

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Addresses Religious Liberty and the Role of Faith in Public Life 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, "**Religious Liberty in Contested Ecosystems: Law, Religion and Foreign Policy in a New International Order**," explored the relationship between law, religious freedom, faith communities, international policy, and responsibility for the natural environment.

Using the concept of an "**ecosystem**" as a central theme, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew drew a connection between the natural environment and the civic and legal environments in which people live. He described both as interconnected systems in which the well-being of each part depends upon the health of the whole. In this context, he emphasized that neither the earth nor one's neighbor should be understood simply as possessions to be managed, but as gifts that call for freedom, responsibility, and care.

The Patriarch also reflected on the purpose of law, emphasizing that law should serve human persons and protect relationships within society rather than function solely as an instrument of control or power. He connected this understanding to the Orthodox concept of *koinonia*, or communion, and highlighted the importance of approaching legal and social questions with attention to human dignity and the common good.

A significant portion of the lecture addressed the changing role of religious communities in Europe and beyond. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew discussed the challenges of navigating religious plurality, including both the marginalization of religious belief from public life and the close identification of religion with national identity. He argued that both approaches can undermine religious freedom and the ability of diverse communities to contribute meaningfully to society.

The lecture also examined the relationship between **religion and foreign policy**, particularly the dangers of using religious identity to advance political or national interests. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew spoke against the instrumentalization of religion in conflict and emphasized the importance of religious literacy among policymakers. He further called for faith actors to engage in domestic and international policy discussions in ways that are informative and constructive rather than performative.

Another central theme was the relationship between **faith and human rights**. Rather than positioning religious traditions and human rights as competing frameworks, the Patriarch suggested that Orthodox Christian thought can contribute to contemporary human-rights discussions through its understanding of the human person as existing in relationship with

others. He emphasized that individual freedom and dignity are accompanied by responsibility toward one's neighbor and the wider community.

Throughout the address, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew returned to the importance of dialogue, cooperation, and solidarity. He presented religious communities as important contributors to conversations surrounding freedom, justice, peace, human rights, and environmental responsibility. In an increasingly interconnected and divided world, he emphasized the need to build bridges across religious, cultural, and political boundaries while protecting the freedom and dignity of every person.

The lecture reflects the broader role of interfaith engagement in addressing contemporary global challenges: bringing the perspectives, experience, and moral resources of faith communities into constructive dialogue with policymakers, scholars, and civil society.

Based on the lecture “Religious Liberty in Contested Ecosystems: Law, Religion and Foreign Policy in a New International Order,” delivered by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, September 17, 2026, and published by the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

[Read the full lecture on the Ecumenical Patriarchate website](#)