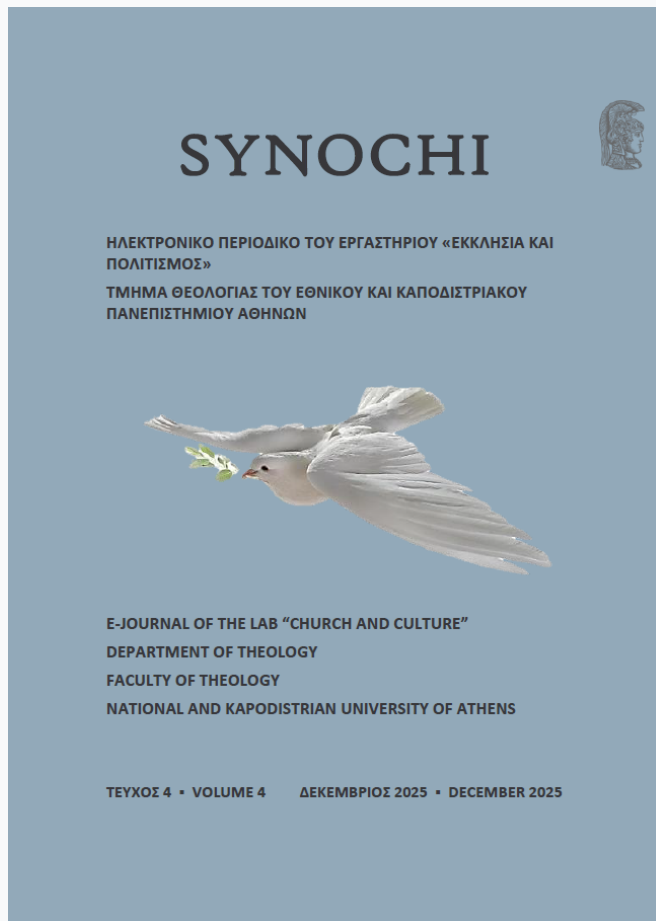


Synochi

Vol 4 (2025)



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Christos Nasios

doi: [10.12681/syn.44422](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.44422)

To cite this article:

Nasios, C. (2026). Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and interreligious dialogue: : preliminary notes on a lived theology of encounter . *Synochi*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.44422>

SYNOCHI



ΗΛΕΚΤΡΟΝΙΚΟ ΠΕΡΙΟΔΙΚΟ ΤΟΥ ΕΡΓΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΥ «ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ ΚΑΙ
ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΣ»

ΤΜΗΜΑ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑΣ ΤΟΥ ΕΘΝΙΚΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΠΟΔΙΣΤΡΙΑΚΟΥ
ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟΥ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ



E-JOURNAL OF THE LAB "CHURCH AND CULTURE"

DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY

NATIONAL AND KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS

ΤΕΥΧΟΣ 4 ▪ VOLUME 4

ΔΕΚΕΜΒΡΙΟΣ 2025 ▪ DECEMBER 2025

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and interreligious dialogue: preliminary notes on a lived theology of encounter

Christos Nasios²²⁴

Abstract

This article examines the contribution of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to interreligious dialogue through the interpretative lens of a lived theology of encounter. Drawing on selected speeches, statements, and symbolic initiatives, it argues that the Patriarch's engagement with religious otherness is not primarily articulated at the level of abstract theory but is enacted through practices of presence, hospitality, and shared ethical responsibility. Situated within Orthodox Christian theology and ecclesiology, this approach resists both doctrinal relativism and confessional isolation, affirming dialogue as an expression of faithful witness rather than theological compromise. Particular attention is given to Bartholomew's recent proposal of a *Common Sacred Worldview* and the joint declaration with Pope Leo XIV that echoes the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*.

Taken together, these references illuminate a convergence in ethical posture and dialogical orientation while preserving distinct theological premises. The article concludes that Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's contribution lies in articulating an embodied and relational model of interreligious engagement—one that remains faithful to Orthodox tradition while addressing the demands of religious pluralism in the contemporary world.

Keywords

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; interreligious dialogue; lived theology; theology of encounter; Orthodox Christianity; Common Sacred Worldview; Nostra Aetate; religious pluralism.

1. Introduction

²²⁴Dr. Theology, Scientific Associate at The Interorthodox Centre of the Church of Greece.

In an increasingly plural and interconnected world, interreligious dialogue has emerged as a pressing theological and ethical challenge for religious communities. Processes of globalisation, migration, and geopolitical conflict have intensified encounters between adherents of different faiths, rendering questions of coexistence, mutual understanding, and cooperation both unavoidable and urgent. Within this context, religious leadership is called not only to articulate doctrinal positions but also to model forms of engagement that foster peace, respect, and shared responsibility.

Having followed over the years the consistent contribution of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to interreligious dialogue, this article represents an initial attempt to approach his engagement through the interpretative lens of a lived theology of encounter. Since his election in 1991, Bartholomew has firmly positioned the Ecumenical Patriarchate as an active participant in interreligious initiatives, engaging with Jewish, Muslim, and other religious leaders on issues such as peace-building, human dignity, and care for creation²²⁵. Widely recognised for his contributions to ecumenism and environmental ethics, he has framed interreligious dialogue not as an optional or marginal activity, but as a moral and spiritual imperative of Christian witness.

