

Article

Father André Scrima on Interdenominational Dialogue and Interreligious Openness

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Abstract: Living and teaching among different cultures, Father André Scrima found a favourable environment that challenged him to understand the complex dynamic of the relationship with the ‘alien’, the ‘other’. He developed a fresh theological position and proposed a responsible openness to otherness. Through his entire diplomatic and didactic activity, and especially through the ideas he promoted in his courses, he tried to set in motion an approach to interfaith and interreligious dialogue that was as humble as possible, but creative and free. The purpose of this paper is to present, as authentically as possible, a part of his outstanding thinking on the matter of interdenominational dialogue and interreligious openness.

Keywords: André Scrima; interdenominational dialogue; Revelation; religious identity



Citation: Boicu, Dragoş. 2021. Father André Scrima on Interdenominational Dialogue and Interreligious Openness. *Religions* 12: 309. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050309>

Academic Editors: John Berthrong and Jeffery D. Long

Received: 7 March 2021

Accepted: 26 April 2021

Published: 28 April 2021

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1. Introduction

The meeting in Jerusalem between Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, in 1964 marked a watershed moment in the history of Christianity and interfaith dialogue, anticipating the solemn declarations of 7 December 1965, in which Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI lifted the mutual anathemas proclaimed in July 1054.

However, very few know that the instigator of the two events was Father André Scrima.

An exceptional theologian, a wandering monk and an assiduous scholar, Father Scrima (1925–2000) remains an unknown and not fully accepted figure within the Romanian Orthodox Church, of which he was a part. He was gifted with an incredible memory and an outstanding capacity to bring together information from different fields of knowledge—the so-called ‘classical culture’—with universal elements, patterns, traits, or institutions that are common to all human cultures worldwide, and he presented them in a theological interpretation. As a student in the Faculty of Physics at Bucharest University, he made some breakthroughs in the field of Optics, but his life took a strange turn when he met Father Ivan Kulighin. Father Kulighin was a refugee hieromonk who, between the years 1945 and 1947, animated the spiritual adventures of the Christian Association ‘the Burning Bush’—a reference to the event described in Exodus chapter 3—which emerged in 1945 around the Antim Monastery in Bucharest as a moment of spiritual awakening just before the atheist communist regime was established. This encounter would forever change the life of the young student who embraced the monastic way of life. A series of incredible events lead him out of Romania on a very sinuous journey to India just before the communist authorities arrested all of the members and the supporters of the ‘Burning Bush’ Association in the year 1958. The experience acquired traveling the world, encountering other cultures, and the inner strength and disposition to see the common traits of those geographical, spiritual and cultural spaces of other religions, made him always and everywhere mindful of the signs of the same universal calling which is addressed to all humankind. He acted as the personal representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras to the Second Vatican Council, and afterwards spent almost 20 years in Lebanon teaching at the French University of Beirut. He was also the founder of the Deir El-Harf Monastery. He returned to Romania for good in 1995, where he spent the last five years of his life.

His obscurity and reception can be explained by the historical circumstances that led him to travel abroad, which was unimaginable in 1950s Romania. The main reason for this reception was the theology he developed, promoted, and taught in the courses he held at the French University of Beirut.

The experience gained during his long stay among people of other cultures, religions or nationalities opened new perspectives, giving him the occasion to make comparisons and parallels which confirmed his intuition that every human—regardless of religion or ethnicity—is the key to a genuine relationship with God.

In this mosaic of closely related cultures, Father Scrima found a favourable environment that challenged him and at the same time helped him understand the complex dynamic of the relationship with the ‘alien’, the ‘other’. He himself was an alien and considered himself as such, especially by virtue of the monastic vocation he had embraced.

Assuming the monastic way of life as a perpetual traveller, Father André Scrima emphasized the unanimous and universal duty to discover the need for ‘the brother’ as a requirement of our own path to God (see also [von Balthasar 1967](#), pp. 142–48; [Clement 2000](#), pp. 96–98). He often spoke of the asceticism of meeting and dialogue, which consists in the effort to open ourselves completely and unreservedly to the ‘other’.

This interreligious openness is a characteristic feature of the theology of Father Scrima who—“stranger to any syncretic triviality” though he was, and faithful without concessions to Orthodox dogma in its letter and spirit—nevertheless “does not impose confessional and geographical borders on the Holy Spirit” ([Scrima 1996](#), p. 14).

In order to present as authentically as possible a part of this outstanding thinking, we need to lay emphasis on some quotations from his studies and courses which synthesize Father Scrima’s vision of dialogue.

2. A Fresh Perspective

From his perspective, the problem of interreligious and interdenominational dialogue requires confrontation with this fundamental question:

How can we truly realize the ‘theological’ (or spiritual) value of other religions, recognizing their self-expressed reality, while at the same time professing the conscious and lucid faith in Christ, the ‘unique and total revelation’ of God?

