RAIS RESEARCH ASSOCIATION for INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES
June 5-6,2025

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16219319

Christianity and the Search for a Cohesive European Identity: Toward a Public Theology of Memory, Ethics, and Encounter

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Abstract: As Europe navigates an age of migration, secularization, and political polarization, the question resurfaces: can religion still contribute to a cohesive European identity? While Christianity has historically shaped Europe's cultural, institutional, and moral architecture, its role in the 21st century is increasingly contested. This paper explores how religion, particularly Christianity, reframed through a constructive model of public theology, can foster social cohesion without retreating into triumphalism or exclusion. The paper presents three models for understanding religion's public function in Europe: (1) Christianity as cultural heritage, which emphasizes symbolic continuity; (2) Christianity as moral framework, which contributes to ethical deliberation within democratic pluralism; and (3) Christianity in pluralistic encounter, which cultivates civic relationships through interfaith and intercommunal cooperation. A final constructive section proposes a vision of Christian public theology that affirms memory, nurtures ethical responsibility, and promotes dialogical engagement. Rather than reclaiming Christendom, this paper calls for a public Christianity grounded in humility, justice, and dialogical presence. When disentangled from ethno-nationalist identity claims and practiced as a contributor to the common good, religion can support a cohesive, inclusive, and ethically grounded European identity.

Keywords: Christian Public Theology, European Identity, Religious Pluralism, Cultural Memory, Democratic Ethics, Moral Imagination, Solidarity, Interfaith Cooperation, Public Reason, Post-Secular Society

Introduction: The Problem of Christianity in Contemporary Europe

The question of whether religion can function as a cohesive force in the construction of European identity has grown increasingly urgent over the past three decades. Today, Europe stands at a crossroads – culturally and politically – grappling with intensified migration, accelerated secularization, religious diversification, and the resurgence of populist-nationalist movements. Within this context, some view religion as a relic of the past. Others invoke it as a cultural safeguard or ethical compass. This paper contends that despite its contested status, religion, particularly Christianity – when appropriately reimagined beyond ethno-nationalist essentialism – can contribute meaningfully to a plural, yet cohesive, European identity by offering symbolic resources, ethical orientations, and communal practices (Măcelaru, 2014a).

Historically, the idea of "Europe" has been closely bound to Christianity. Since ancient times, symbioses of church and political power produced various Christian hegemonies that shaped Europe's evolving identity, embedding Christianity in the continent's legal systems, moral imaginaries, and cultural institutions. As historian Larry Siedentop has argued, the roots of European liberalism are unquestionably Christian (Siedentop, 2014). Over the centuries, Christianity offered not only a metaphysical framework but a social ethic that upheld the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of conscience, and the responsibility of community – principles foundational to modern European democracies. However, the Christian heritage became deeply contested in the wake of the Enlightenment and the rise of secular modernity. Charles Taylor has highlighted how Western societies have shifted from a time "in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God" to one in which religious belief is "one human possibility among many" and often not the dominant one (Taylor, 2007, p. 3). Surprisingly, though, as Grace Davie argues, in Europe, this transformation did not reduce belief *per se*; rather, it restructured its conditions, decentering religious authority from public life (Davie, 2000). This so-called "believing without

belonging" poses a paradox for European identity: religion is culturally present but institutionally marginalized.

Furthermore, this paradox deepens as Christianity re-enters political discourse – not as lived faith, but as cultural heritage. This was evident, for instance, in the debate over whether Europe should acknowledge its "Christian roots" in official documents such as the preamble to the failed European Constitution (European Union, 2004). As reported by Reuters (2003), Pope John Paul II pushed at the time for such recognition, calling on Europe to "open the doors to Christ", to rediscover its Christian heritage, and to relive its roots. His proposal, however, was ultimately rejected in favor of a more religiously "neutral" language. Although this omission did not amount to a rejection of all things Christian, the very debate that ensued revealed a deeper anxiety: the concern that affirming Christianity in official discourse might truncate the very identity being shaped by excluding those who do not share the same tradition (Topolski, 2020). Thus, in this context Christianity became simultaneously a unifying myth and a divisive marker.

The same ambiguity is currently exploited by right-wing populist leaders who weaponize religion as a marker of identity. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, often refers to a "Christian Europe" in opposition to Muslim migrants and liberal cosmopolitanism. Christianity, in such discourse, is not about belief and practice, but about determining "who belongs." It is not about religion but about being religiously identified (Walzer, 1997). This rhetoric does not operate as spiritual orientation but as a "civilizational" shorthand. Evidently, such an essentialist use of religion undermines its potential to foster cohesion, reducing it instead to a tool for differentiation, exclusion, and cultural defensiveness.

These distortions preoccupy scholars who advocate for a different role for religion in public life. In his concept of the "post-secular society," Habermas (2006), following Rawls (1997), argues that secular and religious citizens alike must learn to translate their convictions into a shared language of "public reason." Accordingly, while religious voices are welcome in the public square, they must be communicatively translated to ensure mutual intelligibility and respect. This model acknowledges the normative potential of religion – as a source of ethical orientation and social solidarity – while preserving the neutrality of democratic deliberation. Similarly, Casanova's concept of the "deprivatization of religion" challenges the assumption that modernity necessarily leads to the marginalization of religion. On the contrary, he argues that religious actors and institutions can re-enter the public sphere in ways that support democracy, justice, and pluralism (Casanova, 1994, pp. 211-215). Europe, he notes, is somewhat exceptional in its insistence on privatized religion, whereas in much of the world – Latin America, Africa, Asia – religion continues to be a robust participant in civil society and moral debate.