Despite the growing scholarly attention devoted to his ecological vision, Patriarch Bartholomew's contribution to interreligious dialogue has often been treated in a fragmented or primarily descriptive manner. Less attention has been given to the theological logic that undergirds his sustained engagement with religious otherness and to the ways in which this engagement is enacted in practice. This article addresses this gap by interpreting his interreligious activity through the lens of a lived theology of encounter.

In this context, the term refers to a mode of theological expression disclosed through relationships, gestures, and shared commitments, rather than through systematic doctrinal articulation alone. Applied to interreligious dialogue, this framework enables an analysis that takes seriously

²²⁵ “The Ecumenical Patriarchate long ago established an Interreligious Dialogue with the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam. In the preparation process for the Holy and Great Council, the First Pre-Conciliar Pan Orthodox Conference (1976) expressed its desire to collaborate in a spirit of mutual understanding with other religions in order to wipe out religious fanaticism and establish religious understanding. This was affirmed in the Declaration of the Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference (Chambésy, 1986) on The contribution of the local Orthodox Churches to the realization of peace, justice, freedom, fraternity and love between nations, and the removal of racial and other discriminations”, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Religion, Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East,” address delivered in Athens, October 19, 2015, <https://ec-patr.org/en/religion-cultural-pluralism-and-peaceful-coexistence-in-the/>

both theological integrity and ethical responsibility, without reducing dialogue to either abstract theory or pragmatic diplomacy.

Accordingly, the article pursues two aims. First, it situates Patriarch Bartholomew's interreligious engagement within the broader contours of Orthodox Christian thought. Second, it examines selected texts and initiatives in order to demonstrate how his approach exemplifies an embodied and relational theology of encounter. In doing so, the article argues that Bartholomew offers a distinctive model of interreligious engagement—one that remains faithful to Orthodox tradition while responding constructively to the realities of contemporary religious pluralism.

2. Methodological and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodology, combining close textual analysis with theological reflection. Its primary sources include selected speeches, public statements, joint declarations, and symbolic initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew that explicitly address or presuppose interreligious encounter. These materials are analysed not as isolated texts but as expressions of a coherent theological posture enacted over time.

The theoretical framework is shaped by the concept of a *lived theology of encounter*, employed here as an analytical lens rather than as a term used by the Patriarch himself. Although Bartholomew does not explicitly adopt this language, his understanding of interreligious dialogue as a relational, ethical, and publicly embodied practice corresponds closely to contemporary accounts of theology as lived and enacted²²⁶. This framework allows his interreligious engagement to be interpreted as a coherent theological orientation expressed through action, moral witness, and pastoral presence.

Drawing on insights from practical theology, Orthodox ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, the concept of lived theology emphasises the inseparability of belief, practice, and relationality. Instead of privileging systematic formulations alone, it attends to the ways theological meaning is generated and communicated through concrete actions, gestures, and forms of presence. From

²²⁶ Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, "Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2 (2020): 157–176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1759897>, Nancy T. Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of Its Contours and Frontiers," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29, no. 2 (2016): 83–99.

an Orthodox perspective, this approach resonates with longstanding emphases on the experiential and relational dimensions of truth, grounded in liturgical life and communion.

Methodologically, the analysis proceeds inductively. Instead of imposing a predefined theory of interreligious dialogue, it traces recurring themes and theological intuitions across the Patriarch’s discourse and practice, with particular attention to encounter, hospitality, humility, and shared ethical concern. These elements are then brought into dialogue with broader theological discussions within Orthodox Christianity and interreligious studies.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that this study does not claim exhaustiveness. The designation “preliminary notes” signals both methodological modesty and analytical openness. The intention is not to offer a definitive interpretation of Bartholomew’s theology of interreligious dialogue, but to provide an initial mapping that may serve as a foundation for more extensive and systematic research. Such an approach is particularly appropriate given the evolving and context-dependent nature of interreligious involvement.

3. Interreligious Dialogue in Orthodox Christian Thought and the Witness of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Interreligious dialogue, understood as a response to the concrete challenges arising from Christian coexistence with adherents of other faiths, has long formed part of the historical experience of the Orthodox Church. From its earliest centuries, Orthodoxy entered into sustained encounters with Hellenism, Judaism and later Islam, even when these exchanges were expressed primarily through apologetic or polemical literary forms. Following the Arab and Ottoman conquests, prolonged coexistence with Muslim communities rendered engagement with religious otherness an unavoidable reality for Orthodox Christians²²⁷.