([Scrima 2004a](#), p. 80)

The ‘classical’ solution involves solutions that are legitimate to a certain extent, but which also greatly complicate the act of being genuinely open to the recognition of the ‘theological’ value of other denominations, and even of other religions. There are different levels of meaning:

1. The first level is the difficulty of accepting and explaining the possibility that another religion may have a living and true communication with the living and unique God.
2. Closely related to this first level is the one that implicitly determines it: once the uniqueness of the Christian faith is established, the other religions, whatever they may be, can only be totally or partially rejected, with respect to their claims to the truth.
3. Here, we are again faced with the aporia that blocked the meeting between Christianity and other religions, apparently leaving the door open, on the Christian side, only for the path to conversion and the recognition of the established ‘orthodoxy’.
4. It is clear, however, that such positions are increasingly difficult to advocate as such. For historical and cultural reasons, first of all; then due to a kind of inner calling marks any genuine theological or spiritual experience which, in the name of the Truth from which it hails, can never stop in its path and cannot refuse to look for an answer if an open, renewed question awaits for one. The road is therefore open ([Scrima 2004a](#), pp. 80–81).

The very fact of having raised this issue shows an atypical—but not singular—openness for an Orthodox theologian. We could say that André Scrima carries on the ‘prophetic sensitivity’ cultivated by Abbot Benedict Ghiuș, one of André’s spiritual mentors

and closest friends. This kind of ‘prophetic sensitivity’ emerged in a significant episode recalled by the globetrotter monk:

At the end of a Sunday conference, with many secular people in attendance, where Djalal-od-Din Rumi and Ramakrishna had also been discussed, a monk stood up and said: “Forgive me. You quote a Muslim, someone else quotes a Hindu. But what are we doing here then?” And Father Benedict Ghiuş answered very simply: “If God said that at the end of time, He would take all of the sheep, how can I rule them out? How can I reject someone who talks about Him like that? How can I not listen to him?”

(Scrima 2004a, pp. 113–14)

Trying to identify a cultural pattern that defined the Burning Bush movement formed around the Antim Monastery, Anca Manolescu stated that “Antim had among its members people sensitive to the trans-confessional nature of God” (Manolescu 2015, p. 106).

Educated in this environment, André Scrima also shared the same belief that “God’s action is not limited to the European continent and its mindset, that the divine plans are much broader, and that they integrate all of the human spiritual values” (Scrima 2003, p. 70).

This sensitivity or availability is the result of a certain degree of spiritual maturity, as well as an expression of a very strong faith:

[T]he uninhibited observance of other traditions is not necessarily a symptom of a superficial commitment to one’s own tradition. On the contrary, only the firmness of faith, only the clarity of the option for a given tradition, allows the casual evaluation of others. An authentic Christian, sure of his way, has the right to quote the hadiths of the Prophet, without losing his soul in so doing . . .

(Scrima 1996, p. 15)

Father André Scrima himself said that “this balance should not be understood as prudence, moderation, pacifism, but central comprehension” (Scrima 2008a, p. 139).

Ultimately, “the enclosed religious experience, walled within a consciousness that turns its back on the perceived reality, objectively becomes a hypocritical consciousness” (Scrima 2008b, p. 33).

Advancing on this epektatic path or continuous itinerance within the ineffable presence of God not only opens perspectives, but also forces a mature reception of the religious phenomenon:

Spirituality exerts a critical function on religion and the world, not direct, intentional, and even less violent, but an organic critique, by the simple fact of being present as a carrier of an experience and a spiritual attitude.

(Scrima 2008b, p. 33)

However, the premature exercise of this critical function, without having reached the “whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4, 13) may instead lead to the fanaticism of the inexperienced exegete. Building on the statement of the American essayist George Santayana that “[f]anaticism consists in redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim”, Father Scrima noted:

If we think of the easiness with which a religious “orthodoxy” (the meaning of the faith) is translated into “orthopraxy” (a code of socio-ritual practices) we will not be surprised that fanaticism insinuates itself even where no one would suspect it.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 152)

Imposing limitations as self-affirmation through the exclusion of the other (Scrima 1996, p. 45) is an inner process that is very closely related to post-paradisiacal human nature. These limitations underlie discrimination regardless of its nature and object (race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, etc.), and are basically a denial of otherness, a failure to discover the diversity desired and created by God (Boicu 2020, pp. 450–53). In order to grasp the value of this

gift of otherness, man needs an exceptional capacity for empathy and reflexive distancing to complete the “theological elaboration” (Scrima 2004a, p. 83).

Father Scrima invokes

the obligation to perceive the other as a believer, in other words, related to a “different” spiritual identity than mine. This would inevitably seem to threaten my own religious identity, to take me away from myself and my specific place insofar as I am transported to the other and to his theology of the absolute. It is clear that in our immediate cultural structure there are, whether we are aware of them or not, “bars” that act as a reflex of self-defence and at the same time as an impulse to erase the other in their thetic specificity.

