the Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches

**SUMMARY.** The main concern of the ecumenical movement is to overcome the problem connected with the schism and division among Christians. The position of the Orthodox Church is very important in this process, because of historical and other reasons. Orthodox Churches have participated in the ecumenical movement from the very beginning.

The purpose of this article is to review the historical context and to examine the main difficulties that exist in the modern ecumenical movement in relation to the Orthodox Churches. As far as the structure of the Orthodox Church differs from that of the Roman Catholic Church, it should be mentioned that the documents and the encyclicals on which the article is based are from autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Churches. Autocephalous means that there are seventeen self-governing Eastern Orthodox Churches that recognize each other as canonical Churches. The highest-ranking bishop is called a patriarch, archbishop, or metropolitan. These seventeen Orthodox Churches share a eucharistic communion, they recognize common dogmas and common ecclesiastical traditions. Therefore, when the article attempts to express the position of the Orthodox Church, it refers to the official documents of the Orthodox Churches announced at inter-Orthodox gatherings or as the encyclicals. The article examines when and why the Orthodox Churches became involved in the ecumenical movement and what challenges the Orthodox Church faces in modern ecumenical organizations.

**KEYWORDS:** ecumenism, Orthodoxy, Orthodox Ecumenism, World Council of Churches.

## Introduction

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The word ecumenism comes from the Greek word *oikoumene*, which means “inhabited world”.<sup>1</sup> In the contemporary world there are lots of challenges, in theological and ethical issues. The ecumenical movement is of great relevance as it helps to address global challenges as are theological and ethical issues, poverty, climate change, human rights, wars and other problems. The division of Christians is one of the main hindering factors for achieving common goals. The world needs movement that builds bridges between people, such as the call for unity among Christians as well as between Christians and other religions, or non-religious people. The main authority for Christians – Jesus of Nazareth – called on people to love God and one another. Christians, as the followers of this faith, are obliged to serve the values, that are extremely important for humankind.

In the Christian view, God is the Trinity, which means that God is a community. The self-consciousness of Christians should be built on the idea of being in communion with others. Observing different examples in history, it is clear that without the communication and cooperation it is impossible to develop a common vision and follow to the main Christian values. In isolation, entropy and conflicts can increase.

The core concern of the ecumenical movement is to overcome the problem connected with the schism and division among Christians. The position of the Orthodox Church in this process is very important for historical and other reasons. Orthodox Churches have participated in the ecumenical movement from the very beginning. This article aims to explore the theological reasons for this involvement and to examine the main difficulties that exist in the modern ecumenical movement in relation to the Orthodox Churches. In the next sub-chapter, the article will review the beginning of the Orthodox ecumenical journey and some documents and encyclicals of the Orthodox Church on ecumenism.

## The Orthodox Church’s Participation in the Ecumenical Movement in the 20th Century Based on the Important Documents and Encyclicals

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In the article “Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Ecumenical Movement” the Greek Orthodox bishop. The Metropolitan of Pergamon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople John Zizioulas (1931–2023) by going to the historical event tries to find out the beginning of the ecumenical movement inside the Orthodoxy. In 1902, Patriarch of Constantinople Joachim III called on the Christians to gather and to face

<sup>1</sup> “Oikoumene/Orbis Terrarum”, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, accessed February 15, 2023, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-8008;jsessionid=A01855E0825AAF23C028D1D2F8458DE6>.

the challenges of the Christian world at the time.<sup>2</sup> The main goal of this call was to find a way to unite divided Christians. The “Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical of 1902” addresses the Orthodox relationship with Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The document says: “It is moreover, pleasing to God, and in accordance with the Gospel, to seek the mind of the most holy autocephalous Churches on the subject of our present and future relations with the two great growths of Christianity, viz. the Western Church and the Church of the Protestants.”<sup>3</sup> In the Encyclical, Patriarch Joachim III clearly expresses his desire to collaborate with other Churches.