What these scholars highlight is that for religion to function as a source of cohesion, it must go beyond heritage and ethics; it must also foster encounter – particularly in contexts of deep diversity. Interfaith dialogue, interreligious networks, and faith-based civil society initiatives offer practical expressions of what David Ford (2011, pp. 141-143) has termed "scriptural reasoning," a dialogical process that cultivates hospitality across boundaries. Such initiatives are not simply theological exercises but public practices that build trust, solidarity, and mutual understanding. Especially in urban centers marked by super-diversity, religion as dialogical practice becomes a crucial asset for social cohesion. In fact, the response of religious communities to recent crises – such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rotaru, 2020, pp.71-82), the ongoing refugee emergency, and the persistence of political violence – demonstrates this civic resilience. Mosques distributing food to the needy, churches sheltering asylum seekers, synagogues hosting vaccination drives – these are not mere acts of charity but embodiments of solidarity. In these contexts, religion is not only about belief but also about belonging, not just doctrine but care. These communal forms of engagement illustrate the potential of religion to unify across lines of difference when grounded in shared vulnerability and ethical responsibility.

However, this vision is viable only if religion is disentangled from its appropriation by ethnonationalist projects. As Miroslav Volf (1996) has warned, a religion that promotes exclusion comes itself under judgment. Evidently, the future of European cohesion cannot rest on the resurrection of a homogeneous Christian identity. Instead, it must embrace a model in which religion – freed from coercion and open to pluralism – serves as a symbolic and practical resource for cultivating shared meaning, moral responsibility, and civic participation. In this regard, Christian public theology offers a particularly promising framework. Rather than seeking dominance, it embraces a posture of humility, dialogical openness, and faithful public presence. It brings to the shared table a tradition of moral imagination, practices of care and hospitality, and theological resources for justice and reconciliation. Christianity, rightly practiced, can serve as both a critical witness and a constructive contributor in Europe's plural public square.

This paper therefore proposes that religion – reimagined through a constructive model of Christian public theology as cultural memory, moral discourse, and relational practice – can contribute meaningfully to the shaping of a cohesive European identity. The sections that follow will explore this proposal through three interlocking models, each highlighting a different dimension of religion's public role: its limits, its promise, and its potential to bridge Europe's fragmentations without erasing its diversity. The paper concludes by offering a theological vision for a plural and ethically grounded European future.

Christianity as Cultural Heritage

We begin the analysis with the most historically grounded perspective: the role of religion as cultural heritage**.** This model considers how Christianity, even in its post-institutional forms, continues to provide a symbolic backdrop for European identity. Here, Christianity is not evaluated primarily in terms of personal conviction or ecclesial vitality, but rather as a formative civilizational force whose moral, legal, and cultural legacies remain embedded in Europe's shared memory. The argument is that while lived religion may be in decline, its historical imprints still shape the "grammar" of European belonging – informing both secular values and collective imaginaries. As Chantal Delsol (2021) has shown, European civilization was built upon a Christian matrix and continues to bear its imprint, even when that matrix is denied or forgotten. From the codification of Roman law infused with Christian morality, to the development of charitable institutions, universities, and welfare ethics, Christianity has offered the institutional and symbolic infrastructure for what eventually became European modernity. Whether in Christian-inflected language around dignity and the soul or in the enduring legacy of Sabbath rhythms in the work week, religion is present as a cultural sediment. Its architectural, artistic, and geographical consequences are unmistakable. One need not be a practicing Christian to appreciate Chartres Cathedral, hear echoes of the Psalms in Bach's cantatas, or detect the moral architecture of Christian eschatology in Kantian ethics. As Robert Bellah (1988) notes in his analysis of "civil religion," religious motifs can long outlast religious institutions, continuing to shape public identity through cultural memory. This cultural framing is not simply nostalgic. In Europe this memory is predominantly Christian. As such, it is Christianity that functions as a background symbolic order that undergirds many of the shared assumptions of European life – even among those who reject Christianity in its theological or institutional forms.

Furthermore, beyond merely establishing the Christian roots of Europe, what makes the cultural heritage model distinctive is its post-Christian inflection. To be sure, this is not a return to faith, but a reinterpretation of the faith's legacy in secular terms. The model rests on a paradox: Christianity is central to Europe's history, but marginal to many Europeans' lives. In this regard, Grace Davie (2000, pp. 38-81) speaks of "vicarious" religion, that is, the condition in which religious institutions and symbols are maintained by the few on behalf of the many, who are content for religion to exist and even represent them in public rituals, but do not engage with it personally. In this sense, Christianity in Europe functions much like a national anthem or flag: it

stands in for identity but does not serve as basis for personal conviction. In part, this detachment is the result of the transformation Charles Taylor (2007, pp. 539-593) describes as the "immanent frame" – the modern condition in which all belief, including unbelief, is contestable. Within this frame, Christianity may continue to offer a horizon of moral and symbolic coherence, but it is no longer a cultural default. Instead, it competes with an array of other narratives – nationalist, liberal, ecological, technocratic – for meaning and allegiance. As such, its heritage role becomes more aesthetic or ethical than theological. Yet, this does not imply irrelevance. As Philip Jenkins (2007) has noted in his study of post-Christian societies, secular cultures can remain deeply shaped by Christian assumptions, even when detached from creedal fidelity. For example, contemporary commitments to universal human rights, care for the vulnerable, and moral responsibility often retain a genealogy traceable to Christian teachings – even when these roots are unacknowledged or denied by their current secular advocates.