(Scrima 2004a, pp. 89–90)

Consequently, an almost insurmountable challenge is to construct a valid discourse which goes beyond the apologetic, missionary project of conversion, and which seeks to “discover the ways to overcome without denial, from within my own *theological place*” (Scrima 2004a, p. 90).

The seemingly irreconcilable nature of this challenge creates logical faults, more so as it is very difficult for us to distinguish between uniqueness and superiority:

We are all inclined, in a psychological rather than an intellectual (theological) way, to refer to uniqueness in an intramundane-type hierarchy where it simply becomes the superiority which expects obedience from others.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 82)

By dogmatizing intransigence and intolerance, we alienate ourselves from the spirit of the Gospel, turn away from Christian values, and lie when we pretend to imitate Christ in His love, because

if Christ is the one whose mystery is that He came from the Father and returned to Him, remaining until the end of time in a state of openness towards all of creation (Rev. 5: 6), it is therefore indisputable that He is presenting man and the world with a horizon of inclusion, not rejection. For us to base a behaviour of exclusion of others on the very truth of Christ would hence be contradictory, if we think about it earnestly.

(Scrima 2004a, pp. 81–82)

Practicing this sacrificial disposition encounters difficulties even when it concerns other Christians of other denominations. It is even more difficult to manifest an authentic openness to other forms of the divine presence in history:

In faith one cannot say: yes, I am open to God, but under no circumstance to the ideas of others about Him [...]. Openness does not mean adherence to the position of the other, it means at least listening to him, acknowledging him. It means not killing him in the name of faith, not destroying him by refusing to know him, to listen to him.

(Scrima 2011, p. 43)

It is necessary to highlight some statements of Father André Scrima that are relevant to understanding the way the Orthodox Church regarded the relationship with the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations, as well as the perspective it applied to forms of interreligious dialogue.

2.1. *Converting Each Other to Unity*

From the beginning, the Christian ideal was the one formulated by Christ the Saviour, namely “that all may be one” (Jn 17:21), and the Apostolic Fathers—as well as the later patristic authors—regularly reaffirmed it. Christians ask for the divine gift of this same ideal during every Liturgy: the unity of faith (ἐνότης τῆς πίστεως). In Father Scrima’s view,

if Christian unity had (before ruptures and crystallizations) and always has an essential meaning beyond the natural, it is precisely the acceptance of diversity, the communion in spirit and in love with the one who is not like me. I would even speak of a “jubilation” of the meeting with the “other”, the one “not like me” . . . In this way, I add, the oppressive weight of the false feeling of superiority, of other complexes, of moralism in particular, is removed’.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 130)

A fundamental premise of Father André Scrima’s vision was that unity does not mean uniformity, which leaves room for an incredible openness to the manifestation of the sacred in various forms appropriate to specific contexts, even within Christianity:

It is imperative to overcome the confusion (perpetuated by inertia) between unity and uniformity. The latter—a kind of entropy of the spirit—is almost spontaneously the unanimous way of conceiving and accepting unity: the other is like me; the “burden” (if not the scandal) of difference is excluded.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 130)

Different historical developments (the rivalry between Eastern and Western Christianity manifested in the Balkans, different liturgical and canonical traditions, different dogmatic responses to concrete pastoral-missionary situations, the Great Schism, etc.) led to the cooling of this mutual sensitivity for otherness, but even then “Christian unity was not abolished, merely interrupted: historically, institutionally, organizationally” (Scrima 2004a, p. 128).

What motivated Father Scrima to make this statement was the belief that he had in front of him:

Not so much the open conflict or the latent theological incompatibility between East and West, but rather a pluralism of theological formulations, a pluralism that knows no reduction to uniformity. Only when uniformity begins to prevail do theological positions become ruthless by adding an emotional charge.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 92)

The very ecclesiological constitution, marked by the Pauline vision (“you are the body of Christ, and members individually” 1 Cor 12:27) implies that,

Just as the Church is constituted by the communion of the living and free persons saved in Christ, set free to serve Him, so the local Churches each have a personality and an individuality which make the abstract universality of the Church a concrete universality.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 51)

A closer and more responsible look at the apostolic kerygma as a common ground helps us re-evaluate and contextualize the evolution of our own Christian traditions, which prepares us for the next step:

Being aware of the issue of unity and working towards it is comparable to succeeding in “transcending” the Church, or rather its rigid limits [...]. In order to find the deep essence of the Church, we must constantly overcome the definitions of the Church, because they hide its living mystery from us. The mystery of the Church is first addressed to man and through him to human institutions, and not vice versa.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 219)

Being open to this sacrament of the Church, the Christian has a duty to question himself and to answer honestly an essential question:

But what is the sign of superiority? The one whereby I claim to be the only representative of Christianity, by exclusion, and not by inclusion?

