

# “Christianity. Fundamental Teachings” by the Churches in Turkey as an Example of an Ecumenical Catechism

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**Abstract:** The booklet entitled *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings*, published by the Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey in 2018, expresses the shared beliefs of the Christian Churches in Turkey. It can be seen as a landmark in inter-church efforts to draw closer together. Trying to explain Christianity to non-Christians, the booklet presents the key elements of the Christian faith in a clear and easily comprehensible way. This article provides a synthetic presentation of the content of this booklet and shows issues that are important in the Turkish context. Since the call for “an ecumenical catechism” resonates from time to time in the international and inter-church areas, this joint publication of the Churches in Turkey can be a good example of such a catechism for other Churches worldwide. Moreover, this booklet can serve as a good teaching tool for Christians or non-Christians. Thus it is worth studying, translating, commenting on and implementing after being appropriately adjusted to other social, cultural and religious contexts.

**Keywords:** catechism, Christianity, ecumenism, fundamental teachings, Turkey

In 2018, a booklet (95 pages in a small format) entitled *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings* was published in Istanbul, worked out by the Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey. It expresses the shared beliefs of the Christian Churches in Turkey.

This collaborative book has been worked out by leaders of all of the major churches of Turkey (Armenian, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant) and authorized by five heads of these churches: Bartholomew I (Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople), Archbishop Aram Ateshian (Armenian Patriarchal Surrogate in Turkey), Metropolitan Filüksinos Yusuf Çetin (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir Syriac Orthodox Diocesan Leader and Patriarchal Surrogate), Archbishop Levon Zekian (Chairman of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Turkey) and Pastor İsmail Kulakçioğlu (Chairman of the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey). Its first edition had the Turkish title *Temel İkeleriyle Hristiyanlık* and appeared in 2015, the Preface to the English translation in 2016, copyright for the English edition in 2017 (printed in January 2018). The Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey holds the copyright. The Bible Society in Turkey

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(Kitabı Mukaddes Şirketi) is the publisher of the work.<sup>1</sup> The Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey dedicates its work “to the movement towards communion, mutual love and respect as proof that the points uniting us are incomparably greater than those dividing us and as a memorial to such constructive dialogues that spring out of love.”<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Christianity. Fundamental Teachings

The aim of this paper is to give a synthetic presentation of the content of *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings*, with brief commentaries. The book is divided into 13 chapters.

Chapter One, “An Overview of Christianity,”<sup>3</sup> is an extended Creed with a brief panorama of Christian Churches and denominations. It explains the origin of the name “Christian” and provides a brief description of the structure of the Church and its worship. Regarding the structure of the Church, the document states that as the mystical (spiritual) body of Christ, the Church has had a well-organized hierarchal structure since its beginnings. This structure does not represent class divisions, but rather functional differences. “Though the titles may differ among denominations, a certain kind of division of labor can be observed in all of them.” The “differences in biblical interpretation” and “divisions that have occurred throughout history for political reasons” are given as reasons for the denominational differences. The birth of Jesus Christ, celebrated at Christmas, and His resurrection from the dead, celebrated at Easter, are underlined as two great religious Christian festivals. According to the document, all Churches, even if they are interpreted somewhat differently, consistently perform “two special ceremonies or rites: baptism and communion.” If you had to keep only one chapter in the entire book, you would need to choose the introductory one.

The Second chapter is entitled “The Existence and Oneness of God.”<sup>4</sup> “Christianity believes that the Eternal Creator existed before time, while everything that exists was made by Him out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).” According to the Christian faith, there are four primary ways for humankind to know God: through reason, through Revelation, through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Christianity teaches about the recognition of the existence of God through His works by the natural light of human reason. Revelation is defined as God’s self-revelation to humanity in time and space. The Holy Bible is the “written revelation” and from this book,

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1 JCCT, 1–12.

2 JCCT, 10.

3 JCCT, 13–17.

4 JCCT, 18–22.

which Christians accept as the Word of God, they get to know “who God is, what He desires, what are His attributes and goals, and what plans He has for the world and humankind.” Jesus Christ is seen as the direct revelation of God, different from and superior to any prophet. Through the Holy Spirit given by the Father people get to know and experience God personally in a new dimension. This phenomenon is known as the “new birth.” At the end of this chapter, we can read that the doctrine about Holy Trinity, “presented to humanity through Jesus Christ by the revelation of the Holy Spirit, is a new stage of divine revelation that explains God more fully without denying His oneness.”