Later, in 1920, another famous document of the Orthodox Church was created – the Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere”. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople called on the Churches to create a “League of Churches” similar to the “League of Nations”<sup>4</sup> that was an instrument for maintaining peace in the world after the First World War. The Encyclical argues that in order to find unity it is necessary to establish “a Koinonia of Churches”<sup>5</sup> – “being ourselves convinced of the necessity for establishing a contact and league (fellowship) between the Churches and believing that the other Churches share our conviction as stated above, at least as beginning we request each one of them to send us in reply a statement of its own judgment and opinion on this matter so that common agreement or resolution having been reached, we may proceed together to its realization.”<sup>6</sup> An important Orthodox encyclical was also created in 1952, after the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC). This document deals with the participation of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement (in relation to the movements “Life and Work” and “Faith and Order”, which are two movements that have begun to work towards the formation of a single organization as a council) and with the Orthodox participation in the WCC.<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that every Church tradition has its own ecclesiology and theological positions. The Orthodox Church has an ecclesiastic teaching about the infallibility of the Church as a whole. For this reason, the nature of ecumenism and Orthodox ecclesiology sometimes seem incompatible. Theologians inside and outside the Orthodox Churches argue about the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement, about the relationship between the Orthodox Churches and the relationship with other Churches. The Orthodox Church identifies itself as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church which is undivided. The question which is repeatedly asked is

<sup>2</sup> John Zizioulas, “Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Ecumenical Movement”, in *The One and the Many*, ed. Gregory Edwards (Alhambra, Ca.: Sebastian Press, 2010), 309.

<sup>3</sup> “Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical of 1902”, in *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement 1902–1992*, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994),

<sup>4</sup> Zizioulas, “Orthodox Ecclesiology”, 310.

<sup>5</sup> “Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical”, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> “Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Phanar, 1952”, in *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*, 21.

the following: does the Orthodox Church participate in the ecumenical movement because of its missionary vocation to reintegrate other Churches? To answer this question, it is crucial to see what the Church is according to Orthodox ecclesiology. Within the Orthodox tradition theologians have different approaches to the topic of Church unity. However, it is necessary to notice that for the Orthodox Church the official position of the whole Church is the most important. For the Orthodox Church the most authoritative theological basis is the Nicene Creed and the teaching of Church fathers as are Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa and others. The Orthodox Church teaches that the Church has a divine nature and that in this world the Church exists as an institution. For the Orthodox Church the hierarchical structure of an institution is crucial. Any decision related to ecclesiological or ecumenical issues, is made according to the official position of the Orthodox Church. Most of this article examines the unity of the Church and the ecumenical nature of the Orthodox Church according to the official documents, e.g., encyclicals, decisions after pan-Orthodox assemblies, the Orthodox responses to ecumenical documents, and so on.

### **The Orthodox Church in Relation to the World Council of Churches**

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The World Council of Churches (WCC) is the largest ecumenical organization, founded in 1948. 147 representatives attended its first assembly entitled “Man’s Disorder and God’s Design” which was held in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. While the assembly affirmed the WCC’s calling and future goals, and debated various social and political issues, it fell short of answering several fundamental questions about the nature of the council and interchurch relations.

In 1950 the central committee of the WCC adopted “the Toronto Statement”<sup>8</sup> which declared that the WCC is not and will never be a “super-church”. The structure of the WCC presupposes no concepts about the Church and does not touch on the ecclesiological issues of member Churches. The WCC exists to provide an opportunity for Churches to engage in dialogue and cooperation.