(Scrima 2004a, p. 108)

Without this minimal interrogative exercise, we risk reducing the other man, even a Christian, to ‘*sa mauvaise conscience*’:

Why should he exist? I am enough: the foundation [...] of inter-Christian proselytism. Every time we make use of it, we fall from Christ. Self-discovery [consists] in the presence of the other.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 215)

Putting off getting rid of such prejudices makes authentic theological dialogue difficult.

This is also due to the fact that the two dialogue partners, who are so close in essential matters, but who experience this resemblance differently, are no longer aware of the original unity that underlies the diversity of their form of expression.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 92)

On the contrary, anathema and superficial exclusion gave way to a no less easy claim of assimilation, of dialogue, of ‘openness’. From the brutal assertion of rupture, one has often gone on to ‘seek’ a hollow continuity, and on to a noisy confusion. Concerned and engaged in interdenominational dialogue as a plenipotentiary delegate of the Patriarchate of Constantinople at the consultations of the Second Vatican Council, and also in interreligious dialogue, mediating between the Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions during his teaching activity in Lebanon, Father Scrima emphasized that

Dialogue is an aspiration, a possibility, maybe a hope. In fact, it is not, in itself, a solution, an easy technique that offers, quasi-mechanically, presumptions of solution at the end of its application.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 105)

On the contrary, it is necessary for the dialogue partners to assume that they must “first of all and in the widest possible way re-elaborate, together, a profound dimension of theological language” (Scrima 2004b, p. 92). It is an effort that must be made even more so now, “when the complementarity of the two spiritual traditions (Eastern and Western) is again felt as a necessity and a way to enrich creative theological thinking” (Scrima 2008a, p. 217).

Without proposing a theorization of authentic interdenominational dialogue, Father Scrima distinguishes between the essence of the dialogue and its conditions, showing that although

Orthodoxy does not seem to correspond to the conditions of dialogue (objective knowledge of the other, [...] curiosity, desire to come out of oneself), often due to historical vicissitudes, it is present before Catholicism as a suitable interlocutor (transmitting in spirit the matter of theology), of the World Council of Churches (testifying to the sources of the mystery), always attentive to the essence of dialogue. It knows that a communication only makes sense in an orderly way, completed by communion or even—because Christ loved us first—founded, rooted in communion.

(Scrima 2004b, pp. 218–19)

The dialogue takes the form of an asceticism of the encounter, being seen as a crucifixion of prejudices and overcoming the efforts to preserve one’s own identity (the gesture often goes as far as annihilating otherness). That is why this asceticism requires one

to die for the other in order to be reborn with him; to become the other, to no longer be afraid of him, to no longer be distrustful.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 214)

If only love can animate such a sacrificial openness, as it respects and awakens the infinite mystery of sacrificial love on which the world is based, then we must

make room *in us*, in prayer, in our meditation and conformation, to the other. [...] We must rejuvenate our Christianity, enter the Church of the other, pray together, without complexes, with gravity and maturity.

(Scrima 2004b, p. 215)

In this way, we come to acknowledge that “each Church has its own charismatic calling” (Scrima 2004b, p. 49) and although in terms of reflection, doctrinal positions and official attitude there are still many steps to be taken, Father Scrima noted during his first visit to the West that “unity of the two Churches (Orthodox and Catholic) has already become an existential fact, a reality lived and obtained by the simplest and humblest believers, a spontaneous instinct before any intellectual consideration or external order” (Scrima 2008a, p. 218).

Unfortunately, although interdenominational dialogue must tend “to rush into an enthusiasm of love—*caritas enim Christi urget nos*—towards the communion of saints” (Scrima 2004b, p. 216), Father Scrima notes the paradox and anomaly of the situation: “dialogue no longer deals with the problems that could promote unity. An obscuration of the ‘oriental problem’: the effort towards unity should already bear the mark of union, otherwise it risks highlighting the differences” (Scrima 2004b, p. 223). Consequently, even the Ecumenical Movement can become an alibi for the lack of goodwill to achieve union, although convergent efforts are obvious: “Catholicism comes out of the Counter-Reformation, Orthodoxy out of the Constantinian era; Protestantism out of the rigidity of external expressions: *sola fide, sola Scriptura*” (Scrima 2004b, p. 223).

However, if the Ecumenical Movement has its limits, especially with regards to ecclesiology (Scrima 2004b, pp. 218, 221), ecumenism itself—according to Father Scrima—is, first of all, a question of spiritual life (Scrima 2004b, pp. 216, 224), as it challenges us, takes us out of self-sufficiency, and helps us to better understand our own tradition: “Self-discovery today necessarily passes through the other and is fulfilled in his presence” (Scrima 2004b, p. 224). Hence the conviction of the illustrious monk that “Orthodoxy must be inclusive, not exclusive to Western tradition; to enlighten it from within, not to fight it apologetically” (Scrima 2004b, p. 226).