The above statement leads to Chapter Three that deals with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.<sup>5</sup> It begins with a remark that the human mind cannot comprehend God. His oneness and trinity are revealed. “Just like the other attributes of God, this too is hard *nut* for human reason to *crack*” but the three-fold name of God – the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – is clearly revealed by Jesus Christ. The Oneness of God is presented in the Old and New Testaments, which is supported by relevant biblical quotations. The evidence of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in the Old (!) and New Testaments is exposed, and theological terms, like *hypostaseis* and *personas*, are clarified. Particularly, the Father–Son relationship is explicated:

So, we can say that the Father is the cause within divinity, in a way hidden from everyone and everything. That which is born from the Father is the WORD, which expresses Him. The divine essence is hidden, while the Word is that which is revealed. Even a human word verbalizing a person’s hidden thought is both one connected to and distinct from that thought. If this is so, the terms Essence and Word express a functional difference existing within God. Anything that originates from God is also God. No reality in God is unconscious. Consequently, the divine Word also has a conscious and unique personhood.<sup>6</sup>

The topic of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, the largest in the entire book, is the doctrine of salvation.<sup>7</sup> It reflects on the “pyramid of creation,” with humankind on the top, the “problem of freedom,” the “fall of men,” the “plan of salvation” and the “election of Abraham as the Father of faith,” followed by a presentation of the reality of sin and the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. The inadequacy of this system is stressed as Jesus Christ is “the True Sacrifice.” He offered his life on the Cross as the only acceptable sacrifice for our sins. Presenting “the victory of Easter,” the document depicts the Jewish Festival of Passover, its historical and religious meaning, and the Lord’s Supper established by Jesus. Christ desired his disciples “to participate in His ceremony of sacrifice and to continue it.”

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<sup>5</sup> JCCT, 23–33.

<sup>6</sup> JCCT, 32.

<sup>7</sup> JCCT, 34–46.

Furthermore, this chapter deals with the question of sacrificing animals, arguing that the era of sacrificing animals came to an end with the single sacrifice of Jesus Christ for all on the Cross: “[...] From that moment, for a Christian to sacrifice an animal for his sins would be to deny his faith; or at the very least, it would be a sign of deep ignorance. To submit for some reason to a superstitious practice remaining from times of idolatry [...] is a denial of one’s baptismal vows.”<sup>8</sup>

Chapter Five, the shortest in the book, is devoted to the Ascension of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> It is noticed that the process of turning the world back to the Kingdom of Christ began with an interesting paradox, that of His leaving this world and being exalted to the realm of the divine. From this realm, He could shape history through the activity of the Holy Spirit and prepare the world for His second coming. At the same time, Jesus Christ, who ascended into heaven, “can request from God the Father for all humankind the forgiveness and justification that he secured as the sacrificial offering on the cross, thereby opening wide for us the door of divine grace.”

Continuing this line of thought, the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter deals with the second coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> A Christian is described as a person who eagerly awaits this coming. Contrary to our impatience and hurriedness, the Creator is the God of ages. He foresaw that it would take a specific period of time for the seeds of the first coming of Christ to grow, be scattered and spread across the whole world. “This time period, which may be considered very brief by cosmic measurements, although it seems long to human beings whose lifespan is 70 or 80 years, will one day come to an end.” The second coming of Christ is described as visible by all, a cosmic event witnessed by the whole world. With this coming “a new heaven and a new earth” will be established. The document honestly states that this rightful expectation “is unfortunately from time to time the cause of misusing or manipulating this event through hasty and amateur interpretations.” Extreme interest, zeal and curiosity about this subject can lead to unhealthy spiritual conditions as concluded:

It is best to avoid giving exact dates, creating calendars or spreading sensational news. All heretical beliefs establish their teaching on sensationalism and excitement rather than on stable New Testament doctrines. They do not read the New Testament starting from the Sermon on the Mount, but rather from the book of Revelation. Therefore, we feel it our duty warn all Christian against such exaggerated and one-sided doctrines. The best way to prepare for the return of Christ is to live today – and every day – as He desires us to.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> JCCT, 46.

<sup>9</sup> JCCT, 47–50.

<sup>10</sup> JCCT, 51–55.

<sup>11</sup> JCCT, 54–55.