It follows that religion as heritage is neither inert nor innocuous. Its political invocation can serve both inclusive and exclusionary aims. On the inclusive side, heritage allows Europeans from various backgrounds – religious or not – to participate in a shared symbolic economy. Public holidays like Christmas and Easter continue to punctuate social time, even for those who no longer observe them religiously. National ceremonies in cathedrals and the invocation of Christian imagery in literature, architecture, and public monuments generate what Jan Assmann (2006, pp. 1-45) calls "cultural memory" – layers of collective belonging that transcend individual belief. However, this same heritage has been instrumentalized for exclusionary purposes. As noted above, the turn to "Christian Europe" rhetoric by far-right parties across the continent – from Marine Le Pen in France to the AfD in Germany and Viktor Orbán in Hungary – demonstrates the danger of cultural Christianity weaponized as an identity boundary. In such discourses, Christianity is less about ethics or solidarity and more about guarding a mythical cultural homogeneity. These appropriations of Christianity have little to do with church teaching or theological substance. Rather, they reflect a "secular Christianity" that opposes Islam, immigration, and liberal pluralism in the name of preserving cultural purity. This reveals the Janus-faced nature of cultural heritage: it can unify through shared memory, or it can divide by defining enemies of an imagined national self.

As mentioned in the Introduction, such dynamics were vividly displayed in the 2003–2004 debates surrounding the drafting of the European Constitution. Several Eastern European countries, backed by the Vatican, advocated for a reference to "Christian roots" in the preamble. Others – most notably France and Belgium – opposed it, citing their secular republican traditions and concerns over religious pluralism. In the end, the document adopted a more inclusive formula, acknowledging Europe's "cultural, religious and humanist heritage" – a compromise that recognized Christianity's formative role in Europe's history without demanding confessional allegiance. The debate itself, however, revealed more than just disagreements over wording. At stake were deep divisions over what kind of Europe was being imagined. On one level, the controversy was about symbols. But on another, it reflected divergent views about the role of religion in public life. Should Christianity be honored for its civilizational contributions? Or should such recognition be avoided to protect the secular and plural character of the modern European project? Evidently, these are questions that continue to animate public debates in education policy, religious signage, and holiday recognition across EU states (Miu, 2019).

Given all these, it is evident that, despite its symbolic power, the heritage model faces serious limitations. First, it risks aestheticizing religion – turning living faith into dead tradition. Second, it can conflate cultural Christianity with civilizational superiority, thereby marginalizing other religious or secular identities. Third, it may lull European societies into complacency, assuming that cohesion can be achieved through symbolic gestures alone. A truly constructive approach to heritage, however, will include what Paul Ricoeur (2004, p. 79) terms "critical memory." This entails not only celebrating cathedrals and moral legacies, but also reckoning with

Christianity's historical complicities, such as the Crusades, colonialism, and antisemitism. The Christian contribution to European identity includes moments of ethical formation, but also of ethical failure. A heritage model blind to these realities risks reproducing triumphalist narratives under the guise of cultural memory. In response, some theologians advocate for a hermeneutics of retrieval: the discerning recovery of tradition to serve present civic and theological formation (see Volf, 2006; cf. Sarisky, 2017). Such an approach seeks to lift up dimensions of Christian memory that foster dignity, reconciliation, and solidarity, while also critically naming and resisting those theological and cultural patterns that once legitimated exclusion or violence. This is not about erasing the past, but about redeeming it – by allowing the better angels of the tradition to speak into a plural and ethically responsible European future.

To conclude, the model of religion as cultural heritage provides an indispensable, though only partial, contribution to the question of European cohesion. It underscores how Christianity continues to shape symbolic life, moral imagination, and institutional memory – even in secular settings. Yet this legacy must be handled with care. To serve as a resource for cohesion, Christian heritage must be interpreted pluralistically, remembered critically, and mobilized ethically. It must not serve to exclude, dominate, or retreat into nostalgia. Handled constructively, it can offer Europe a symbolic grammar through which to express shared values, narrate historical continuity, and reflect on the responsibilities of the present. Still, heritage alone cannot sustain cohesion. Without an ethical horizon, memory risks becoming myth. Therefore, the next step in this inquiry is to consider how religion – particularly Christianity – can function as a moral framework that informs public reasoning and democratic responsibility.

Christianity as Moral Framework

If the cultural heritage model emphasizes the historical-symbolic presence of Christianity in Europe, the moral framework model foregrounds its normative potential. Here, the focus shift from memory to meaning: can Christianity offer ethical orientations that contribute to democratic life in plural societies? This question invites consideration of how religious traditions, particularly Christian moral reasoning, can engage public life through ethical dialogue, critical conscience, and civic responsibility. Thus, unlike the heritage model, which often operates in the symbolic register, the moral framework model centers on the discursive and formative role of religion in shaping public norms. It presumes that Christianity, even in a post-secular and pluralistic Europe, retains a capacity to generate moral language, communal ethos, and visions of justice that are pertinent to common life. In this register, the issue is not whether Europeans still *adhere* to Christian doctrine, but whether Christian ethical thought can *contribute* to public deliberation, policy reflection, and shared moral imagination.

As noted in the Introduction, theorists such as Rawls (1997) and Habermas (2006) have already laid important groundwork for understanding religion's place in democratic moral discourse. If Christianity is to be regarded as a legitimate participant in contemporary public ethics, it must relinquish any claim to privileged authority. Only under conditions of epistemic humility can Christian ethics serve as a constructive resource for articulating visions of justice, human dignity, and social solidarity within plural societies. This model assumes that the Christian tradition harbors rich internal resources – narratives, virtues, and prophetic critiques – that can meaningfully nourish democratic life. Accordingly, the emphasis shifts from defending the right of religion to speak in the public sphere – what one may call "the apologetics program" – to exploring its capacity to contribute to public reasoning in ways that are both theologically faithful and dialogically responsible.

