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## ECUMENISM AS A FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCONFESSIONAL PROCESSES

**Abstract.** *The article examines the phenomenon of ecumenism as a dynamic reality that has evolved from the idea of church unity into a contemporary model of interconfessional and interreligious interaction. The study analyzes the historical and theological premises for the emergence of the ecumenical movement and highlights the impact of social, cultural, and political factors on its development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Particular attention is paid to the processes of institutionalization of ecumenism, its transformation into a stable form of religious cooperation, and the adaptation of universal principles of Christian dialogue to specific regional traditions. The article emphasizes the significance of ecumenism as a factor in strengthening a culture of religious tolerance, civil peace, and spiritual solidarity in contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** *ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, confessional relations, Christianity, ecumenical movement, World Council of Churches, religious tolerance.*

### INTRODUCTIONS

The term “ecumenism” (from the Greek oikoumene – “universe”, “inhabited world”) in the early Christian context denoted the idea of universal church unity and the spread of faith to the entire inhabited world. In the early Byzantine period, it reflected the universal character of the Christian Church (ecclesia oecumenica) and its conciliar forms of governance. Already in the fourth century CE, the word oikoumene ceased to be an exclusively geographical notion and began to designate a religious space that united all Christian communities. During the period of the Ecumenical Councils (325–787), the term acquired an institutional meaning: conciliar decisions were regarded as binding for the entire Christian “universe”, and the principle of oikoumenicity expressed the idea of

the unity of Christian doctrine. After the church schism of 1054 between the Eastern and Western Churches, the issue of restoring unity acquired a new theological significance. In the subsequent centuries, the concept of ecumenism came to denote the aspiration toward interaction and the harmonization of positions within the Christian world, and in the nineteenth century, especially in Anglican and Protestant circles, initiatives to search for common theological foundations intensified. These processes took on institutional form at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 came to be regarded as the starting point of the modern ecumenical movement (Florovsky, 1991:84).

### MAIN PART

Gradually, ecumenism lost its character as an exclusively intra-church idea and became a distinct trend in Christian social and theological thought, oriented toward the search for forms of unity and practical cooperation among different confessions. In the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, against the background of secularization and the growing missionary activity of Protestant churches, ideas of inter-church cooperation acquired a stable organizational expression. The formation of contemporary ecumenism was conditioned both by the internal needs of Christian communities, seeking to overcome the consequences of confessional divisions, and by external factors such as political, cultural, and sociological transformations of the global world.

In the twentieth century, the ecumenical movement entered a phase of institutionalization. Its strategic center became the World Council of Churches (WCC), founded in 1948, whose activity is directed toward coordinating the efforts of Christian confessions in theological dialogue, social justice, human rights, and peacebuilding. Alongside the WCC, specialized theological commissions and research centers emerged to address key questions of Christian unity, including the relationship of doctrinal systems, differences in liturgical practice, and the role of ministry and mission under conditions of global challenges (Borkin, 2005:112).

International inter-church conferences also played an important role in the development of ecumenism, elaborating means of reconciling dogmatic differences and principles of dialogue between Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches (Chadwick,

1993:56). In this period, the idea of ecumenism moved beyond purely theological issues and acquired a sociocultural dimension. It became part of a broader process of forming global Christian solidarity and came to encompass questions of peace, social responsibility, justice, and religious tolerance.

Thus, the evolution of ecumenism from a spiritual and dogmatic concept of early Christianity to an institutionalized international movement of the twentieth century illustrates the transition from the idea of universal church unity to a systemic practice of interconfessional dialogue. This transformation enabled ecumenism to become not only a religious but also a public phenomenon that influences the development of contemporary models for the interaction of religion, society, and the state (World Missionary Conference, 1911:203).

In contemporary religious studies, ecumenism is interpreted as a multi-level phenomenon that includes historical-theological, cultural, and social dimensions. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its scope expanded from the idea of church unity to the principles of interreligious dialogue, encompassing interaction among different confessions, including between Christianity and Islam. The emergence of Christianity in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan and neighboring regions dates back to the early period of the spread of the new religion eastward. According to tradition, the preaching of the apostles Thomas and Andrew the First-Called reached Central Asia, where Christian settlements and episcopal sees are already mentioned in the fourth century (World Council of Churches, 2023:18). One of the earliest written testimonies is the reference to a Christian episcopate in Merv (334), which confirms the early rooting of Christian teaching on the lands of Central Asia (Zander, 2001:97).

From the fifth century onward, the Church of the East (commonly known as the Nestorian Church), which broke communion with Constantinople after the Council of Ephesus (431), became an active center of missionary work and extended its influence across the territories of Iran, Khorezm, Samarkand, and Sogdiana. Chronicles by al-Biruni and Mahmud al-Kashgari contain information on Christian-Nestorian communities in Samarkand and the Uighur Khaganate, while Central Asia functioned as a contact zone between Eastern Christianity and local religious traditions. During the Abbasid Caliphate (eighth–thirteenth centuries), the region was characterized by the coexistence of various beliefs – Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity – against whose background

a model of tolerant religious interaction was formed. As noted by N. N. Seleznyov, Eastern Christian authors developed a theological approach oriented toward the search for ethical and legal foundations consonant with the Islamic worldview, which can be regarded as an early form of ecumenical consciousness. From the thirteenth century, after the incorporation of Central Asian territories into the Mongol Empire, brief periods of revival of Christian communities can be observed.