2.2. In the Limitless Expansion of the Spirit

In Father Scrima’s vision, this openness and willingness to discover otherness is manifested not only at the interdenominational level, but also interreligiously, which requires a rigorous effort to overcome another prejudice:

Almost undoubtedly (but always camouflaged) Christianity is thus conceived as a religion of exclusion. Moral superiority “belongs” to it essentially; the others are not on the same level, they are not “compliant”, they are not “good”. It is the surest way to turn away from the Spirit of Christ.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 131)

The failure of such a thought is illustrated by André Scrima when he says: “if you start from Christianity as a religion of exclusion, if you make “superiority” a pretext for exclusion, I am afraid that you are not in the Spirit of Christ” (Scrima 2004a, p. 109).

Failure or alienation from the Spirit of Christ is due to the limitations and prejudices we apply to the Incarnate Logos, and therefore

Christ cannot be caught, perceived, understood except by the one in a state of itinerance, in the limitless expansion of the Spirit [...] He is the stranger who is no longer reduced to any kind of location: in time, in space, in established categories. The absolute stranger, Christ is at the same time absolute presence, absolute contemporaneity”.

(Scrima 2008b, pp. 170, 172)

Father Scrima went further and emphasized the didactic value of this true divine pedagogy, which is learned through the sacrifice and ‘crucifixion’ of prejudices and challenges us to open from within our own beliefs:

The spectacle of religious diversity therefore offers us a good noetic support to meditate and “realize” to some extent the impossibility of circumscribing the divine in a form, a figure, a definition, also to “soften” the limitations of our finite condition, and to overcome our almost irrepressible tendency to enclose God in our concepts, in our language, in a certain identity.

(Manolescu 2005, p. 51)

That is why “the pillars of Islam, the Sacraments of Christianity, the Buddhist truths are for Father Scrima, ‘relays’ of the divine presence in history, which function as a guide to the act of faith” (Tofan 2019, pp. 209–10). This act of faith, and not the degree of intensity or explicitness of Revelation in a particular religion, gives the practitioner a special position before the divinity: “in the eyes of God it is not the “religions” that are equivalent, but *the living man* who lives them, the man in a state of faith” (Scrima 2004a, p. 121).

In fact, the mystery of the Church brings about the manifestation of ‘hospitality’, of being available to receive the Revelation, i.e.,

the unprecedented opening of the careful desire to receive the unpredictability of God, free from any enclosure, including that of an earthly Jerusalem. To acknowledge that we are all equidistant to God from now on, that the open-being (*l’être-là*) of the other is the inalienable place where God Himself can appear.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 57)

If the hospitality offered to God in this openness to the unpredictable—as an extension of Abraham’s xenophilia—is the hospitality of love, “then God can appear in any creature He creates, beyond the confines of a church or a religion” (Geffré 2005, pp. 126–27).

It can be said that religious diversity gives us an image of this divine infinity, being a reflective expression of the divinity: “to consider and treat other authentic religions as rays or “*phaneiai*” of a God free from any boundaries, already means practicing from here and now, this type of hospitality” (Manolescu 2005, p. 49).

However, religious identity has been perceived over time as a distinctive element “as a last bastion of separation [...]. Religion could still give the impression that it accepts or cultivates its own segregations and exclusions, as a kind of mark of sufficiency. Self-definition almost requires the denial of the other” (Scrima 2004a, p. 145). Therefore,

The universe is now torn apart in as many horizons as there are beings. Each is a unique, partially exclusive perspective, where depth is obtained and paid for with narrowness. [...] I do not therefore propose my truth as universal. I put it unconditionally only in so far as it is for me the only means of attaining that which transcends all truth, that is, in so far as I may go beyond it, through it.

(Scrima 2005, p. 323)

Although all spiritual traditions could be seen as possibilities of revelation of the same Infinity, which radiates in the world (Manolescu 2005, p. 52), it is still not enough “to say that all religions are equal and that all cats are gray in the dark” (Scrima 2004a, p. 108), but one must dedicate oneself to a survey and interrogation beyond mere appearances.

Without trying to sketch a model of relationship at the interreligious level, starting from the distinction between Christ who exists in the truth of God and the Christ conceived by us, in the way we conceive it, Father Scrima exemplifies such an interrogation from the perspective of Christianity:

Have I the right to define Christ, to keep Him in my poor contours, to possess Him and to project onto Him things derived from the smallness of a life that He has come to raise, to “open”, not to close?.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 109)

When the interrogation is suspended, a strange, unconscious phenomenon of ‘alienation’, of identitarian wandering, appears: ‘the Christian faith’ ends up being conceived as a privileged status, preoccupied with its own interests, ignoring other forms of faith, making efforts to convert (Scrima 2004a, pp. 175–76).