Prominent Fathers and theologians—among them John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas, and Joseph Vryennios—as well as Byzantine emperors such as Manuel II Palaiologos, pursued

²²⁷ See, for example, Χρήστος Τσιρούδης, *Το Ορθόδοξο Κέντρο του Οικουμενικού Πατριαρχείου στο Σαμπεζύ της Γενεύης. Η συμβολή του στον Διορθόδοξο, Διαχριστιανικό και Διαθρησκευτικό Διάλογο*, [The Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy. It’s contribution to the Inter-Orthodox, Inter-Christian and Interreligious Dialogue] (Αθήνα: Ελίκρανον, 2025), Georgios D. Martzelos, “Orthodoxy and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *Εκκλησία-Οικουμένη- Πολιτική: Χαριστήρια στον Μητροπολίτη Αδριανουπόλεως Δαμασκηνό* (Αθήνα: Αποστολική Διακονία, 2007), 437–444.

significant exchanges with Islam in response to the theological, cultural, and political challenges they faced²²⁸. These encounters, while often shaped by controversy, nevertheless testify to a sustained Orthodox engagement with religious otherness across centuries.

Beyond formal theological exchanges, Orthodox communities have historically developed practical modes of coexistence shaped by everyday life, mutual accommodation, and shared social space. Although these experiences were not always articulated in systematic theological terms, they fostered an implicit ethos of engagement rooted in lived practice. This historical background continues to shape contemporary Orthodox attitudes toward religious plurality.

At the theological level, Orthodox anthropology provides a foundational basis for encounter. The human person, created in the image and likeness of God, is understood relationally—as existence-in-communion rather than isolated individuality²²⁹. This relational ontology allows the religious other to be approached not primarily as a doctrinal problem, but as a person bearing inherent dignity. Dialogue, in this sense, is rooted in anthropology before it becomes an explicit theological method.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has, in the modern period, firmly promoted interreligious dialogue as a cornerstone of efforts to foster peace and reconciliation among the world’s major religious traditions, enabling them to respond collaboratively to contemporary and emerging global challenges. This commitment had already taken institutional form decades earlier through official academic dialogues: with Judaism in 1977 and with Islam in 1986. Since that time, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has repeatedly reaffirmed its steadfast support for constructive interreligious dialogue as a vital means of promoting mutual understanding, sincere cooperation, and practical solidarity within increasingly pluralistic societies²³⁰.

²²⁸ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, in *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., Fathers of the Church 37 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 153-160, Manuel II Palaeologus, *Dialogue mit einem “Perser”*, ed. E. Trapp (Vienna 1966), Gregory Palamas. The Hesychast Controversy and the Debate with Islam. Documents Relating to Gregory Palamas. Transl. and introd. by N. Russel (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2020), Daniel J. Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam: Collected Studies on Byzantine-Muslim Encounters*, (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2022).

²²⁹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 27–65, Kallistos Ware, “The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity,” *Sobornost* 8, no. 2 (1986): 6–23, Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 48–50.

²³⁰ See, *In the World, Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, edited and by J. Chrysavgis, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, 81-83.

It is within this broader Orthodox context that the interreligious engagement of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew must be situated. From the beginning of his patriarchate, dialogue with representatives of other religious traditions has constituted a consistent and visible dimension of his ecclesial leadership. His approach is marked by a clear distinction between dialogue and doctrinal negotiation: dialogue does not aim at theological compromise or syncretism, but presupposes theological clarity and confessional integrity²³¹. He repeatedly emphasises that dialogue does not aim at theological synthesis or the suspension of confessional identity, but at the cultivation of relationships grounded in respect, listening, and shared responsibility²³².

His participation in interfaith encounters is frequently expressed through symbolic gestures, shared presence, and joint public statements addressing common global challenges, particularly violence, exclusion, and ecological crisis²³³. Particular importance is accorded to the ethical dimensions of interreligious engagement. Patriarch Bartholomew repeatedly frames dialogue as a moral imperative in a world marked by violence, exclusion, and ecological crisis. His insistence that religion must never legitimise violence, and that faith communities bear responsibility for fostering peace, situates interreligious dialogue within a broader framework of public and moral theology²³⁴.

These actions function not merely as diplomatic initiatives but as theological expressions, articulating a vision of coexistence grounded in personal encounter and moral responsibility. His attentiveness to historical memory—especially in encounters with Jewish and Muslim leaders—further underscores the ethical seriousness of dialogue and the need for healing and trust.

²³¹ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “The Imperative of Interreligious Dialogue,” address to the Plenary Assembly of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, January 22, 2007, in *In the World, Yet Not of the World*, 253–255.

²³² Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Contradictions and Prerequisites of Interreligious Dialogue,” keynote address at the Meeting of the World Council of Religions for Peace, Constantinople, July 29, 2025, <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>

²³³ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 173-177.

²³⁴ “Unfortunately, the ongoing outburst of religious fundamentalism and the terrible acts of violence in the name of religion provide additional arguments against faith to the modern critiques of religion, and support the identification of religion with its negative aspects. The truth is that violence is the negation of fundamental religious beliefs and doctrine”, address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, December 6, 2017, <https://ec-patr.org/en/address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-15/>

Taken together, these elements suggest that Orthodox interreligious dialogue, as exemplified in the witness of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, is best understood not as a departure from tradition but as a dynamic mode of faithful engagement shaped by anthropology, ecclesiology, and historical experience. This approach does not seek to resolve all theological questions concerning the religious other at a systematic level; instead, it foregrounds practice, presence, and responsibility as sites of theological meaning. In this sense, interreligious dialogue emerges as a lived theology of encounter—one in which theology is enacted through relationship and shared witness in the world.