“The Activity of the Holy Spirit”<sup>12</sup> is the title of Chapter Seven. The day of Pentecost is seen as a turning point in human history. Through this event, God offered humankind His greatest gift: namely, Himself. The Holy Spirit completes the work of Christ and resides in believers. He is the guarantee of eternal life and of our resurrection. Just as we have physical needs, we read in the book, there are spiritual things that we must absolutely have: the Word of God, prayer, the Mysteries of the Church (Sacraments), fellowship, faith, hope, love and all the other spiritual virtues. “Neglecting these is spiritual suicide. However, all of these and the other spiritual practices are like the dead bones that the Prophet Ezekiel saw in his vision. They do not have life in themselves. [...] Only God’s Spirit can give them life.” That is why our lives, works and worship will be as they should be. For “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

The place and importance of the Church are shown in Chapter Eight.<sup>13</sup> The meaning of the word “Church” as well as the human and divine structure of the Church, its relationships with Christ, and salvation have been discussed. The Church is described as an effective instrument, which Christ uses to bring about the salvation of all people. “We would not be exaggerating if we said the Church is the mouth, hands and feet of Christ.” According to St. Athanasius, in Christ “God became man so that man might become a god.” The Church is seen as a stage in the realization of this process, whose plan began even before the creation of the universe.

Baptism, of the Christian rites presented in the book, has been given the most attention, in particular in the section of the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter entitled “One Baptism and Repentance for the Forgiveness of Our Sins.” The word “baptism” and the theological meaning of this “sacrament” are elucidated. This is the second time when the word “sacrament” appears in the document; the previous chapter spoke generally about the Mysteries of the Church (Sacraments). “The view that rejects the doctrine of only One Baptism performed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and supports multiple baptisms, is considered to be a false doctrine from the viewpoint of universal Christianity.” The struggle against sin continues with all its intensity even after baptism. However, one does not need to be baptized again for the forgiveness of sins. “The right of repentance, which is granted even to the believer’s final breath, is sufficient for purification.”

The expression of the previous chapter – “the believer’s final breath” – introduces an eschatological topic, namely the resurrection of the dead. The “power of death,” the “power of Christ’s Resurrection,” “bodily resurrection,” “resurrection with heavenly bodies” and “Final Judgment” are the main motifs in the next chapter entitled “The Resurrection of the Dead.”<sup>14</sup> The thought that the soul is eternal and that after

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<sup>12</sup> JCCT, 56–60.

<sup>13</sup> JCCT, 61–66.

<sup>14</sup> JCCT, 67–71.

death the human soul somehow continues to exist is a very common belief, we read in the document, however, “Christians believe in a much more supernatural miracle than this. The belief that the dead will one day be raised immortal with new bodies and be judged is one of Christianity’s foundational doctrines.”

Chapter Ten focuses on the Holy Bible.<sup>15</sup> The point of view presented in *Christianity* is as follows (also expressed by the subtitles): “The Oldest Monotheist Record Known and Recorded in World History is the Holy Bible,” “The Holy Bible is a Long-Term, Divine Design Surpassing Human Power and Wisdom,” and “The Holy Bible is the Most Influential and Successful Work Ever Witnessed.” Moreover, in the section entitled “The Holy Bible Has Proven its Accuracy Despite Every Kind of Criticism” it is stated that every comparison between the texts of our oldest extant handwritten manuscripts and the Holy Bible used today proves that no differences have either changed or corrupted its meaning. Further, the structure and the process of formation of the Bible, as well as the place of the Holy Scripture in the lives of faithful have been presented.

The foundations of Christian ethics are the main issue of Chapter Eleven.<sup>16</sup> This part underlines that the Christian faith gives meaning to ethical values and establishes their universal dimension; in Christianity all moral standards derive from love. The Ten Commandments are mentioned, in particular, the two commandments of love. The application of love in Christianity is shown from the very beginning of its era: schools, hospitals, soup kitchens in addition to houses of worship, healing programs for people addicted to alcohol and drugs or others, active aid programs and various foundations.

The topic of the sacredness of life is separately dealt with in this chapter. It begins with the observation that “[e]verything prohibited by secular law may not be a sin, while not every sin may be prohibited by secular law,” followed by the main point that “abortion is the greatest assault on human life and, therefore, also to Almighty.” Abortion “means the death of something in the soul of the mother as well.” “The murder of millions of embryos still in their mother’s womb, who are deprived of the right to live, should lead us as Christians to think, pray and take action against such acts.”<sup>17</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> chapter deals with Christianity and culture.<sup>18</sup> Since religion is one of the foundation stones that make up societies, “it is inevitable that culture both affects and is affected by it.” The following fields of culture are enumerated and described: language, literature, music, painting and sculpture. The contents of many novels as well as works of poetry and philosophy have been deeply influenced by the Holy

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<sup>15</sup> JCCT, 72–77.

<sup>16</sup> JCCT, 78–84.

<sup>17</sup> JCCT, 82–84.

<sup>18</sup> JCCT, 85–90.