To counterbalance this tendency, Father Scrima adopted the traditional position of the Holy Fathers, and showed that “from the moment the Logos entered history, we are all, including Christians, equidistant from Him. (In other words, until the end of time no one can be considered as the irrevocable possessor of the mystery in the fullness of Christ)” (Scrima 2004a, p. 76).

The interpreter who thus recognizes himself in the role of confessor, of the ‘herald’ of meaning, not in that of its owner, becomes a ‘marginal of the centre’: he wanders around a circle of what he seeks to understand, set in motion by the interpretation of the Other and lingering indefinitely among the signs that this interpretation leaves in the world and in texts (Tofan 2019, p. 227).

The article ‘East meet West’¹ captures the very essence of his particular way of dealing with this topic, in the context of meeting Dalai Lama in 1978:

We are all equidistant from God, for God is a circle whose centre is nowhere and everywhere at once [...] Religion wants to make God too present. You fill up the world with Godhead and do not have room for emptiness, for the void must be explored with faith.

(Ennis 1979, pp. 174, 176)

A few years later (1985), in his article entitled ‘Religions of Salvation and Salvation in Jesus Christ’, Father Scrima pointed out that “if there is a true meaning to the “meeting of religions”, it is certainly not to elaborate a discourse on God, but to reveal ourselves to each other and with Him” (Scrima 2004a, p. 94). The intellectual benefit of meeting other religions is that it commits us to “scrutinize to a theological height the distancing of the free and living God from his forms of temporal expression, which He can confirm, but who don’t keep Him captive” (Manolescu 2005, p. 51). The Revelation opened through ‘prophetic sensitivity’ could serve like Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action to highlight the normal patterns of undistorted communication (Habermas 1991, p. 226) and the genuine relationship with God.

Quite vehemently, Father Scrima denounced the prejudices of Christians who engage in interreligious dialogue and apply to ‘the other’, intentionally or involuntarily, “a degree of inferiority or, if you will, of underdevelopment in any face-to-face confrontation between Christians and non-Christians”. This attitude is based on the ‘historical singularity’ of the incarnation of the Logos, proclaimed by Christianity (Scrima 2004a, pp. 95–96). André Scrima’s argument demonstrated an extraordinary common sense:

It would be enough to reconnect with the origin places of our faith (which, as such, are not chronological in nature, but ontological and spiritual) to recognize that the historical fact of the Incarnation with all its concreteness of events is not so determinant as we believe due to acquired habits. Was not the intervention of a meta-historical “factor”, the Holy Spirit, absolutely necessary to recognize and accredit the historically recorded person of Jesus Christ? Also, very briefly: the historical factor is not decisive in terms of faith in God, God himself is the one who opens and carries the perceptible element in history to the horizon of actual divine significance.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 96)

Given the quality of the interreligious dialogue and the Christian biased position, Father Scrima remarked upon how difficult and unsearchable remains the field of true knowledge, intellectual and in the faith of the great spiritual traditions. Consequently, he proposed to overcome the ‘dogmatic enclosure’, because theological thinking has become an extension of the dogmatic structure of the Church, while the authority of doctrine crushes theological imagination and claims the ‘submission’ of the interlocutor (Scrima 2004a, pp. 99–100),

especially because the ‘plenary truth, although contained indisputably in the structures of the Church, does not refuse an openness to outsiders’ (Scrima 2004b, p. 228). This means that:

To enlarge the space of God and at the same time to confront His unexpectedness, coming perhaps also from Himself, but through the intercession of others. We would thus be situated far from any easy concordism (Christ and Krishna, the Gospel and the Upanishads, etc. “are the same thing”), far from any syncretism, it goes without saying, being compelled to discover not “the same thing”, but the Same One, only differently: here lies the whole noetic and existential difference. (Scrima 2004a, p. 101)

Father Scrima wants to overcome the temptation—very subtly insinuated—to turn interreligious dialogue into a theological discourse of ‘conversion’, based on the relative historical and cultural ‘superiority’ claimed by Christianity, but also on “the reflex to compare what is best in us with what is less good in others” (Scrima 2004a, p. 101).

The importance or final stake of this openness is not the diplomatic, formal interaction of a nominal ecumenism, but rather is revealed in its fullness as the eschatological perspective. It is the criterion of the acts of faith that are measured in sensitivity and love for the neighbour: the sacrament of the brother (Mt 25: 31–46). This love is based on active respect, that is, the will for the other to be himself in his fullest freedom and his own truth (Scrima 2005, p. 299).