This brief overview does not aim to exhaust the Orthodox theological background of interreligious dialogue, but rather to sketch the horizon within which Bartholomew's own approach becomes intelligible.

4. Core Themes of a Lived Theology of Encounter

As previously noted, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's contribution to interreligious dialogue is articulated less through systematic theological exposition than through a sustained pattern of public discourse and symbolic action. Across a wide range of interreligious contexts, his language reveals a coherent theological orientation that can be described as a lived theology of encounter. This section analyses core themes that recur consistently in his addresses and statements, illustrating each with representative primary sources.

4.1 The Anthropological Foundations of Interreligious Dialogue

The theological significance of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's engagement in interreligious dialogue emerges most clearly through a focused examination of his key texts and public statements. They articulate a coherent vision through recurring anthropological and ethical motifs and disclose an understanding of dialogue that operates not primarily at the level of abstract theory, but as a lived theology—one embodied in relational engagement, moral responsibility, and public witness.

According to Patriarch Bartholomew, dialogue is an evangelical obligation and not an optional choice. It is not only for theologians, but a Christian duty inscribed in the heart of our calling as

baptised persons. For how can we claim to love God, whom we do not see, if we do not love our brothers and sisters, whom we do see?²³⁵ Encounter and dialogue demand commitment at personal and communal levels, as all dialogue is inherently personal, involving unique individuals shaped by their distinct social, cultural, and religious identities. Opposition often stems from fear, ignorance, or intolerance of diversity, whereas authentic interreligious dialogue honors differences, fosters peaceful coexistence, and enriches one's faith through openness—without denial—while healing prejudices and aiding mutual understanding and conflict resolution²³⁶.

A central and persistent theme in Patriarch Bartholomew's discourse is the affirmation of human dignity as the common ground for interreligious engagement. In multiple addresses, he underscores that dialogue begins not with abstract theological comparison but with the recognition of the other as a person created by God. As he has stated, every human person, regardless of religious affiliation, bears the imprint of divine dignity and therefore deserves respect, protection, and love²³⁷. Following the model of the Holy Trinity's three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—humanity is summoned to relational existence with one another, united through love's bond while remaining distinct and unique individuals, each graced with particular gifts and traits, and all fashioned in God's image and likeness²³⁸. This anthropological foundation anchors dialogue in shared humanity while avoiding doctrinal reductionism.

Closely related to this is the Patriarch's insistence that dialogue is an ethical responsibility and not an optional ecclesial activity. Speaking in the context of interfaith peace initiatives, he affirms that Interreligious dialogue dispels fear and suspicion, serving as central to peace when rooted in

²³⁵ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Μην φοβάστε τον πλησίον σας, ακόμα κι αν προσεύχεται διαφορετικά, αν κατανοεί τον Θεό διαφορετικά” [“Do not fear your neighbor, even if he prays differently, if he understands God differently”] <https://ec-patr.org/oikoymenikos-patriarchis-min-fovast/>

²³⁶ “Remarks by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence”, November 3–5, 2022, <https://ec-patr.org/remarks-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-bahrain-forum-for-dialogue-east-and-west-for-human-coexistence-november-3-5-2022/>

²³⁷ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Address at the 2nd International Conference of Athens for Religious and Cultural Pluralism and for Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East, Athens, October 29–31, 2017, <https://ec-patr.org/en/address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-29/>

²³⁸ “Following the example of the three persons of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—all human beings are called to exist relationally to one another, united in the bond of love, as different and unique persons, each endowed with specific talents and characteristics, each created in the image and likeness of God. All human beings—regardless of religion, race, national origin, color, creed, or gender—are living icons of God, innately worthy of such respect and dignity. Whenever human beings fail to treat others with this respect, they insult God, the Creator, as is explained through the teachings of the Christian Scriptures”, Address at Durban World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, March 3, 2015, <https://ec-patr.org/en/un-durban-world-conference-against-racism-racial-discrimination/>

mutual confidence and respect²³⁹. Dialogue, in this sense, is framed as a response to concrete historical realities, not as an abstract theological exercise. This ethical urgency situates interreligious encounter within the broader horizon of Christian responsibility for the world.

4.2 Dialogue as lived experience

A foundational element of Bartholomew's understanding of interreligious dialogue is his insistence that dialogue must be rooted in lived encounter rather than abstract negotiation or doctrinal bargaining. Dialogue is not framed as a technical process aimed at theological convergence, but as a way of life grounded in presence, listening, and mutual recognition.

According to Patriarch Bartholomew, participating in dialogues with Muslims or Jews aims not to convert them to our faith—that would smack of arrogance and prejudice, undermining the purpose of genuine encounter²⁴⁰. In this context Bartholomew has repeatedly emphasised that dialogue is not a matter of negotiating beliefs, but of learning how to live together in truth and respect. Elsewhere, he stresses that the purpose is to continue the constructive dialogues which benefit the world, teaching our people tolerance, which is ultimately based on respect for the sanctity and rights of individual human beings²⁴¹.