Bible. This chapter mentions eminent writers: Dante, Erasmus, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky as well as great painters and sculptors: Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. “It is not difficult to see the inspiration and influence of the Hagia Sophia cathedral on mosques and Eastern architecture. This is a wonderful example of continuity in culture and civilization.”

Finally, Chapter Thirteen includes a call for unity: ecumenism.<sup>19</sup> Ecumenism is described as an “open-ended and long-term movement toward harmony among churches rather than as an ideology.” Although this movement has developed to a considerable extent, it has not yet reached the level of all believers meeting together “under a single homogenous umbrella of faith, coming together as one church with organic administrative unity.” It is evident “that such an ideal will be realized at the second coming of Christ.”

In the “Final Word” of the booklet, its authors declare that the most important condition for unity and peace is to maintain an attitude “that prioritizes principles that unite rather than divide us.” And one of the most effective ways to move toward unity is to determine, express and declare our mutual beliefs in Christ.

With this small book, we have aimed to do just this. [...] Although the common foundation of faith expressed in this book may not yet be enough for the perfect and ideal Christian unity (namely, communion), they nevertheless constitute a serious step forward that should not be minimized in any way. [...] Therefore, we ask God to bless this sincere effort as we dedicate this book, with the participation and approval of our city’s principle churches, to the unity of all believers, with the hope that it will prove a source of inspiration for all those who read it.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. The Turkish Context

Turkey is the cultural and religious bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Istanbul is one of Christianity’s most important cities. Over the ages, this city has been a center of Christian study and leadership. The ecumenical councils that determined the foundational doctrines of Christianity were held or organized in this city.<sup>21</sup>

In the early 1900s, 20 percent of Turkey was Christian. Today it is approximately 0.2 percent. The total population of Turkey is estimated at 81.3 million (July 2018). According to the Turkish government, 99 percent of the population is Muslim, approximately 77.5 percent of which is Hanafi Sunni. Representatives of other religious

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<sup>19</sup> JCCT, 91–95.

<sup>20</sup> JCCT, 95–96.

<sup>21</sup> JCCT, 9.

groups are mostly concentrated in Istanbul and in other large cities as well as in the southeast. Exact figures of the number of Christians are not available. However, they self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians (including migrants from Armenia); 25,000 Roman Catholics (including migrants from Africa and the Philippines); 25,000 Syrian Orthodox Christians (also known as Syriacs); 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians (mostly immigrants from Russia who hold residence permits); 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; fewer than 3,000 Chaldean Christians, and up to 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians. There also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, and Maronite Christians.<sup>22</sup>

Despite legal protections and freedom of religion, the Christian minority in Turkey is still experiencing some basic problems. Hate speech against Christians has increased, fueled by social media. Legal recognition as a church is limited to the historic places of worship. Protestant churches in particular are experiencing problems.<sup>23</sup>

The authors of *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings* admit that “[t]he historical texture and ecumenical richness of Istanbul has made such an enterprise possible.”<sup>24</sup> Their collaborative work originated because the different Christian denominations in Turkey began reporting to Turkish government that state and Muslim schools were teaching distortions about Christianity and its practices. This problem led to creating the booklet under discussion.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, many of its chapters have considered important Turkish and Islamic contexts, especially regarding the truths of faith and its sources, rules of conduct and rituals.<sup>26</sup>

The introductory chapter begins with the following statement: “Christianity is a monotheistic religion.” As for the Scriptures, it is stated that “Christianity accepts the Hebrew prophets and Holy Scriptures” and “the Bible is the inspired Word of God, comprised of the Old and New Testaments.” The Word of God is described as “the cornerstone of Christian worship” and “biblical prayers, Psalms and prophetic passages are repeated and memorized.” The fasting practiced “for personal discipline and spiritual maturity” is also mentioned. The order of describing these elements of the Christian worship and prayer is precisely explained in the context of Islam: Word of God, fasting, festivals and rites.<sup>27</sup>

In Chapter Two a special mention about Turkey is made in the section about revelation through Jesus Christ and His identity. We read that the long-awaited Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, and that in the unique person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God

22 United States Department of State, “Turkey 2018.”

23 Casper, “Despite Drop in Deportations.” Bulut, “Protestant Christians in Turkey.”

24 JCCT, 94.

25 Sessions, “Clear and Precise Statement.”

26 Cf. Danecki, *Podstawowe wiadomości o islamie*, 264–389.

27 JCCT, 13, 16–17.



became human through the divine incarnation: “In Turkey, He is referred to as *Kelamullah* (the Word of Allah) and *Ruhullah* (the Spirit of Allah).” Naturally, Christians use the name “Son of God.”<sup>28</sup>