This vision has generated much discussion among theologians and ethicists who advocate for what we may call a "bilingual public Christianity" – that is, a Christianity that retains theological depth while engaging civil discourse. Since Karl Barth's (1960, pp. 149-190) assertion that the church speaks two languages – its own theological discourse and the speech of the civil

realm – and that it must respect the autonomy of the secular order even as it proclaims the message of Christ, it has become clear that an appropriately pluralistic Christian ethic is a prerequisite for meaningful Christian engagement in the public square (cf. Huber, 2013). In this regard, Nicholas Wolterstorff (1997, pp. 67-120) and Jonathan Chaplin (2008) have both argued that such an approach allows Christian ethics to shape political deliberation without violating democratic principles of reciprocity and inclusion. This mode of engagement requires both moral clarity and dialogical humility – a difficult balance, to be sure, but one that avoids the twin perils of secular exclusion and religious authoritarianism. Crucially, as noted earlier, this vision presupposes that Christianity continues to carry ethical capital: moral resources capable of informing public norms beyond their ecclesial contexts. Indeed, many of the core principles of European liberal democracies – human dignity, solidarity, social responsibility, and care for the vulnerable – are rooted in Christian moral anthropology. The biblical idea of the *imago Dei*, for instance, informs the conviction that all human beings possess inherent worth (Măcelaru, 2021) – a conviction that has undergirded Christian arguments for human rights and equality throughout history (q.v. Szczerba, 2020), its misuse to promote patriarchy, exclusivism and anthropocentrism notwithstanding (Szczerba, 2025, pp. 76-79, 285-288). The teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, have historically nourished ideals of nonviolence, compassion, and justice (e.g. Yoder, 1994; cf. Mocan, 2023, pp. 19-24). Even the very idea of the conscience as a moral compass – central to human rights and legal protections – draws from Christian spiritual traditions (Măcelaru, 2022; cf. Măcelaru, 2014b).

Of course, such values are now mediated through secular institutions. However, it is important to remember that they remain indelibly marked by Christianity, even if their religious origins are often forgotten or deliberately rejected. This observation matters, because ethical legacy is not a static datum; it must be continually retrieved, reinterpreted, and rearticulated to remain publicly relevant. In this task, public theology can play a mediating role: translating Christian convictions into civic contributions – not by diluting doctrine, but by discovering points of convergence and a shared moral vocabulary. Such mediation, however, requires the use of a hermeneutics of responsibility in the fashion suggested by Johann Baptist Metz (1980, pp. 109-115): an interpretive posture that reads memory in light of suffering and calls for ethical and political action. In this context, religious ethics are not proclaimed as divine decrees but offered as invitations to moral reflection, democratic deliberation, and communal discernment.

Having said all that, we must also acknowledge that the moral framework model is not without its challenges. One key tension lies in balancing conviction with pluralism. In societies marked by religious and moral diversity, strong ethical claims can easily slide into moralism or exclusion. Religious communities may offer powerful critiques of injustice, but if their ethical language becomes insular or triumphalist, they risk alienating others. The challenge, therefore, is to affirm moral truth while respecting difference – a task especially complex in the context of public debates where deep disagreements persist (q.v. Măcelaru, 2025). For instance, Christian institutions in countries like Poland or Hungary have strongly influenced anti-abortion laws, raising concerns about church-state entanglement and the suppression of minority views. On the other hand, Christian ethics have also undergirded prophetic calls for justice – such as Protestant churches mobilizing to welcome Syrian refugees or global ecclesial leaders like Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, and Archbishop Justin Welby issuing repeated appeals for ceasefire and peace in Ukraine and the Middle East. These examples show that Christian ethics can serve both reactionary and progressive agendas. The task for public theology, then, is to develop criteria for discerning when religious moral arguments genuinely support the common good and when they hinder the democratic process. This includes evaluating how such arguments are framed (authoritatively or dialogically), to whom they are addressed (insiders or publics), and with what consequences (coercion or solidarity).

To conclude, for Christian ethics to be credible as a factor of cohesion in the European public sphere, it must be both rooted and responsive. It must draw from the deep wells of theological reflection – Scripture, tradition, and lived faith – while actively engaging the realities of post-secular pluralism. As Nigel Biggar (2011) contends, Christian ethics must remain active in the public arena, but it must do so while respecting the rules of the game: persuasion, not imposition; dialogue, not dominance. Clearly, this demands a shift in posture. Rather than lamenting the loss of Christian hegemony, churches and theologians are summoned to embrace a mode of public engagement that is confident yet non-coercive, morally serious yet politically humble (Fergusson, 2004). Public theology, in this register, does not seek to govern society, but to leaven it – to offer moral insight, provoke ethical imagination, and contribute meaningfully to democratic discourse. Such a vision aligns with the broader ecumenical recovery of the church's public vocation – not as a theocratic force, but as a moral community dedicated to the flourishing of all (Măcelaru, 2017). This includes nurturing civic virtues such as honesty, courage, and solidarity; forming consciences capable of resisting injustice; and building moral coalitions across religious and secular divides.

Thus, the model of religion as moral framework complements the cultural heritage perspective by focusing not on what Christianity *has been*, but on what it *can offer* in the present. It invites Christians and churches to act as ethical interlocutors – contributing to public reason, advocating for justice, and shaping civic values without demanding cultural dominance. In this way, Christian public theology becomes not a nostalgia for Christendom, but a moral vocation rooted in humility, courage, and love of neighbor. As Europe searches for cohesion in a fragmented world, such moral contributions – when offered dialogically – not only illuminate paths toward shared responsibility and civic solidarity but also prepare the ground for deeper encounters across lines of faith, culture, and conviction.