His understanding of dialogue is deepened in his more recent keynote address at the meeting of the World Council of Religions for Peace (2025), where Bartholomew situates interreligious dialogue within a broader critique of the dominant materialistic worldview. He argues that contemporary societies increasingly reduce human existence to its material dimension, systematically excluding reference to the Sacred, thereby eroding the foundations of meaningful human encounter²⁴².

²³⁹ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Religion and Peace*, address at the Al-Azhar and Muslim Council of Elders' Global Peace Conference, 8 April 2017, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/religions-and-peace-address-of-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew>

²⁴⁰ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery*, 183.

²⁴¹ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Message to the Eighth World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace in Kyoto, Japan, August 21, 2006 in *In the World, Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, (New York: Fordham University Press), 2010, 138.

²⁴² Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Contradictions and Prerequisites of Interreligious Dialogue," <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>

Within this framework, interreligious dialogue emerges as a form of spiritual and cultural resistance. It is not merely an exchange between traditions, but a theological counter-proposal to existential fragmentation, isolation, and the loss of relational depth. Dialogue becomes lived theology precisely insofar as it reasserts relationality—between persons, communities, and the Sacred—as a fundamental condition of human flourishing.

4.3 Interreligious dialogue as peace-building and moral responsibility

Another recurring theme in Bartholomew’s interreligious discourse is the intrinsic link between dialogue and peace-building. Dialogue is consistently presented as a moral imperative in a world marked by violence, injustice, and the instrumentalisation of religion for ideological ends²⁴³. A recurring theme in the Patriarch’s discourse is the affirmation of interreligious dialogue as a theological necessity; he explicitly presents dialogue as an indispensable response to religiously motivated violence and social fragmentation²⁴⁴. He stresses that religions must not be perceived as sources of conflict, but as agents of reconciliation and peace.

In statements issued in response to acts of religiously framed violence, Bartholomew insists that no religion can justify violence in the name of God, arguing that such misuse of religion constitutes a betrayal of its deepest vocation²⁴⁵. Every war in the name of religion is actually a war against religion. This conviction underlies his repeated appeals to religious leaders to assume responsibility for the social consequences of religious discourse²⁴⁶.

²⁴³ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *In the World, Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, 81-83.

²⁴⁴ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Religion, Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East,” address at the KAICIID–Ecumenical Patriarchate Conference, Athens, October 19, 2015, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://ec-patr.org/en/religion-cultural-pluralism-and-peaceful-coexistence-in-the>

²⁴⁵ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Religion and Peace*, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/religions-and-peace-address-of-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew>

²⁴⁶ This is precisely why we jointly proclaimed, with leaders of other religious faiths, in the Bosphorus Declaration, at a Conference on Peace and Tolerance organized here in Istanbul in 1994, that “a war in the name of religion is a war against religion... The basic prerequisite of peace is the respect for the sanctity of the human person and his freedom and dignity. From this respect are born all other prerequisites for the peaceful coexistence of all human beings on earth in the love of one God and Father, who is not a God of war and battle but of reconciliation and peace”, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Theological and Ethical Reflections*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 291.

Addressing international interreligious fora and meetings, he affirms that dialogue among religions is not a luxury for peaceful times but a necessity born of suffering and conflict. This position is further developed in his 2025 address, where he insists that dialogue is an inexorable necessity in societies suffering from social fragmentation and spiritual meaninglessness. For this reason he emphasizes the importance of the “dialogue of life as a precondition for interreligious dialogue”²⁴⁷.

Here, dialogue functions as public moral witness. It calls religious communities to articulate, together, a shared testimony grounded in love, compassion, and mercy—not as abstract values, but as lived practices capable of countering dehumanisation and exclusion. Theology, in this context, is lived through acts of reconciliation and shared ethical commitment in the public sphere²⁴⁸.

4.4 Ecology as a privileged space of interreligious encounter

One of the most distinctive elements of Bartholomew’s lived theology of encounter is his integration of ecological responsibility into interreligious dialogue. His long-standing commitment to these two interconnected fields has been a source of inspiration for many people and institutions internationally²⁴⁹. Environmental concern is repeatedly framed not merely as a technical or political issue, but as a profoundly spiritual challenge that concerns all humanity. He has articulated the

²⁴⁷ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Contradictions and Prerequisites of Interreligious Dialogue,” <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>

²⁴⁸ “There is talk of a “clash of religions” as the core of the “clash of civilizations,” and we are witnessing violence “in the name of religion.” At the same time, however, interfaith cooperation is being promoted and the peacemaking role of religions is being emphasized. “No peace among peoples without peace among religions” is a well-known slogan. Of vital importance for the future of humanity is the cooperation of religions in the face of global problems, such as the ecological crisis, migration, social and political conflicts, major natural disasters, religious fundamentalism, and others”, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, The mission and work of the Orthodox Church and Theology in the 21st century (Greek), address at International Conference of the Theological School of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens on “Christian Orthodox Theology in the 21st Century. Challenges and Perspectives”, Athens, November 24, 2024, <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>