The main doctrinal Christian problem in the Islamic context is raised in the next chapter, namely, the accusation that Christians “believe in three Gods.” This accusation “is false” – the booklet firmly states – as “Christianity is absolutely and uncompromisingly monotheistic religion. It is impossible to come to any other conclusion as a result of reading the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, the evidence of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in the Old Testament is that “[...] Holy Scriptures show that this one God is not, as many suppose, a solitary being in His absolute oneness, but rather one who has distinct centers of consciousness and distinct persons [...]. The doctrine of the unity of God’s distinct persons can be clearly seen in the Old Testament.” Then the booklet refers to Gen 1:26 (“Let us make...”), Prov 8:22–36 (God’s Wisdom), Ps 110:1 (“The Lord says to my Lord...”) and to the plural Hebrew word *Elohim*.<sup>30</sup> From the theological point of view, these statements are too bold. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states more moderately: “God has left traces of his Trinitarian being in his work of creation and in his Revelation throughout the Old Testament” (no. 237).

Chapter Three concludes with a simple illustration which can facilitate a certain acceptance of the mystery of the Holy Trinity:

The sun is one. However, no one can see its essence. [...] Let us, then, use the sun as an analogy of God and call this the Father. [...] It has a form, a round shape that we can observe. This form comes about as the hidden essence pouring forth. This form, which is inseparable from its essence, belongs to the sun and is worthy of being called the sun. Let us now call this shape of the sun the Word or Son. The sun also has rays, which beam from its essence and shape. These, too, spread throughout the universe without separating from the sun. These, too, share the same essence and nature with the sun. So let us call these the Holy Spirit. While this analogy is only an illustration, it can assist us by explaining that something can simultaneously be in one and three forms.<sup>31</sup>

An interesting statement on this issue has been made by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in its ecumenical commentary on the Creed. The Commission notices that those who agree with Christians about their belief in one God find the Trinitarian affirmation of Christians difficult to understand, particularly Jews and Muslims. For them the Christian concept of

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<sup>28</sup> JCCT, 20.

<sup>29</sup> JCCT, 26–27.

<sup>30</sup> JCCT, 28–29.

<sup>31</sup> JCCT, 32–33.

the Triune God has been “a stumbling block” because it seems to deny monotheism. But today there are also Christians who think that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity should at least be reinterpreted and even linguistically revised. The Faith and Order Commission draws attention to the danger of the “modalistical” explanation of the Trinitarian doctrine “as if it meant that God is really one, but because of human limitations is understood in three different ways.” Many Christians feel that the traditional Trinitarian teaching is too speculative in comparison with the biblical language about God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. “Such challenges ask for contemporary work of clarification,” concludes the Faith and Order Commission.<sup>32</sup>

The questions of the resurrection and the Final Judgment are also important to the Islamic context.<sup>33</sup> These Islamic beliefs are mentioned in the conciliar Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*: “[Moslems] await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. For this reason, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting” (no. 3). It comes as no surprise that these topics have been highlighted in the eschatological Chapter Nine of our book. Human conscience and divine justice “require this kind of judgment, because this world is a place in which neither evil deeds are fully punished nor good deeds are adequately rewarded. If the only reward and punishment were in this world, it would open up a huge ethical crisis (Psalm 73).”<sup>34</sup>

In Chapter Ten, another observation about Turkey is made. It applies to “one-sided slander campaign against the Christian Holy Bible” that is “consciously pursued within certain circles” in Turkey. We should quote the following fragment as very instructive from an apologetic point of view:

Though such criticisms have been thoroughly answered in many books, unfortunately Christians have not found sufficient opportunity to properly defend the Bible and their faith through the media. We encourage Christians to educate themselves on these subjects, especially in the face of this unjust one-sided propaganda. We would like them to become more knowledgeable and aware not just to avoid being affected by such propaganda, but, when necessary, to defend their Book and provide an appropriate and convincing response. The limits of this booklet do not allow us to enter into deeper analysis of this subject. Please refer to the clergy of the church to which you belong or to the Bible Society for more detailed information.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Confessing the One Faith*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Danecki, *Podstawowe wiadomości o islamie*, 301–312.

<sup>34</sup> JCCT, 71.

<sup>35</sup> JCCT, 75.