The most important issue in the Statement concerns mutual recognition. This question is very sensitive for the Orthodox Churches and therefore it was necessary to clarify that the Churches were not obliged to recognize other Churches as “the Church.” Almost in every official statement of the Orthodox Church, it is emphasized that the Orthodox Church identifies itself as the only Church that fully manifests elements of the true Church and continues in the apostolic faith. In other words, the Orthodox Church considers itself as the one true Church and recognizes only elements of the

<sup>8</sup> “Toronto Statement”, *World Council of Churches*, Toronto, 1950, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/toronto-statement>, III, paragraph 1.

true Church in the other Churches and denominations. However, the Toronto Statement establishes this view towards every member Church (including the Orthodox Church) by stating that “the member Churches of the World Council recognize in other Churches elements of the true Church.”<sup>9</sup>

The Second Assembly of the WCC was held in 1954 in Evanston, USA, with the theme “Christ – the Hope of the World.” The work of the assembly was divided into six sections. One section was called “Our Oneness in Christ and our disunity as Churches.” The concept of oneness in Christ based on the New Testament was acceptable to the Orthodox participants as a conception for Church unity, but the problematic issue was the approach to the reunion of the divided Christendom. The proposed conclusions became unacceptable to the Orthodox Churches, particularly the concept of Church unity. The Orthodox Churches declared that true unity cannot be achieved simply by accepting certain doctrines: “For Orthodox reunion of Christendom with which the World Council of Churches is concerned can be achieved solely on the basis of the total, dogmatic Faith of the early undivided Church without either subtraction or alteration”<sup>10</sup>.

Another critical issue was the view of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. In the Churches of the Reformation the Bible is of central significance. In their report, the Orthodox declared that, according to their understanding, the Bible is not the only source through which the Holy Spirit speaks to people, but that this takes place within the horizon of Church life and experience: “The Bible is given to us within the context of Apostolic Tradition in which in turn we possess the authentic interpretation and explication of the Word of God”<sup>11</sup>. For the Orthodox, the Church finds unity by keeping the apostolic Faith, because it follows the Church life within the context of historical reality. According to Orthodox vision manifested in the “Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston: “The unity of the Church is preserved through the unity of the Episcopate. The Church is one Body whose historical continuity and unity is also safeguarded by the common faith arising spontaneously out of fullness (pleroma) of the Church.”<sup>12</sup> This description of the Orthodox self-understanding is much connected to the Orthodox relation with other Churches and the recognition other Churches as the Church. As it is pointed out, the Orthodox Church identifies herself as only one who fully kept true faith. It is logical continuation for Orthodox to recognize only the Orthodox Church as the Church and to see in other Churches only “elements of the true Church.”

Later in 1961, this issue was again raised from the Orthodox viewpoint. In the report for the New Delhi Assembly, the Orthodox Church mentioned that their understanding

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., IV, paragraph 5.

<sup>10</sup> “Second Assembly of The World Council of Churches Evanston, USA, 1954”, in *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 29.

of ecumenism is different from the Protestant understanding. The main difference is that the Orthodox Church does not accept the concept of “denominationalism”. In the report it is clarified that “the Orthodox Church is not a confession, one of many, one among the many. For the Orthodox, the Orthodox Church is just the Church.”<sup>13</sup>

For this reason, for the Orthodox, ecumenism is not an interdenominational agreement but an attempt to recover the unity which was broken because of schism and division. As in the Evanston report, the New Delhi report emphasizes the importance of the apostolic faith. The Orthodox Church declares that, for it the structure of the Church, the teaching of the Church and the tradition are based on the ancient undivided Church. This Church by her nature is sacramental. The priesthood is a sacrament in the Orthodox tradition and for the Orthodox the sacramental priesthood, which is linked with apostolic succession, is essential for the existence of the Church. In the following subsection the article will discuss about the ecumenical nature of the Orthodox Church. In order to understand the reasons for Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement and its challenges, it is important to understand how the Orthodox Church understands its own ecumenical nature.