²⁴⁹ “The relevant actions of the Great Church, which have been ongoing for thirty-five years, have promoted inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian, and interreligious dialogue on the possible contribution of the Church and religions to the protection of the natural environment. They have also inspired political leaders, parliaments, economic actors, ecological movements, universities and research centers, organizations, and countless people everywhere. They highlighted the truth that no vision for the future has any value unless it refers to the expectation of a world that will be and function as a real “home” for humanity”, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew address at Conference in Kilkis, September 23, 2024 (Greek), <https://ec-patr.org/oiko-ymenikos-patriarchis-h-prostasia-t/> .

notion of collective human responsibility for environmental sin and the corresponding need for repentance²⁵⁰.

Bartholomew's ecological vision explicitly extends to interreligious contexts. In addresses delivered at interreligious environmental symposia, he argues that care for creation provides a privileged meeting place for believers of different traditions, enabling cooperation without the erasure of theological difference²⁵¹.

Bartholomew calls for a "common meeting place" in which diverse religious voices can articulate a shared testimony against reductive materialism and exploitation.²⁵² Ecology thus becomes a privileged space of encounter: a domain where interreligious dialogue is enacted through common responsibility for the world, rather than negotiated consensus.

Theologically, this approach reflects a sacramental vision of the world in which creation is received as a gift entrusted to humanity. Interreligious dialogue, when grounded in such a vision, becomes a form of shared action through which theological convictions are translated into collective practice. Lived theology here takes concrete form in initiatives, conferences, and public advocacy oriented toward the healing of the world.

4.5 Towards a "Common Sacred Worldview": Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's Innovative Contribution to Interreligious Dialogue

In his keynote address "*Contradictions and Prerequisites of Interreligious Dialogue*," delivered in Constantinople on 29 July 2025 at the meeting of the World Council of Religions for Peace, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew articulates one of the most innovative and theologically daring proposals of his interreligious engagement: the notion of a "Common Sacred Worldview". Addressing what he describes as the spiritual desolation and materialistic reductionism of contemporary

²⁵⁰ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, A rich Heritage, address in Santa Barbara, November 8, 1997) in *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, ed. by J. Chryssavgis, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 220-222.

²⁵¹ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven. Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 171.

²⁵² Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Contradictions and Prerequisites of Interreligious Dialogue," 2025, <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>

global culture, the Patriarch situates interreligious dialogue not merely as a diplomatic necessity but as an existential and theological response to a shared civilizational crisis²⁵³.

Central to this proposal is Bartholomew’s insistence that a *Common Sacred Worldview* must not be construed as a new religion, a lowest common denominator of beliefs, or a syncretistic fusion of traditions. Instead, it functions as a framework of encounter—a shared horizon of reference within which distinct religious traditions may articulate their unique experiences of the Sacred while acting together in the public sphere²⁵⁴. Each tradition retains its irreducible identity, vocabulary, and theological integrity, even as it participates in a common moral and spiritual witness against forces that fragment both persons and societies.

The Patriarch defines the goal of this worldview as the creation of a meta-linguistic system of reference, a meeting place that will permit the “translation” of individual sacred truths into a commonly understood terminology, capable of addressing the contemporary world without dissolving confessional specificity²⁵⁵. This emphasis on *translation rather than substitution* reflects a mature theology of encounter: dialogue does not require abandoning one’s own language of faith, but learning how that language may resonate intelligibly and responsibly within a plural public context.

To understand the significance of this *Common Sacred Worldview*, we can imagine it as a common grammar. Just as different languages can express the same profound truth using different words, so too religions, despite their differences, are called upon to use their common spiritual values as a single syntax to protect the “home” of humanity from spiritual suffocation.

The absence of a shared conceptual point of departure for the Sacred does not invalidate the necessity of dialogue; it heightens its urgency. This absence relocates the centre of gravity from the realm of theoretical consensus to the domain of shared historical responsibility. For even if religious traditions find it difficult to meet at the level of dogmatic truth, they are nevertheless compelled to encounter one another within the terrain of lived reality—where the effects of a

²⁵³ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Keynote Address at the Meeting of the World Council of Religions for Peace, Constantinople, July 29, 2025, <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

desacralised world are experienced as concrete suffering, collective disorder, and the erosion of the social fabric²⁵⁶.

What emerges here—at least from the perspective adopted in this study—is the ethical core of Bartholomew’s lived theology of encounter. Dialogue thus becomes a space in which difference is neither erased nor absolutized, but oriented toward shared responsibility in the face of global injustice, ecological degradation, spiritual impoverishment, and contemporary challenges such as sovereign debt and artificial intelligence. In this sense, Bartholomew’s proposal moves beyond conventional models of interreligious dialogue, offering a vision of theology enacted through relational courage, moral clarity, and faithful presence in the world.