The search for religious concord under conditions of medieval political fragmentation contributed to the formation of syncretic forms of spiritual culture, such as the shared veneration of Old Testament prophets at pilgrimage sites like the springs of Job in Bukhara and Urgench. In the late medieval period, Christian communities lost their mass character, yet elements of religious diversity persisted. Archaeological data and written sources attest to traditions of religious tolerance that later formed the foundation for the model of interreligious coexistence in the region.[4]

After independence, the state policy of Uzbekistan was directed toward strengthening religious pluralism and the secular character of society. A legal framework was created to guarantee freedom of conscience and equality of all confessions. The adoption by the UN General Assembly of the resolution “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance” (2018) on the initiative of Uzbekistan provided international confirmation of the country’s course toward the consolidation of interreligious understanding. The current religious landscape of Uzbekistan is characterized by multiconfessionalism: Islam, as the traditional religion of the majority of the population, coexists with Christian, Jewish, and other communities (UN General Assembly, 2018:4).

The Russian Orthodox Church is represented by the Central Asian Metropolitan District, established by decision of the Holy Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate in 2011. It comprises the Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara dioceses, which together include more than 30 parishes and several monasteries (Moscow Patriarchate, 2024:6). The dioceses run Sunday schools, charity centers, and cultural and educational initiatives that engage in social projects jointly with other religious organizations. A special role in the development of ecumenical interaction belongs to the Catholic Apostolic Administration of Uzbekistan, created by Pope John Paul II in 1997 (Catholic Church in Uzbekistan, 2023:9). The central Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Tashkent fulfills educational and cultural functions and serves as a platform for communication among representatives of various Christian confessions. Concerts, charity events, and educational seminars

are regularly held there with the participation of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant communities (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021:12).

The country's Christian milieu also includes Protestant denominations such as Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, and Pentecostals. Their congregations operate legally in Tashkent, Samarkand, Fergana, and Bukhara, engaging in educational work, the promotion of family values, and charitable activity.

An important instrument of interconfessional interaction is the Coordination Council of Religious Confessions under the Committee on Religious Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which serves as an institutional platform for discussing urgent issues, supporting joint initiatives, and implementing social projects, including programs for orphans, environmental campaigns, and activities aimed at preserving cultural heritage. The legal foundations of religious life are established in the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" (new edition – 2021), which enshrines the principles of equality and the inadmissibility of discrimination on the grounds of religion (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021:12).

Within the framework of the national strategy "Uzbekistan – a country of interreligious peace and harmony", the Committee on Religious Affairs coordinates interconfessional initiatives and organizes joint events with the support of international organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO. According to the World Council of Churches' Annual Report 2022, Uzbekistan is characterized as a "model of religious cooperation" in which different Christian confessions interact with one another and with the Muslim majority on the basis of mutual respect and partnership (UNESCO Tashkent Office, 2023:27). The reports underscore the existence in the country of a stable system of interconfessional interaction grounded in a combination of legal, cultural, and socio-humanitarian mechanisms.

Christian communities, including Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant groups, participate in programs and projects aimed at developing religious education, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting charitable activities. In this context, the activities of religious organizations are often carried out in cooperation with civil society institutions and state structures, which contributes to the formation of an atmosphere of trust and open dialogue. Joint cultural and educational events – conferences, music festivals, public forums, and charity campaigns – promote the consolidation of interconfessional ties, while particular attention is given to youth initiatives aimed at fostering a culture of tolerance, preventing

manifestations of religious intolerance, and developing the skills of peaceful interaction (World Council of Churches, 2023:41).

Researchers note that the Uzbek model of interreligious cooperation relies on historical traditions of the coexistence of various religions characteristic of Central Asia. Preserving the continuity of cultural experience, the contemporary religious policy of Uzbekistan ensures a balance between maintaining confessional identity and safeguarding public concord. Thus, interconfessional cooperation in Uzbekistan can be regarded as a stable social practice that reflects the principles of contemporary ecumenism, which encompasses not only a theological but also a cultural and communicative dimension. In this sense, the Uzbek experience represents an example of adapting the shared values of interreligious dialogue to the conditions of a specific national and historical context.

In 2023, an international round table entitled “Religion and Civil Solidarity” was held in Tashkent, where representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and Muslim spiritual administrations discussed the role of religion in consolidating humanistic values and countering extremism (International Roundtable, 2023:15).

## CONCLUSION

The history and present state of the ecumenical movement in Uzbekistan demonstrate both the theological and the sociocultural dimensions of this phenomenon. Regional traditions of religious coexistence, state legal support, and the active engagement of religious organizations together create a unique environment for mutual understanding among confessions (Development Strategy Center, 2023:22). Contemporary ecumenism in Uzbekistan can be defined as practical ecumenism, that is, a set of social, cultural, and educational practices aimed at strengthening civil peace and dialogue among different faith communities. This model organically fits within global trends promoted by the World Council of Churches and is one of the most stable in the Central Asian region.

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