From the perspective of the full truth of the eschatological Christ, the One who is still expected to come and be revealed as the fulfilment of times, the Christian community in historical itinerance does not have to judge the intrinsic truth of other religious traditions, whose content of meaning and value also belongs to the same eschatological revelation.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 83)

The eschatological horizon, a *topos* of many religious traditions, represents a point of their convergence. That is why an authentic Christian who confesses to ‘awaiting’ the Apocalypse—the ultimate Revelation of divinity—but refuses to accept the authenticity and legitimacy of other spiritual traditions manifests “a “Christian” attitude which does not question itself, in other words, it doesn’t set out on the path to that eschatology to which the others are also heading” (Scrima 2004a, p. 87).

We do not offend at all of the eschatological Christ, it seems to us, on the contrary, by recognizing the spiritual veracity and therefore the character of efficacy, according to their specific ways, of the great religious traditions we have hitherto called, veracity and efficacy which they have [...] by what they receive as divine influx.

(Scrima 2004a, p. 87)

In the perspective of this assumed eschatological horizon, Father Scrima prophetically proclaims:

Leave all of the diversity in the world for that posthumous day of history [...] when there will be a possible judgment on the whole. And then, at this Judgment, neither one nor the other will suffer because of the confusion that would have plucked the wheat together with the weeds.

(Scrima 2011, p. 185)

3. A Brief Overview of Scrima’s Theology of Religions

Father Scrima did not plan to put forth a coherent theory of interdenominational and interreligious dialogue, and consequently he did not reflect on the concept systematically in his published and unpublished texts. However, elements of a profound importance regarding the meaning of dialogue run like a connecting thread throughout his theological writings.

It is very important to note that most of the statements regarding the interdenominational dialogue were made by André Scrima while attending the sessions of the Second Vatican Council as an official observer of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras.

For sure, an important role in shaping his vision was played by repeated contact (1957–1965) with the Catholic intellectual elite, “especially to the ecumenically minded figures associated with *la nouvelle théologie*”: Christophe Dumont, Pierre Duprey, Jean Daniélou, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, and Louis Bouyer (Coman 2020, p. 188). Collaborating with these ‘exotic’ personalities, Scrima was impressed by the sincerity and perseverance of those who, from within the Catholic Church, were devoted to knowing and sharing the truth about Orthodoxy (Scrima 2008a, p. 399). In this context, Father Scrima stated the importance of discovering, from the perspective of one’s own interiority, the other as the hidden half that we lacked in order to be fully ourselves (Scrima 2004b, p. 109–10). He went beyond spiritual ecumenism and advocated for ecumenical hermeneutics focused on understanding difference and diversity. Based on the historical reality of the apostolic age, which he defined as a “plural ecclesiology” (Scrima 2004b, pp. 110–11), he admitted that when we commit ourselves to restore the Church’s unity, we need “to understand its fullness, to understand that ecclesiality allows plurality” (Scrima 2004b, p. 226).

Before reaching a possible intercommunion, Father Scrima emphasized that, for now, the goal of this interdenominational dialogue is to advance from the awareness of a divergent plurality to the acknowledgement of a legitimate diversity (Scrima 2004a, p. 111). This mutual discovery would end the tension and rivalry, allowing us to become better Christians.

Although Father Scrima focused on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, he did not rule out a similar model of hermeneutical ecumenism for the dialogue with other Christian denominations. In all probability, the most revolutionary and bold idea that André Scrima launched in this special context was the explicit affirmation that Orthodoxy must be inclusive, not exclusive, to Western tradition.

After settling in Lebanon in 1964, Father Scrima began to articulate his perspective on interreligious dialogue. One may suspect here an influence of the inclusivism which, since the Second Vatican Council, has been associated primarily with the Roman Catholic perspective, expressed in the declaration *Nostra Aetate* (Moyaert 2011, p. 23). Scrima shared the same attitude towards other religions, and manifested the intention to promote new relationships of mutual understanding and respect as well as dialogue and collaboration.

However, André Scrima’s statements were much bolder, and did not seem to accurately reflect the religious inclusivism formulated by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (Rahner 1966). On the contrary, the emphasis he placed on religious diversity and the unique value of all people, regardless of the religion to which they belong, places him much closer to the religious pluralism. If we are all equidistant from God, we should recognize the spiritual veracity and therefore the character of efficacy of every religion, without any other condition. Scrima’s reluctance to reflect on the exact patterns of God’s presence beyond the narrowly defined spiritual traditions, became—four decades later—the official position of the Orthodox Church. Now, the Orthodox theologians

affirm that God in His benevolence desires and unceasingly works for the salvation of the world. It is the unique ministry of the Holy Spirit to empower all human beings to overcome the limitations of their created nature moving towards unity and relationality. [...] Yet, how and in what specific ways the Holy Spirit is mystically present to those who live outside of the distinctive boundaries of the Church cannot be fully explained or discerned. The incomprehensibility of God’s active presence in the world beyond the boundaries of the Church is a sign of God’s unconditional freedom and providential love.