Christianity in Pluralistic Encounter

If the cultural heritage model highlights the symbolic continuity of Christianity in Europe, and the moral framework model articulates its normative contribution to public reason, the model of Christianity in pluralistic encounter emphasizes its relational and dialogical dimension. This model moves beyond memory and ethics to focus on presence: the embodied and interactive role of Christianity in fostering civic trust, interreligious cooperation, and communal solidarity within an increasingly diverse European landscape. It posits that in order to support cohesion in post-secular and multi-faith societies, Christianity must not only speak but also listen; it must not only offer norms but also build relationships. Pluralism, in this sense, is not merely a fact to be acknowledged, but a gift to be cultivated – a theological and political opportunity for mutual recognition and shared human flourishing (Măcelaru, 2017).

The need for this model is especially evident in Europe's urban centers, where religious diversity is both a demographic reality and a daily experience. From neighborhoods in Berlin and Paris to districts in London, Brussels, or Stockholm, people of different faiths increasingly share not only public spaces, but also common challenges: housing shortages, rising xenophobia, environmental degradation, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. In such contexts, the question is no longer *whether* Christians should engage with religious others, but *how* they should do so. Answering this requires a transformation in theological imagination – one that views encounter not as dilution or threat, but as a theologically generative event. As David Ford (2011, pp. 130-147) has argued, deep differences do not have to lead to division. Rather, they can provide a context for attaining deeper wisdom and friendship. Interfaith encounter, then, becomes not an ancillary activity but an essential expression of Christian vocation in a plural public sphere. This vision is already embodied in various forms of public interreligious praxis. Initiatives such as scriptural reasoning, interfaith councils, peace walks, and grassroots cooperation on local issues demonstrate how theological communities can act together for the common good without

sacrificing doctrinal integrity. For instance, bodies such as the Parliament of the World's Religions (https://parliamentofreligions.org) and the European Council of Religious Leaders (https://ecrl.eu) have facilitated ongoing forums for joint advocacy on climate justice, refugee protection, and anti-racism. In many cases, these efforts are grounded in shared commitments to compassion, human dignity, and the sacredness of life – principles that transcend doctrinal boundaries. Importantly, these practices offer an alternative to the zero-sum logic of identity politics, replacing the logic of competition with one of collaboration (Măcelaru, 2025).

From a theological standpoint, such engagement must be rooted in a Christian self-understanding that affirms the dignity of the religious other. This entails moving from an exclusivist logic of rivalry to a theology of embrace, as articulated by Miroslav Volf (2011; cf. Volf, 1996), which refuses to define the self in contrast to the other and instead makes space for reciprocal recognition. Such an approach does not imply relativism or doctrinal compromise; rather, it presupposes a confidence in the gospel that enables generous and hospitable dialogue. As the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* affirms, the Church "rejects nothing that is true and holy" in other religions and "regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which… reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, par. 2). Although originally a Roman Catholic statement, the spirit behind this declaration has inspired analogous forms of openness in Protestant and Orthodox traditions, contributing to a broader ecumenical and interfaith ethic of encounter.

The theological justification for such engagement lies in a trinitarian understanding of anthropology: if all human beings are created in the image of God, and if the Spirit is active beyond the institutional boundaries of the Church, then every genuine encounter with the religious other becomes potentially revelatory. In this sense, pluralistic engagement is not only a social imperative but also a theological opportunity – a means of discerning the Spirit's activity in the world. Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong has consistently articulated this vision by suggesting that the Spirit's universal presence enables meaningful interreligious learning, even while affirming the particularity and normativity of Christ (see Yong, 2008; cf. Yong, 2000 & 2005). Similarly, in Eastern Orthodox thought, John Zizioulas (1985 & 2006) has emphasized communion as the central mode of divine-human and human-human relations, suggesting that encounter is intrinsic to theological anthropology and ecclesiology alike. Practically, this means that Christian participation in public life must include a dialogical posture, especially in contested spaces where religious and secular actors interact. This is particularly important in moments of crisis, when multi-faith cooperation proves vital in ensuring community resilience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, interfaith task forces emerged in cities like Vienna and Birmingham to combat misinformation and social isolation. Likewise, in response to the ongoing refugee crisis, Christian organizations partnered with Muslim and Jewish counterparts to provide shelter, legal aid, and trauma care. These joint initiatives not only address immediate needs but also challenge the narrative that religion is inherently divisive. In fact, they suggest that religion – when practiced in a spirit of hospitality and solidarity – can serve as a powerful unifying force.

Such theologies of encounter are particularly vital in countering the rise of ideologized Christianity, that is, the politicized, exclusionary appropriation of religion as a marker of ethnic or national identity (q.v. Măcelaru 2025). Against such instrumentalization, the pluralistic encounter model asserts that Christianity's most credible public witness lies not in cultural defense, but in relational generosity. As William Cavanaugh (2011, p. 196) notes, this search for a "new form of Christian presence in Europe" emerged in the aftermath of the devastating divisions caused by war in the 1940s. In his words, "it was no longer tolerable that the churches should be content to be domestic chaplains to their nations." Rather, they were called to form a "supranational entity which could in some measure embody and express the supranational and supracultural character of the gospel." At the heart of this project was the pledge churches made "to be faithful to one another in a mutual commitment to receive correction from one another." This vision of mutual

accountability and supranational solidarity holds important lessons for today. If Christianity forgets this pledge and retreats into nationalist fragmentation, it risks becoming a civil religion of uniformity and a tool for exclusion. By contrast, a church that practices dialogical encounter becomes a sign of the Kingdom: a community in which reconciliation is not merely proclaimed but embodied in real relationships across lines of race, religion, and nation.