4.6 *Nostra Aetate* and Orthodox Lived Theology in Interreligious Dialogue

Particularly significant for the theological interpretation of his approach is the *Joint Declaration of H.H. Pope Leo XIV and H.A.H. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, in which reference is made to *Nostra Aetate* as a guiding framework for engagement with other religions. “*In particular, we reject any use of religion and the name of God to justify violence. We believe that authentic interreligious dialogue, far from being a cause of syncretism and confusion, is essential for the coexistence of peoples of different traditions and cultures. Mindful of the 60th anniversary of the declaration Nostra Aetate, we exhort all men and women of good will to work together to build a more just and supportive world, and to care for creation, which is entrusted to us by God. Only in this way can the human family overcome indifference, desire for domination, greed for profit and xenophobia*”²⁵⁷.

Although *Nostra Aetate* originates within the Roman Catholic tradition, its invocation in this joint context may be understood as a significant implicit affirmation of its spirit and not a formal doctrinal adoption. The declaration signals a shared Christian commitment to respect, dialogue, and cooperation with followers of other religions, while preserving ecclesial distinctiveness. This convergence reflects not doctrinal uniformity but a common ethical and pastoral orientation toward religious plurality.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ H.H. Pope Leo XIV and H.A.H. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Joint Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue*, Constantinople, November 23, 2021, <https://ec-patr.org/joint-declaration-of-h-h-pope-leo-xiv-and-h-a-h-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew/>

When read through the lens of lived theology, these texts reveal a consistent pattern: theology is articulated not primarily through abstract propositions but through relational practices, moral commitments, and public witness. Patriarch Bartholomew's contribution lies precisely in this integration of belief and action. His interreligious engagement does not resolve all theological questions concerning the religious other, but it demonstrates how Orthodox theology can be faithfully enacted in contexts of encounter.

Patriarch Bartholomew's spiritual legacy on interreligious dialogue aligns with two significant contemporary texts that echo the Orthodox theological perspective and enjoy broader acceptance. The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, June 2016), emphasizes that honest dialogue fosters mutual trust, promotes peace and reconciliation, and makes "peace from on high" tangibly felt on earth, resonating with his vision²⁵⁸. This spirit is also concisely captured in a significant text entitled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (2020), paragraph 55: "*Knowing that God reveals himself in countless ways and with boundless inventiveness, the Church enters into dialogue with other faiths prepared to be amazed and delighted by the variety and beauty of God's generous manifestations of divine goodness, grace, and wisdom among all peoples.*"²⁵⁹

Thus, the lived theology of encounter emerging from these key texts is neither a departure from Orthodox tradition nor a mere pragmatic adaptation to modern pluralism. Rather, it represents a mode of theological presence in the world—one that affirms truth through relationship, identity through openness, and faith through responsibility toward the other.

5. Critical Reflections and challenges

One of the primary challenges facing Bartholomew's interreligious engagement lies in its reception within certain Orthodox theological circles. Despite his consistent insistence that dialogue does not entail doctrinal compromise, his initiatives have at times been criticised as exceeding the

²⁵⁸ "Honest interfaith dialogue contributes to the development of mutual trust and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. The Church strives to make "the peace from on high" more tangibly felt on earth. True peace is not achieved by force of arms, but only through love that "does not seek its own" (1 Cor 13.5). The oil of faith must be used to soothe and heal the wounds of others, not to rekindle new fires of hatred", *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, <https://www.holycouncil.org/encyclical-holy-council>

²⁵⁹ *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, edited by David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020), 74.

traditional boundaries of Orthodox engagement with religious otherness. Such critiques often arise from concerns that interreligious dialogue risks relativising truth claims or undermining the uniqueness of Christian revelation.

Bartholomew acknowledges that interreligious and interconfessional dialogue has not been without resistance, including from within Christian—Orthodox included—and other religious communities, particularly among groups adopting strongly conservative or exclusivist positions. Such critics often object to the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s long-standing commitment to dialogue, arguing that engagement on equal terms with those of different confessional identities amounts to a relativization of truth, frequently invoking the language of “heresy”²⁶⁰. Yet, as the Patriarch underscores, this term has historically been employed in ways that are theologically imprecise and pastorally unhelpful. He therefore insists that participation in dialogue does not entail a dilution of doctrinal integrity or a weakening of theological precision.

Bartholomew has responded to these concerns by repeatedly reaffirming that dialogue presupposes a clear ecclesial identity and not its suspension. In his reflections on dialogue, he explicitly rejects the notion that openness to the religious other entails theological indifference, arguing instead that authentic encounter is possible only when participants remain rooted in their own traditions²⁶¹.

To those who fear dialogue, Patriarch Bartholomew emphasizes that you must not fear your neighbor, even if they pray differently or understand God differently. For within every person dwells a divine spark, a mysterious presence of the One who created us in His image and likeness. Dialogue begins with a gaze, a gesture, a kind word where Christ, the Word of God, becomes the bond uniting all things; it starts when we accept to experience otherness²⁶².