Chapter 12, dedicated to Christianity and culture, discusses the question of paintings and sculptures. As stated by the Joint Commission, Christianity does not reject paintings and sculptures, and these fields of art have been used in abundance to decorate churches. Moreover, “clothing in Christianity” is explained as follows: in Christianity, there is not a single, prescribed dress code which is given as a religious obligation, whether the person “is expected to adhere to the mode of dress generally accepted by society and to avoid wearing disturbing or provocative styles, contrary to morals and common decency.” There is no command or practice requiring women to be covered more than men. “We take past practices to be issues of culture.”<sup>36</sup>

This chapter also brilliantly shows the interrelations between faith and culture, the missionary nature of the Church in the changing cultures, and the culture as a cultivated field of the Church as seen by contemporary theologians.<sup>37</sup>

Another issue raised in this chapter is sacred places and pilgrimages. “We believe that places where God is worshipped have a special sacredness.” The Holy Bible teaches that God regards some places in this world as holier than others. Mountainous and uninhabited areas have traditionally been places where God gave His revelations: “Think of Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, Mount Horeb, Mount Carmel and Mount Tabor.”<sup>38</sup> The tradition of offerings in order to show love and gratitude to God is also explained: candles, incense, cloth, flowers, carpets, candelabras or anything for use in a church, as well as donations such as money. “However, the desire to offer the blood of animals is contrary to the practices of today’s civilized world, modern environmental awareness and compassion for animals.”<sup>39</sup> All of the four issues (clothing, sacred places, pilgrimages, offerings) occupy very important place in the Islamic religion and culture.<sup>40</sup> No wonder, they have been distinguished and very clearly discussed in *Christianity*.

Thomas K. Johnson, Senior Advisor to the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and the special envoy of this Alliance to the Vatican, author of the longest review of our booklet, describes the context of this work. It is not exactly the Gnosticism or Arianism faced by the early Church and conducted it to the formulation of the creed:

The Turkish context is a history of violence, genocide and oppression, now facing a Muslim majority culture mixed with global secularism. There are serious analogies to the situations faced (or soon to be faced) by Christians around the world. The method used in this book cannot be imagined without the recent history of intra-Christian relations, both the process of getting to know each other by talking about each other’s truth claims and

<sup>36</sup> JCCT, 86–88. Cf. Huda, “Islamic Clothing”; Yıldırım, “Religion,” 183–294.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Kopiec, “Continuity,” 46–51.

<sup>38</sup> JCCT, 88–89.

<sup>39</sup> JCCT, 89–90.

<sup>40</sup> Danecki, *Podstawowe wiadomości o islamie*, 351–356, 363–376.

also the process of joint responses to opposition. The churches from the four branches of Christianity in Turkey have presented a unified proclamation, apologia, and ethics in response to opposition and persecution. The global body of Christ needs to find courage to follow.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. The Call for an Ecumenical Catechism

The task of catechesis is not only to teach the doctrine, but also to introduce it to the whole Christian life. The broadly understood Christian life also includes its social and cultural context, as well as the ecclesial, and thus, the ecumenical one.<sup>42</sup> The call for an ecumenical catechism resonates for time to time in the international and interchurch area.

The first ecumenical catechism was published in 1973 and entitled *The Common Catechism. A Book of Christian Faith* (German edition; English edition in 1975). It was written by a team of German, French, and Swiss scholars, nineteen Catholics and sixteen Protestants (Lutherans and Calvinists), including such internationally well-known names as Heinrich Fries, Walter Kasper, Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Its purpose was “to help ensure that Christians co-operate within their own communities in the common growth of the churches towards that unity in variety which is the goal of all ecumenical efforts.”<sup>43</sup> This 720-page book is divided into five parts, devoted respectively to God, Jesus Christ (His work and His person), “New Men” (effects of Christ’s death and resurrection on His followers, problems of grace, freedom, sin, prayer, the sacraments), faith in the world (with Christian ethics), and to ecumenical efforts.<sup>44</sup> Yet *The Common Catechism* contains a certain uneasiness about such topics as the pre-existence of Jesus, His virginal conception, and His physical resurrection. The doctrine of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on birth control is firmly rejected. Overall, the book is seen as “a survey of the kind of European liberalism that has inspired Protestant ecumenism and is becoming increasingly attractive to ecumenically-minded Catholics.”<sup>45</sup>

*The Common Catechism* has not been approved as official teaching by any Roman Catholic or Protestant church body, and importantly, it does not embrace the theology of Eastern Churches. Even the remarkable book of Cardinal Kasper *Harvesting the Fruits* covers only the results of the Western bilateral dialogues of

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41 Johnson, “An Astonishing,” 87.