Of course, such work is not without risk. Engaging deeply with religious others can provoke suspicion from within the Christian community – accusations of syncretism, relativism, or theological compromise. But the alternative – isolation, insularity, or triumphalism – risks betraying the gospel's call to love the neighbor and welcome the stranger. As such, public theology must cultivate both internal formation and external presence. Internally, this means preparing Christians to engage confidently and charitably with difference. Externally, it means building institutional partnerships, shared platforms, and dialogical spaces where real listening and collaboration can occur. To be clear, this model does not suggest that religious differences can or should be erased. Nor does it imply that interfaith engagement is always easy or unproblematic. Rather, it affirms that difference, when engaged through practices of dialogue, hospitality, and shared action, can become a source of civic strength rather than fragmentation. In an era where identity politics threatens to pit religious communities against one another, such a vision is both countercultural and deeply needed.

In conclusion, the model of Christianity in pluralistic encounter adds a vital dimension to the pursuit of a cohesive European identity. Where the cultural heritage model offers memory, and the moral framework model offers ethical substance, the encounter model offers relationship. It challenges Christians to move beyond proclamation into presence, beyond symbolic continuity into lived solidarity. In doing so, it reveals that the most credible public witness of Christianity today may lie not in reclaiming past authority, but in practicing relational humility, cultivating shared trust, and standing in prophetic solidarity with the marginalized. In Europe's fragmented and plural landscape, such an embodied, dialogical Christianity may well be one of the most powerful forces for cohesion yet untapped.

Toward a Constructive Theology for a Cohesive European Identity

Having explored three complementary models – Christianity as cultural heritage, as moral framework, and in pluralistic encounter – we now turn to the integrative task of theological construction. If public theology is to contribute meaningfully to European cohesion, it must go beyond the analysis of past legacies and the interpretation of present possibilities; it must also articulate a constructive vision for the future. Such a vision requires holding together memory, ethics, and encounter within a theological framework that is both contextually grounded and eschatologically oriented. It occurs to me that such theological construction should include at least the following seven tasks – presented here in a chronological sequence, but, due to their synergistic nature, best understood as working simultaneously, in unison, to foster a coherent theological development.

First, a constructive theology for a cohesive European identity must affirm Christianity's unique capacity to weave together tradition and transformation. This capacity lies not in reclaiming institutional dominance, but in reimagining Christian presence as a humble yet confident contribution to the common good. Gregory Jones (2016, pp. 49-84) describes this dynamic as "traditioned innovation" – the convictional practice of drawing on the wisdom of the past in order to faithfully improvise in response to the challenges of the present and the future. Rather than choosing between preservation and progress, traditioned innovation holds them in creative tension, allowing the Christian tradition to remain vital, adaptive, and responsive. This improvisational fidelity to tradition also has relational consequences. To engage a plural and fractured Europe, traditioned innovation must be expressed not only in institutional or doctrinal flexibility, but also in relational generosity. Here, Miroslav Volf (1996) offers a crucial

complement with his theology of embrace – an orientation that resists defining identity in opposition to others and instead opens space for reciprocal recognition (see also Oprean, 2019, pp. 9-10). Such openness is not theological relativism, but a posture rooted in deep trust in the Spirit's presence and in the gospel's power to engage difference without coercion. In this way, a traditioned and improvisational Christianity does not merely conserve or adapt; it anticipates and invites. It cultivates a public presence that is neither nostalgic nor reactionary, but constructive – rooted in the memory of faith and open to the Spirit's unfolding future. For a Europe marked by fragmentation, disillusionment, and contestation, this kind of theological imagination may offer not only relevance, but renewal.

Second, constructive public theology must also be unapologetically political – in the Aristotelian sense of being concerned with the *polis*, with the flourishing of life together, in a community oriented toward the common good (cf. Măcelaru, 2014c). However, this politicization must be qualitatively distinct from ideological co-optation or partisanship. The church's public engagement is not about seizing or preserving power, but about forming conscience, resisting injustice, and nurturing democratic practices of deliberation, accountability, and solidarity (see Stackhouse, 2007, pp. 77-116; Forrester, 2004, pp. 49-94). In this sense, theology becomes an imaginative resource for civic resilience – articulating a vision of the good that is morally serious, spiritually deep, and publicly legible. This theological task is not merely doctrinal but practical. It must attend to the embodied, local, and material dimensions of European life. As Kathryn Tanner (2002) has argued, theology must take seriously its social location, addressing concrete injustices such as systemic racism, ecological collapse, and economic inequality. In contemporary Europe, this means confronting the moral implications of border regimes, surveillance policies, and rising populist rhetoric. Rooted in a theological anthropology that affirms the *imago Dei*, public theology insists that every political structure be measured by its capacity to uphold dignity and justice. Drawing from the biblical traditions of prophetic justice, Jubilee economics, and the preferential option for the poor, constructive theology will not bypass these realities but will engage them critically – refusing the comfort of neutrality in the face of suffering.

Third, constructive theology must be ecumenical and dialogical. The fragmentation of the European religious landscape – between East and West, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and non-Christian – demands a theology that is both confessional and collaborative. Ecumenical and interfaith engagement is not optional in today's Europe; it is a theological imperative rooted in the nature of the Church as a reconciled and reconciling community. The ecumenical vision articulated in the *Charta Oecumenica* (CEC-CCEE, 2001) provides a helpful model: a covenant to work together across doctrinal lines for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. Likewise, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (WCC, 2013) affirms that the unity of the Church serves the unity of humankind and calls Christian communities to witness together to justice and peace. This theological cooperation is not a lowest-common-denominator consensus, but a commitment to relational fidelity amid diversity. It is not about structural mergers or abstract unity, but about a shared commitment to the well-being of others in a fractured world. This means holding both theological conviction and moral responsibility in creative tension. It affirms that different Christian traditions – and indeed other faiths – can contribute to the common good while retaining doctrinal integrity. In this regard, interreligious dialogue also plays a crucial role in the process. According to Yong (2008), such dialogical openness is not a betrayal of Christian identity but a genuine act of Spirit-empowered fidelity, whereby Christian witness is deepened – not diluted – through dialogical engagement with religious others who are also made in the image of God and who may bear traces of the Spirit's work (Yong 2008, pp. 65-98). Far from compromising the distinctiveness of Christ, such engagement seeks to discern the Spirit's movement across boundaries. Thus, an authentic ecumenical and dialogical stance affirms that theological depth and dialogical generosity can coexist, allowing divergent Christian and even non-Christian traditions to learn from one another without surrendering core convictions. This insight is vital for

