

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Addresses Religious Liberty, Human Rights, and the Environment at Oxford

On September 17, 2026, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew delivered a lecture at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford, at the invitation of the Centre for Law and Religion at Regent's Park College. His address, titled **"Religious Liberty in Contested Ecosystems: Law, Religion and Foreign Policy in a New International Order,"** explored the relationship between religious freedom, human rights, international affairs, and care for the natural environment.

Drawing on the Orthodox understanding of law, the Ecumenical Patriarch emphasized that law should serve human dignity, freedom, and communion rather than become an instrument of control or power. He also highlighted the important role religious communities can play in addressing questions of freedom, justice, and peace, particularly in an increasingly divided world.

A central theme of the address was the responsibility of faith communities to engage constructively with public policy. Patriarch Bartholomew called for religious engagement that is informative rather than performative, emphasizing the importance of religious literacy and meaningful contributions from faith actors to domestic and international policy discussions. He also warned against the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes and stressed that religious freedom must be defended for all people and communities.

The Ecumenical Patriarch further connected religious liberty with human rights and the dignity of the person. Drawing on Orthodox concepts of personhood and communion, he argued that human dignity and freedom are strengthened when understood alongside responsibility for one's neighbor and the wider community. He also highlighted the importance of protecting vulnerable religious minorities, including Christian communities in the Middle East.

The address concluded by returning to the theme of the environment. Patriarch Bartholomew connected ecological responsibility with human rights, peace, and global solidarity, emphasizing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable communities. He called for cooperation among scientists, theologians, policymakers, and civil society, and encouraged a movement from crisis to "kairos"—an opportunity for reflection, responsibility, and meaningful change.

The lecture reflected a central theme of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's work: that faith communities have an important role to play in building bridges across religious, cultural, and political boundaries and contributing to a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.