42 Kantyka, “Ekumenizm i katecheza,” 171.

43 Feiner – Vischer, *The Common Catechism*, xiv.

44 Feiner – Vischer, *The Common Catechism*, 1–89, 91–275, 277–395, 397–550, 551–666.

45 Dederen, “The Common Catechism,” 12–14.

the Catholic Church with Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and Methodist Churches.<sup>46</sup> That is why the Turkish *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings* is so important: it takes Eastern theology into account and has been approved by the heads of these churches, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople included.

According to Cardinal Walter Kasper, former president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, a shared ecumenical catechism could be one of the fruits of the ecumenical dialogue of the last decades. “We have affirmed our common foundation in Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity as expressed in our common creed and in the doctrine of the first ecumenical councils,” but “we do not yet have any idea how such a catechism could be structured and written,” he said during the opening of the symposium held at the Vatican in 2010.<sup>47</sup>

Attempts of common explication of the Christian Creed are closely related to the idea of an ecumenical catechism. The most important work is the document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches entitled *Confessing the One Faith. An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* published in 1991. This text grew out of many years of study and consultation by theologians of various Christian traditions and from all parts of the world. It is not a consensus, nor even a convergence text, but an instrument offered to the Churches to assist them as they reflect on and seek to recognize the apostolic faith.<sup>48</sup> *Confessing the One Faith* is structured in three parts, following the three articles of the Creed. Each section indicates basic affirmations of faith as well as main challenges to be faced with regard to the respective theme. In identifying these challenges, attention is paid to three factors: (a) the language and philosophy of the age in which the creeds were formulated are no longer those of the present day; (b) the influence of old and new religions is more and more affirmed and appreciated in many cultures; (c) in modern societies, especially with the process of secularization, many of the basic affirmations of the Christian faith are questioned.<sup>49</sup>

At this point it is worth recalling ecumenical methodology, which is advocated in the Vatican document concerning the ecumenical dimension of pastoral formation:

Attention should be drawn to the real communion already existing among Christians, seen in their reverence for the living Word of God and their common profession of faith in the triune God and in the redemptive action of Christ, the Son of God made man. It finds expression in the various Creeds Christians share; it is embraced in the one sacrament of

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<sup>46</sup> Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> “Vatican Suggests Ecumenical Catechism.”

<sup>48</sup> Tillard, “Preface,” xii.

<sup>49</sup> *Confessing the One Faith*, 8–9.

baptism which constitutes the fundamental bond between them; it directs them all to full visible unity and a common destiny in the one Kingdom of God.<sup>50</sup>

The symbol of faith is the stem cell of all dogmatic development in the Church. It has the significance of the foundation of the whole building, together with the Scriptures, constituting a particularly legitimate interpretation of it. It expresses “the essence of Christianity.”<sup>51</sup> The Creed should be at the heart of ecumenical dialogue, and much has already been done in this area.<sup>52</sup> However, it should not be forgotten that the Creed does not deal with ethical issues, the way of life, conduct and action of Christians in the world, important for the formation of Christian spirituality.<sup>53</sup> The credibility of the Church is connected with its various signs: unity, holiness, universality, love, praxis, witness, culture-forming activity and values.<sup>54</sup>

The task of publishing an ecumenical catechism can be facilitated today by the publication of catechisms of individual Churches or confessions. Nevertheless, the structure of *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings* resembles neither the structure of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nor Luther’s *Catechisms*, nor *Catechism of the Orthodox Church*. These Catholic and Lutheran catechisms consist of four chapters covering (in different order) faith (Creed), liturgy (sacraments), moral life (commandments) and prayer (Our Father). The structure of the Orthodox catechism is focused on the mysteries of Christ’s life in seven chapters: His Nativity (with subtitle “From Old Adam to New Adam”), Baptism (“From Abraham to Jesus: waiting and receiving God’s Anointed”), Transfiguration (“Who is God?”), Teaching (“From Old Covenant to New Covenant”), Cross and Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost (“New Age: Church Age”), His Second Coming and our life of the World to Come; an annex about prayer has been attached.<sup>55</sup>

These catechisms have different origins, objectives, and authorities within their Churches. Regardless of the differences, we can find a certain similarity: the mutual connection between faith, liturgy, Christian life and prayer. On the one hand, the division into four parts protects against the “ruinous dichotomy” what Christian “believe” and “act,” which leads to intellectualism and moralism. On the other hand, the division into four parts poses a problem for the theocentric, Christocentric, and soteriological exposition of the doctrine. It should also be remembered that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an organic compendium, from which it has been made precise and comprehensive. The catechism of the Orthodox Church uses