a European context marked by religious pluralism and rising suspicion of difference. It follows, then, that constructive public theology that seeks to foster European cohesion must recover and deepen its ecumenical and dialogical commitments – not as a strategy of accommodation, but as a theological practice of love, humility, and hope. Only by standing together in mutual respect and shared civic responsibility can diverse religious communities model the kind of plural solidarity Europe so urgently needs.

Fourth, a constructive theology for European cohesion must be consciously post-Christendom. It cannot rely on assumptions of cultural privilege or indulge in nostalgic appeals to a bygone Christian Europe. The future of Christianity lies not in its institutional legacy but in its capacity to indwell new cultural spaces with humility and creativity (Măcelaru 2014a). In this light, the European church is called not to dominate public space but to inhabit it prophetically: speaking truth to power, embodying reconciliation, and building bridges across lines of difference. This posture aligns with what Hunter (2010, pp. 197-286) calls "faithful presence" – a vision of Christian engagement that resists both political withdrawal and cultural conquest. Rather than striving for hegemony, faithful presence calls the church to cultivate practices of integrity, hospitality, and service within the everyday institutions of civil life. It echoes the incarnational shape of the gospel itself: power through presence, and love through vulnerability (Philippians 2:5–11). This form of public theology seeks influence not through dominance, but through witness: through communities that live out alternative patterns of belonging, care, and reconciliation. It recognizes that in post-Christendom Europe, the credibility of Christianity lies not in its capacity to command, but in its willingness to serve – to be present with and for others, especially the vulnerable. In this sense, faithful presence is not a retreat but a deeply missional vocation: a quiet, enduring participation in the Spirit's work of healing, justice, and hope.

Fifth, building on dialogical engagement and prophetic presence, constructive theology must also be eschatological in orientation. It must resist the temptation to seek cohesion through uniformity or to settle for the mere maintenance of order. True cohesion arises not from suppressing difference but from enacting a foretaste of the reconciled community of the Kingdom. As Jürgen Moltmann (1993, pp. 192-201) has shown, eschatology is not escapism; it is the horizon of justice and hope from which Christian action draws its courage and direction. A public theology rooted in this eschatological vision will confront the powers, dream new dreams, and endure disappointment without losing heart. Eschatology, in this sense, becomes a posture of hope akin to what Katongole (2017, pp. 3-40) describes as the ongoing, sacrificial involvement in the work of reconciling divided communities, tending to the wounded, and imagining a shared future beyond enmity. For Europe, this may include the long work of healing colonial legacies, integrating migrants with dignity, and building institutions that reflect genuine pluralism rather than token inclusion or superficial tolerance. It may also involve reimagining forms of citizenship, belonging, and solidarity in ways that resist both the technocratic reduction of identity and the ethnonationalist distortion of religion. In this light, even liturgical practices and acts of public witness become anticipatory signs – rehearsals of the Kingdom's justice, reconciliation, and joy. As James K.A. Smith (2009) argues, liturgies are not just expressions of belief but formative practices that shape what we love. They orient the worshiping body toward an alternative social imaginary, cultivating habits of desire and imagination that resist the dominant liturgies of consumerism, nationalism, or fear. In this sense, the church's gathered worship trains believers to anticipate and embody the coming Kingdom – not only in creeds but in posture, action, and affection. Similarly, Schmemann (2018) insists that liturgy is inherently eschatological: it reveals the world as sacrament and the Eucharist as the "banquet of the Kingdom," calling the church to live as a proleptic community of joy, justice, and reconciliation. As such, public acts of Christian witness – whether in interfaith vigils, climate justice marches, or sanctuary for the marginalized – can be seen as extensions of the liturgy into the *polis*. They become acts of justice that reflect the liturgy's *telos* in the real world (cf. Wolterstorff, 2011). Such practices resist resignation and enact

hope. In a European context marked by disillusionment and fragmentation, they are not peripheral or decorative; they are missional and prophetic, dramatizing the belief that another world is not only imaginable but already breaking in.