### **Orthodox Understanding of the Nature of Ecumenism**

In 1967, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, emphasized that division is the cause of suffering and explained how important it is to participate in ecumenism: “No Christian Church has the right to remain in isolation, to proclaim that it has no need to be in contact with other Christian brothers, and that those who live outside its frontiers are deprived of bonds which link them with Christ.”<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that the Orthodox have abandoned the conviction that the Orthodox Church alone possesses the truth, but confirmed that a collaboration with other Churches is essential to rebuild the visible unity which was destroyed because of division. Patriarch Athenagoras I, during his visit to the WCC headquarters, stated that finding visible unity means sharing the Eucharist: “We do aim at a spirit of reciprocal and sincere understanding, in the authentic spirit of Christ, and at directing ourselves toward the preparation of the way that will one day make it possible for the Holy Spirit to enable all members of the Body of Christ to receive Communion with the same Bread and from the same Chalice.”<sup>15</sup>

Following this approach, it is possible to say that the Orthodox see the unity of Christians as sharing in one Eucharistic communion. The Orthodox participate in the ecumenical movement in the hope that one day all Christians will share one Body of Christ. Thus, for Orthodoxy, unity does not mean uniting the Churches as institutions

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>14</sup> “Address by His All Holiness Athenagoras I, Ecumenical Patriarch on the Occasion of His Visit to WCC Headquarters, 1967”, in *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 35.

and creating one juridical organization, but rather sharing one theological understanding of Church unity and true Eucharistic communion. Presumably, the participation of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement has a missionary character.

The Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference of the Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement was held in Chambesy, Switzerland, in 1986. It was very important because it outlined the role of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement and Orthodox participation in WCC. The conference resolution explained that for the Orthodox Church, ecumenism does not contradict its very nature: “The Orthodox Church, which unceasingly prays, ‘for the union of all,’ has taken part in the ecumenical movement since its inception and has contributed to its formation and further development. In fact, the Orthodox Church due to the ecumenical spirit by which she is distinguished, has throughout history, fought for the restoration of Christian unity.”<sup>16</sup>

It is possible to conclude that from the Orthodox perspective non-Orthodox Churches cannot be recognized as Churches, because their doctrines have changed over the centuries. Given this view, it is reasonable to ask a crucial question: which Church has made the “radical change” and where is the boundary between change and different interpretations? Perhaps the most urgent problem in contemporary ecumenism is hidden in this question. If different approaches are evaluated as a change, it becomes very difficult to find a common vision.

In the twenty-first century, there are many new social, political, and religious challenges, as well as divisions, non-acceptance of others, and confrontations. While ethical issues may not be considered more important than dogmatic issues in the search for the main goal of the ecumenical movement – visible unity – in the contemporary world, major Churches have split precisely because of their competing visions on ethical issues. This is reasonable because ethics concerns everyone – the Church as well as the larger society. Divisions over ethical issues can lead to the marginalization of some groups of people or individuals. It is an existential reality that the modern world faces many new problems that did not exist before. This means that some Churches may remain isolated, even though they may be in dogmatic agreement with other Churches. For these reasons, another important document, “The Church Towards a Common Vision” (TCTCV), was published by the Faith and Order Commission in 2013. It highlighted these concerns in the following words: “While tensions about moral issues have always been a concern for the Church, in the world of today, philosophical, social and cultural developments have led to the rethinking of many moral norms, causing new conflicts over moral principles and ethical questions to affect the unity of the Churches.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “Report of an Inter-Orthodox Consultation of Orthodox WCC Member Churches ‘The Orthodox Churches and the World Council of Churches’ Chambesy, Switzerland 1991”, in *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*, 193.

<sup>17</sup> “The Church Towards a Common Vision”, *Faith and Order Paper* No. 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publication, 2013), paragraph 9.

The Orthodox Churches responded in the report for TCTCV: “Christian moral norms are not simply philosophical, social and cultural constructs: they express fundamental realities about the relations between God and human beings. In this regard it is very difficult to understand how some Christian groups can make ethical and moral decisions which are radical departure from the unbroken Christian tradition of 2000 years, disregarding the objections of other Christians, even those within their own communions.”<sup>18</sup> This approach indicates that for the Orthodox Church, attitudes on ethical issues flows from divine authority. This makes dialogue between different Churches and reflection on ethical issues more difficult, since the “divine” is always *a priori* true. In the next subchapter, the article reviews Holy and Great Council held in Greece in 2016.