Nevertheless, the persistence of internal resistance reveals a structural tension between lived practices of encounter and doctrinal frameworks that prioritise confessional boundaries. This

²⁶⁰ “Often, unfortunately, Christians (including Orthodox) and other religious groups (especially extremists) who are rather conservative are offended that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has historically given priority to such dialogues with other confessions or faiths. These people believe that there can be no dialogue on equal terms with those who, holding to a different creed, are in their view “heretic”, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *In the World, Yet Not of the World*, 204.

²⁶¹ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery*, 173–177.

²⁶² Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Μην φοβάστε τον πλησίον σας, ακόμα κι αν προσεύχεται διαφορετικά, αν κατανοεί τον Θεό διαφορετικά” [“Do not fear your neighbor, even if he prays differently, if he understands God differently”] <https://ec-patr.org/oikoymenikos-patriarchis-min-fovast/>

tension underscores both the promise and the limits of lived theology: while it can model alternative forms of theological engagement, it does not necessarily culminate in systematic theological consensus.

As Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew occupies a symbolic position that carries spiritual and moral authority enormous disproportionate to the institutional or demographic strength of his local Church. This symbolic authority enables him to function as a visible and credible interlocutor in international interreligious forums.

Throughout his spiritual ministry and sustained participation in international forums and organizations dedicated to interreligious and intercultural dialogue, Patriarch Bartholomew has demonstrated a coherent commitment to this engagement. His approach has had a significant impact across the Orthodox world, serving as a source of inspiration for local Orthodox churches and, potentially, as a catalyst for healing internal divisions among them.

At the same time, interreligious dialogue—particularly in high-profile global settings—often privileges elite religious leadership and symbolic gestures over grassroots engagement. While Bartholomew has sought to counter this imbalance through educational and ecological initiatives, the structural limitations of global interreligious platforms remain evident²⁶³. Dialogue risks becoming performative if it is not accompanied by sustained engagement at local and communal levels. For this reason, one of the greatest challenges facing Orthodoxy today is to translate the Ecumenical Patriarch’s visionary discourse into everyday practice—into a genuine dialogue of daily life.

Although Bartholomew does not offer a systematic theology of interreligious dialogue, his theological vision must instead be reconstructed inductively from diverse texts and actions. This lack of systematisation, however, appears intentional, preserving the openness and contextual sensitivity of his approach. The resulting tensions are not deficiencies but constitutive features of a lived theology that unfolds through practice and ongoing encounter rather than abstract theoretical closure.

²⁶³ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 121-122; 236-240.

Conclusion

This study has examined the contribution of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to interreligious dialogue through the lens of a lived theology of encounter, interpreting his sustained interreligious activity as the expression of a coherent theological orientation grounded in Orthodox anthropology, ecclesiology, and ethical responsibility. Dialogue, in this perspective, emerges not as a peripheral or pragmatic concern, but as an integral dimension of Christian witness in a pluralistic world.

By situating interreligious dialogue within the relational understanding of personhood and the moral imperatives of peace, dignity, and care for creation, Patriarch Bartholomew articulates a vision of encounter that preserves confessional integrity while resisting withdrawal or hostility toward the religious other. His consistent emphasis on respect, listening, and shared responsibility demonstrates that strong ecclesial identity need not preclude openness, but can instead serve as its theological foundation. In this sense, dialogue is not opposed to truth, but becomes a mode through which truth is lived and witnessed in concrete historical contexts.

The analysis of key texts and joint declarations, including the implicit reception of the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* in ecumenical and interreligious contexts, further illustrates how theology is enacted through relationships and public witness rather than through abstract doctrinal synthesis. This alignment does not imply doctrinal uniformity between traditions, but rather points to a shared ethical and pastoral commitment to peaceful coexistence and cooperation. It demonstrates how theological fidelity and historical responsibility can be held together without reductionism.

A defining feature of Bartholomew's vision is his resistance to both relativism and syncretism. Dialogue, as he repeatedly maintains, does not require the dilution of doctrinal truth or the creation of a new religious synthesis. This conviction finds its most innovative articulation in his recent proposal of a *Common Sacred Worldview*. This framework seeks to provide a meta-linguistic space in which diverse religious traditions can translate their distinct experiences of the Sacred into a common ethical and symbolic vocabulary capable of addressing the crises of the contemporary world.

Importantly, the lived theology of encounter advanced by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew does not seek to resolve all theological questions concerning the religious other. Instead, it reorients theological reflection toward practice, presence, and responsibility, inviting Orthodox

theology to remain attentive to lived realities while remaining accountable to its dogmatic heritage. This dynamic understanding of theology challenges static or defensive approaches and affirms theology as a living tradition shaped through engagement with the world.

As spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew thus offers more than a model of interreligious dialogue; he demonstrates a way of being Church in conditions of diversity. His example shows how Orthodox Christianity can approach, interact with, cooperate alongside, and live together with people of different cultural and spiritual backgrounds without compromising its theological identity. In doing so, he points toward a future in which encounter is not perceived as a threat, but as a faithful response to the calling of the Church in a shared and fragile world.

Finally, the analysis offered here does not claim to provide a definitive account of Patriarch Bartholomew's interreligious theology, but seeks to highlight interpretative trajectories that, in the author's view, merit further theological exploration.

ISSN 2945-0683