Sixth, in practical terms, this constructive theology must animate the life of Christian institutions: shaping curricula, liturgies, charitable practices, and public discourse. Theology cannot remain abstract; it must be enfleshed in the rhythms and structures of Christian community. Seminaries, therefore, must train leaders to do more than merely proclaim doctrine; they must equip them to navigate pluralistic public spaces with theological depth, cultural intelligence, and dialogical skill. This requires pedagogies that integrate contextual theology, interfaith literacy, and civic engagement alongside traditional theological disciplines. Formation must involve not only Scripture and tradition, but also the practices of listening, lament, discernment, and public reasoning. As Elaine Graham (2017, pp. 124-150) argues, such education must prepare Christians not merely to speak *to* the world, but to act *within* it – understanding the signs of the times and equipped to engage the complex moral landscapes of secular and multi-faith societies. Churches, likewise, must cultivate practices that reflect this vision: habits of hospitality that move beyond charity toward solidarity; liturgies that remember not only the Church's story but also the sufferings and hopes of the wider world; preaching that connects biblical imagination with ethical and civic responsibility. As James K.A. Smith (2016) notes, Christian practices shape not only what we think but what we love. Worship, then, becomes a space where public hope is rehearsed, where the social imagination is reformed, and where believers are formed as citizens of both the Kingdom of God and the civic communities they inhabit. Advocacy networks and Christian NGOs must, too, ground their work in theological visions of justice and reconciliation. Their public presence should not be driven solely by pragmatic response, but by a witness to distinctive moral commitments – especially to the poor, the displaced, and the marginalized. This demands long-term investment in coalition-building, prophetic critique of unjust policies, and public speech characterized by courage and humility. As Luke Bretherton (2010, pp. 31-70) suggests, Christian institutions can educate for democratic life (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 190-196), as they cultivate the habits of patience, mutual recognition, and deliberative engagement that pluralistic societies require. Ultimately, this institutional task is about formation for public discipleship – not in the sense of training Christians to dominate the public sphere, but to serve it faithfully and prophetically. In a world where suspicion and fragmentation have become the norm, the credibility of Christian public theology will depend largely on the quality of its communities: whether they form people who embody justice with joy, truth with humility, and faith with courage.

Seventh, following from the above, a constructive theology must attend to affect and imagination as formative forces. James K.A. Smith (2009, pp. 37-48) has convincingly argued that human beings are not only rational agents, but "desiring creatures" shaped by the liturgies of the heart – stories, rituals, and practices that form our loves and direct our vision of the good. Public theology that seeks to foster cohesion in Europe must therefore engage not only reason but the imagination; it must form desires and affections in ways that align with the justice, mercy, and reconciliation of the Kingdom of God. This means that theological formation for cohesion must actively shape *what we love* and *how we imagine life together*. Christian liturgies, communal stories, public witness, and the arts – music, poetry, iconography, architecture – are not decorative extras but essential practices for shaping identity, belonging, and civic virtue. As such, they can become anticipatory signs – rehearsals of the Kingdom's justice, reconciliation, and joy. The Church, in this regard, performs an act of imagination as it discovers what it might mean to belong to a humanity healed by God's grace. In fragmented and polarized societies, these imaginative resources become more important, not less. Europe today suffers not only from institutional erosion or political mistrust, but from a crisis of meaning and imagination. The rise of cynicism, nostalgia, and fear is not simply a political phenomenon, but a symptom of narrative

loss. In such a context, Christianity can offer not just critique, but creative repair: stories of grace amidst violence, forgiveness amidst revenge, and belonging amidst alienation. Christian imagination, therefore, must resist domination and exclusion by re-narrating our life together as grounded in mutual dependence, care, and vulnerability. As Jennings (2010, p. 4) put it, "there is within Christianity a breathtakingly powerful way to imagine and enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging." Such narratives, therefore, can become a vehicle for reweaving the social fabric and re-enchanting the public square. Constructive theology for European cohesion *must* narrate Europe differently: it must refuse to cede imagination to fear, and instead cultivate a public grammar shaped by lament and longing, memory and hope. Christianity has long known how to tell stories that hold suffering and hope together. Now is the time to recover that vocation – offering Europe not just arguments, but *visions* worth living toward.

In sum, the constructive task is clear: to articulate a public theology that affirms Christian memory without nostalgia, offers ethical clarity without coercion, and practices encounter without fear. This is no small undertaking. But it is one deeply consonant with the gospel and urgently needed in the current European moment. Such a theology will not solve all of Europe's challenges. But it can equip communities to live into their highest callings: to love the stranger, seek the common good, and witness to the possibility of peace in a fractured world. It dares to imagine a future where justice and mercy meet, and where the church, in all its diversity, serves as a sign of reconciliation and hope.

Conclusion: Public Theology for a Fragmented Europe

This paper began by asking whether Christianity, reframed through a constructive public theology, can still contribute meaningfully to the search for a cohesive European identity. In response, it offered both diagnosis and proposal. Through the analysis of three models – Christianity as cultural heritage, as moral framework, and in pluralistic encounter – I argued that religion, when disentangled from nostalgia and exclusion, can serve as a symbolic, ethical, and relational resource for Europe's plural future. These models highlighted both the promise and the peril of Christianity's public presence: its capacity to provide shared memory, moral vocabulary, and civic solidarity, but also its vulnerability to ideological misuse.

Building on this analysis, in the final section I advanced a constructive theological proposal, offering seven interwoven tasks: (1) retrieving tradition through innovation; (2) engaging politics prophetically; (3) cultivating ecumenical and interfaith solidarity; (4) embracing post-Christendom humility; (5) practicing eschatological hope; (6) forming institutions for public discipleship; and (7) shaping the imagination through practices of worship, storytelling, and public presence. Together, these trajectories point toward a public theology that is rooted in memory, alive to ethical complexity, and animated by dialogical and imaginative engagement.

Such a vision does not seek to reestablish Christendom, but to renew Christianity's vocation in a democratic, plural, and post-secular Europe. It dares to imagine the Church not as a relic of the past, nor a fortress of identity, but as a community of reconciliation and hope – one that trains citizens for love of neighbor, nurtures solidarity across deep difference, and participates in the Spirit's work of healing the wounds of history. In a continent marked by political fragmentation, cultural anxiety, and moral fatigue, this is no small ambition. But it is one consonant with the gospel and crucial to Europe's democratic future. Constructive public theology, then, must not retreat from this task. It must embody the memory of faith without nostalgia, speak moral truth without coercion, and practice encounter without fear. In doing so, it can become more than discourse – it can become a sign of the very cohesion it seeks to cultivate: a Europe gathered not by power, but by promise; not by uniformity, but by a shared longing for justice, mercy, and peace.

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