### **Holy and Great Council in 2016 Held with Incomplete Staff of the Orthodox Churches**

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The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church convened in Crete, Greece, in 2016 and confirmed the Orthodox response to TCTCV as the official position of the Orthodox Church. Some Orthodox Churches did not attend the Council, as they continue struggling to accept the document TCTCV and there have been discussions between Orthodox Churches as well as within the local Churches about the TCTCV. The Orthodox Churches that did not attend are: Church of Antioch, Church of Georgia, Russian Church, Orthodox Church in America, and Church of Bulgaria.<sup>19</sup>

The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church took place with the participation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and was chaired by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. The Patriarchates of Alexandria and Jerusalem were also represented. There were delegations from the Orthodox Churches of Serbia, Romania, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

The document issued by the Council reiterated the Orthodox ecclesiological approach to unity, stating that for the Orthodox Church, unity is based on sacraments which are expressed “through the apostolic succession and the patristic tradition”, and adding that “the Orthodox Church has the Mission and duty to transmit and preach all the truth contained in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition”<sup>20</sup>.

As expressed in the document, the Orthodox believe that the ecumenical character of the Orthodox Church is missionary in nature. The document

<sup>18</sup> “Orthodox Response for TCTCV” (an unpublished document), paragraph 39.

<sup>19</sup> Eugen Tomiuc, “Explainer: the ‘Holy And Great Council’ of Orthodox Churches”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-orthodox-churches-holy-great-council/27810011.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”, *Holy and Great Council*, Pentecost 2016, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.holycouncil.org/rest-of-christian-world>, paragraph 9.



emphasizes that the goal of the ecumenical movement is to seek the unity of the divided Christendom and once again points out that the basis of the unity should be “the truth of the faith and tradition of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils.”<sup>21</sup>

The document reviewed the Orthodox participation in the WCC (1960–2016) and reiterated that “mutual recognition” remains a problematic issue in the ecumenical movement: “Remaining faithful to her ecclesiology, to the identity of her internal structure, and to the teaching of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the Orthodox Church’s participation in the WCC does not signify that she accepts the notion of the ‘equality of Confessions’, and in no way is she able to accept the unity of the Church as an inter-confessional compromise.”<sup>22</sup> The Council reiterated the position that the non-Orthodox Churches have rejected the fullness of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and are in separation from the One Church: “the non-Orthodox Churches and Confessions have diverged from the true faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.”<sup>23</sup>

This issue became the main reason why some autocephalous Churches did not attend the Council. Two bishops from Greece did not sign the document “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Christian World” because of a change in the original text that referred to non-Orthodox Churches as confessions and communities. According to Dragos Andrei Giulea: “The topic ignited some discussion before the council, when the draft did not include this distinction but simply applied the term “Church” to Christian communities other than the Orthodox Church. For this reason, among others, the Patriarchates of Georgia and Bulgaria refused to attend the synod.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is clear that this issue is problematic not only in the ecumenical movement as such, but also in the inter-Orthodox dialogue.

## Conclusions

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This article has attempted to review the historical context of Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement and to highlight the challenges facing the Orthodox Church in relation to contemporary ecumenism. As we have seen above, there are different opinions among the autocephalous Orthodox Churches, and this seems natural. Every country has its own historical, political, and cultural context that influences the position of the Church.

It is important to keep this contextual awareness in mind when speaking about the position of a particular independent Church. Despite the fact that many issues

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., paragraph 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., paragraph 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., paragraph 21.

<sup>24</sup> Dragos Andrei Giulea, “Discerning the Mystery of the Church: Reflections on a Document of the Council of Crete”, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 62, No. 1 (2018), 5.

remain challenging and problematic, and sometimes certain developments seem to be a step backwards, the desire to exchange views can be understood positively for the Orthodox Church as well as for the whole of Christianity. As the article shows, Orthodox Churches are trying to participate actively in the ecumenism, but many challenges remain.