50 Pontificium Concilium ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam, *La dimension oecuménique*, no. 17.

51 Sesboüé, “Treść tradycji,” 119.

52 Sabugal, *Credo*, 35–40.

53 Hryniewicz – Karski – Paprocki, *Credo*, 11.

54 Kaucha, “Wiarygodność Kościoła,” 138–145.

55 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 13. *Księgi Wyznaniowe Kościoła Luterskiego*, 41–55, 60–131. Paprocki, *Bóg żywy*, 19, 67, 97, 131, 187, 281, 399, 477.

a much more metaphorical, typological (thanks to the patristic reading of the Old Testament) and liturgical language. It is shorter and more suitable for direct use in catechesis.<sup>56</sup>

It seems that the Turkish booklet kept all these required dimensions. Its exposition is theocentric, Christocentric, soteriological, biblical and metaphorical, and the booklet is extremely brief. Thus it can easily be used in catechesis or other presentations of the Christian faith. Summarizing the structure of *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings* by the Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey, we can conclude that it is an extensive commentary on the Creed (Chapters 2–9) with an introduction (Chapter 1) and chapters dealing with the Bible, ethics, culture and ecumenism (Chapters 10–13). The teaching about the creation, incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ is included in the chapter about salvation; thus, protology has been integrated into Christology and soteriology. The book ends with a motivational call to Christian unity.

The booklet *Christianity. Fundamental Teachings* has received very positive critiques. “Turkey’s Jewel” – this term was used by Brian C. Stiller, Global Ambassador of the World Evangelical Alliance.<sup>57</sup> According to the reviewers, this collaborative work presents the commonalities of the faith as well as the distinctions, but doing the latter very “calmly.” It explains Christianity to non-Christians in a way that is both accessible and enlightening, and it would be a great reference and teaching tool for any Christians or non-Christians. “There is a beauty to its clarity and a wonderful spirit to its mission.”<sup>58</sup> The booklet, “short but impactful,” is seen as “a landmark” in inter-church efforts to draw closer together. This “easy to read synopsis” of major Christian doctrines has its “historic significance.” It is an “excellent, clear and powerful book and balanced statements of what Christians believe.” More than that, the authors present the key elements of the Christian faith in a way that is “fresh for western readers.” It is in part a reflection of the theology of the Eastern Churches, which is complementary to that of the Western Churches.<sup>59</sup>

Andrew Messmer describes the publication of *Christianity* as “something amazing” because the Churches of Turkey have been able to produce a document that attempts to be universal and long-lasting despite the local flavor. He wrote: “I gladly confess that, although I am a (generally conservative) Protestant, there is little if anything that I disagree with. This, indeed, is encouraging!” This reviewer also lists which issues were left out of the book: canon of Scripture, Popes, the veneration of Mary and the saints, Purgatory, the number of the sacraments, the millennial

<sup>56</sup> Batut, “Le Catéchisme,” 30–31. Gianetto, “Come usare,” 187.

<sup>57</sup> Stiller, “Turkey’s Jewel.”

<sup>58</sup> Sessions, “Clear and Precise Statement.”

<sup>59</sup> Dinolfo, “Historic breakthrough.” Moody, “If You Want.” Niccum, “Short but Impactful.” Rogers, “Seeing the Ecumenical Movement.”

kingdom and use of images. These omissions reminded us precisely of what still divides us and sharpen the focus of our future ecumenical conversations.<sup>60</sup>

To sum up, the Turkish booklet is not a compilation or comparison of doctrines, even for unifying purposes as practiced by “symbolic theology” (*theologia symbolica*) or by “science of confessions” (*Konfessionskunde*).<sup>61</sup> It expresses the shared beliefs of the Christian Churches in a mature, balanced and convincing way.

## Conclusion

The collaborative work of the Churches in Turkey is a good example for other countries, or even Churches worldwide, how to prepare a kind of an “ecumenical catechism.” It would be even a paradigm of such a catechism. In comparison with other ecumenical catechisms, the booklet embraces Eastern theology and has been authorized by heads of the local churches. It also takes into account the local context. As a good teaching tool for Christians or non-Christians it is worth knowing, translating, commenting and implementing, after being adopted to other social, cultural and religious contexts. As a clear and balanced statement of what Christians believe, it gives the idea how a new ecumenical catechism could be structured and worked out. Such a catechism (or local catechisms) could be one of the fruits of the ecumenical dialogue conducted in the past decades and an instrument of evangelization for our time.

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<sup>60</sup> Messmer, “Christianity.”

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Karski, *Symbolika*, 9–13; Pokorska, *Porównanie wyznań*, 12.



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