(Clapsis 2014, p. 709)

In all probability, it would be a mistake to try to label Father Scrima’s vision using the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Wirén 2018, pp. 5–13). On the one hand, he made some of these statements even before the threefold paradigm was formulated. On the other hand, this paradigm could be flawed and insufficient “to

cover all available options” (Markham 1993, p. 34). Scrima was not so concerned about the nature and function of non-Christian religious traditions in light of Christian faith in the salvific character of the life, death and resurrection of Christ (Moyaert 2012, p. 26). He rather focused on the more immediate effects which the dialogue had on the Christian, and he emphasized the impact that openness to otherness had on him when the limitations and bias applied to the Incarnate Logos were overcome.

Father Scrima took both the tradition and the experience of religious diversity as enrichment very seriously, and it could be said that he anticipated the vision of Jacques Dupuis, who advocated the need to search

for the root-cause of pluralism itself, for its significance in God’s own plan for humankind, for the possibility of a mutual convergence of the various traditions in full respect of their differences, and for their mutual enrichment and cross-fertilization.

(Dupuis 1997, p. 11)

The balance between the significance Scrima gave to the eschatological Christ and the acknowledgement of the intrinsic truth of other religious traditions also has some common points with Raimon Panikkar’s paradigm of “mutual interpenetration without the loss of the proper peculiarities of each religiousness” (Panikkar [1978] 1999, p. 9).

However, Father Scrima was not a theoretician, and he did not make it a priority in developing a coherent system of ideas. Instead, he was a practitioner of this openness to dialogue on the path towards unity and communion. For several years, he worked closely together in Beirut with the Jesuit priest Augustin Dupré La Tour and two Muslim teachers, Yusuf Ibish and Hisham Nashabe, teaching together at the Institute of Islamic-Christian Studies. The four theologians of different religions and denominations tried to discover themselves effectively and empirically through one another, and to strengthen their faith through understanding, acceptance, and tolerance of the other religious doctrines (Dumitraşcu 2016, p. 279).

André Scrima’s statements must also be appreciated in the context of his own denominational framework. Although the Orthodox Churches have taken important steps to develop interdenominational dialogue by engaging in the Ecumenical Movement (most of them since 1961), and by participating in World Council of Churches’ initiatives, they have been extremely cautious and hesitant about interreligious dialogue. The Pan-Orthodox interfaith engagements made in Chambésy in 1976 and 1986 had limited effects on the bilateral dialogues with Judaism and Islam, and relations with other religions of the Far East are still in an incipient state of developing (Pătru 2014, pp. 702–4).

With these in mind, André Scrima can be considered a pioneer. Even now, five decades after his bold statements, little progress has been made in the Orthodox thinking on interreligious dialogue, such as the contributions of Bishop Anastasios Yannoulatos. He considers that besides the dialogue on scholarly issues, we can also discern, in the framework of multi-religious societies, various important opportunities for a “dialogue of life” that “does not demand common agreement, but is based on the acceptance of and respect for the religious freedom of others and their right to decide what their ultimate visions and goals are” (Yannoulatos 2000, p. 355).

Like André Scrima, Bishop Anastasios believes that the dialogue which respects the religious principles and views of others does not mean syncretism and the discoloration of someone’s faith. On the contrary, it is the natural expression of the love for our neighbor, and also a basic need of our era, which is peaceful co-existence in a multi-cultural society.

4. Conclusions

Far from relativizing religious identity or attachment to the values of his own spiritual tradition, Father Scrima proposed a responsible openness to otherness. Through his entire diplomatic and didactic activity, and especially through the ideas he promoted in his courses, he tried to set in motion an approach to interdenominational and interreligious dialogue that was as humble as possible, but creative and free (Scrima 2004a, p. 103). The

so-called ‘eschatological differential’ proposed by André Scrima meant the undertaking of evaluation, analysis, and effective reflection with regard to the historical and cultural mediation of our human conditions, which themselves depend on the fullness of eschatological Revelation (Scrima 2004a, p. 83).

In order to understand that Revelation is not limited and permanently sedimented, but rather fulfilled in the Spirit, the believer must step out of his comfort zone. The more steadfast he is in his faith, the more readily he accepts the pluralism of theological formulations: “Only the firmness of the faith, only the clarification of the option for a given tradition, allows the casual evaluation of others” (Scrima 1996, pp. 14–15).

Father André Scrima’s ‘casual’ vision has the potential to be an authentic Christian filter applied to both interreligious dialogue and interdenominational relations, recognizing in the ‘other’ (regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) an agent of Providence whose encounter does not relativize or suspend our own spiritual tradition, but further emphasizes the bright mystery of faith.

Funding: This research was financed by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu and Hasso Plattner Foundation research grants LBUS-IRG-2020-06.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to express his gratitude to Katherin Papadopoulos for her valuable comments on a first draft of this paper and for the translation review.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Notes

¹ The intended pun is a reference to the floods of that autumn.

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