As we see in this article, the main challenge has been the contentious issue of mutual recognition and acceptance, rather than any theological or ecclesiological reasons. So how is it possible to build a healthy relationship without mutual respect, and how can visible unity be achieved without mutual recognition? This is the question that must be asked in ecumenical dialogues. Christians have been divided by schisms for political and theological reasons, but neither the Great Schism of 1054 nor the Reformation was intended to create a new Church. Therefore, the main goal should be to focus on building peace among Churches as well as with other religious traditions.

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Gauta: 2022 07 01

Parengta: 2023 03 07

Salome ESEBUA, Malkhaz SONGHULASHVILI

## ORTODOKSŲ BAŽNYČIOS DALYVAVIMAS EKUMENINIAME JUDĖJIME NARYSTĖS PASAULIO BAŽNYČIŲ TARYBOJE KONTEKSTE

### S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinis ekumeninio judėjimo tikslas – įveikti schizmą ir susiskaldymą tarp krikščionių. Ortodoksų Bažnyčios ekumeniniame judėjime dalyvauja nuo pat pradžių, o jų pozicija šiame procese dėl istorinių ir kitų priežasčių yra labai svarbi. Straipsnyje, remiantis autokefalinių Ortodoksų Bažnyčių dokumentais ir enciklikomis, siekiama apžvelgti istorinį kontekstą ir išnagrinėti pagrindines šiuolaikinio ekumeninio judėjimo problemas, siejamas su Ortodoksų Bažnyčių dalyvavimu jame. Autokefalija – pagrindinė Stačiatikių Bažnyčios organizacinė forma, kai septyniolika savivaldžių Rytų Ortodoksų Bažnyčių pripažįsta viena kitą kaip kanonines Bažnyčias. Šios septyniolika Stačiatikių Bažnyčių dalijasi eucharistine bendryste, pripažįsta tas pačias dogmas ir bažnytines tradicijas. Todėl straipsnyje, siekiant suformuluoti Ortodoksų Bažnyčios poziciją, remiamasi oficialiais Stačiatikių Bažnyčių dokumentais, skelbiamais tarpbažnytiniuose susirinkimuose, ir enciklikomis. Taip pat nagrinėjama, kada ir kodėl Stačiatikių Bažnyčios įsitraukė į ekumeninį judėjimą ir su kokiais iššūkiais jos susiduria šiuolaikinėse ekumeninėse organizacijose.

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RAKTAŽODŽIAI: ekumenizmas, ortodoksija, ortodoksų ekumenizmas, Pasaulio Bažnyčių Taryba.

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**Salome ESEBUA** – PhD student at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania, Master of Philosophy (Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia), Master of Ecumenical Studies (Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Geneva, Switzerland). E-mail [esebua.salome@gmail.com](mailto:esebua.salome@gmail.com).

**Salome ESEBUA** – sociologijos doktorantūros studentė (Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas, Lietuva). Turi filosofijos magistro laipsnį (Ilia valstybinis universitetas, Tbilisis, Sakartvelas), ekumeninių studijų magistro laipsnį (Bossey ekumeninis institutas, Ženeva, Šveicarija). El. paštas [esebua.salome@gmail.com](mailto:esebua.salome@gmail.com).

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**Malkhaz SONGHULASHVILI** – Professor at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. Doctoral work under the direction of Prof. Paul Fiddes and Dr. Paul Freston in association with the Oxford Center of Mission Studies and the Regent's Park College, Oxford (2013). E-mail [malkhaz.songulashvili@gmail.com](mailto:malkhaz.songulashvili@gmail.com).

**Malkhaz SONGHULASHVILI** – Ilia valstybinio universiteto profesorius (Tbilisis, Sakartvelas). Doktorantūros studijos – pas prof. Paulą Fiddesą ir dr. Paulą Frestoną Oksfordo misijų studijų centre ir Regent's Park koledže, Oksforde (2013 m.) El. paštas [malkhaz.songulashvili@gmail.com](mailto:malkhaz.songulashvili@gmail.com).