

The issues of interreligious dialogue

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Abstract: *This article presents main viewpoints of interreligious dialogue, generalizes the process of foundation and development of interreligious dialogue activities, and indicates a certain number of interreligious dialogue forms in current era. Then, investigates the role, emerging issues of interreligious dialogue in the next time, initiatively proposes some recommendations for boosting interreligious dialogue aiming at mutual respect and understanding for the peace among nations all over the world.*

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Interreligious dialogue is a term denoting the positive, constructive and cooperative interactive activities among people belonging to different religions, at individual level as well as organizational institutional level. This dialouge is to enhance mutual understanding among people of different beliefs to eccept each others, but the strive towards the new unification religion for all (Quách Tâm, [www.http://xuanbichvietnam...](http://xuanbichvietnam...)). By nature, interreligious dialogue is a mediative act between groups of different religious beliefs that have had the feud in the past.

1. The history of interreligious dialogue

Researchers pointed out that the interreligious dialogue has existed since the foundation of religions, because the belief defference has been one of the reasons causing the disputes among people themselves.

Right from the beginning of the XX century, the Western intellectual circle proposed the dialouges on politics, ideologies, religions. In particular, the Catholic intellectuals have recognized the values from Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism,... and then the high tides

of dialouge with the East of the Western religious intellectuals have been formed (Zhuo Xinping, 2007, p.150).

However, from 1960s, together with the split, the antagonism on the forms of social consciousness resulting from the Cold War, interreligious dialogues haven't been occurred as often as expected by the parties. Till February 1989, in Paris the UNESCO and the Goethe Institute (the Federal Republic of Germany's Cultural Institute) successfully oranzized *the International Symposium on the Contribution of World Religions for the Realization of Human Rights*. In this symposium, the Swiss Catholic theologian, Prof. Hans Kung delivered a speech indicating that: 'No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions'. From this important speech, the interreligious dialogue has drawn a special attention of religious researchers, since then interreligious dialogue has made a new step of development.

The World War II with the terrible consequences made the mankind judge the issue of mediation in human life. Although the war happened due to other contradictions of politics and economy, the tession of overpopulation, the psychological factors..., the human massacre resulting from was has the main reason that is the lack of mutual understanding on life style, on belief. It recognized that three main religions (Catholicism, Judaism, Islamism) worshipping the same God have been hot-blooded to participate in massacring

each others. Thus, the spiritual leaders of the three key religions have approached the dialogue to reduce the misunderstanding and enhance the corresponding sympathy. In the early 1960s, the interreligious dialogues have been conducted more often among Catholicism, Judaism, Islamism.

The first positive action was expressed by the Roman Catholic Church with the adoption of the Declaration *In our Time* (*Nostra aetate*) promulgated in 1965, by Pope Paul VI on the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. With this Declaration, the Catholic leaders believed that all religions have one final goal that is to return to God, although each relitions have their own expression. The Catholic Church regards the Muslims^(*) with esteem since Islam has some things in common with Catholicism and Muslims should forget the hostilities and differences of the past and work together for mutual understanding and benefit.

The World Conference of Religions for Peace convened in Kyoto (Japan) in 1970 declared: "As men and women of religion we confess in humility and penitence that we have very often betrayed our religious ideals and our commitment to peace. It is not religion that has failed the cause of peace, but religious people. This betrayal of religion can and must be corrected" (refers to: Trần Văn Toàn, [www.http//triethoc.edu.vn](http://triethoc.edu.vn)).

^(*) follower addressing manner by Islamism.

In 1986, Pope John Paul II invited representatives of Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions to the meeting and pray for peace in Assisi (Italy). In 1999, he officially admitted the sins of the Catholic people from the past now.

It can't be seen as a new, breakthrough initiative but the necessary move to regain the prestige of the Catholic Church. By nature, these are the responsible attitude and efforts of the sincere people pursuing the religious ideals, wishing to practically contribute to the peace construction.

In September, 2006, in the lecture entitled *Faith, Reason, and university; memories and reflections* at the University of Regensburg, Federal Republic of Germany (where His Holiness Benedict XVI has been a theological professor), the holy father of the Catholic World made Muslims all over the world displeased when he untactically reminded the remarks on Muslims by the Byzantine emperor in XIV century. In spite of this fact, in October, 2007, *A common word between us and you* was launched as an open letter signed by 138 world leading Muslim scholars and intellectuals that emphasized the common word among Muslims and Christians, and Jews as well is love, love for God and love for neighbors with the wish: "Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill" (refers to: Tý Linh, [www.http://xuanbichvietnam...](http://xuanbichvietnam...)).

After that, the Jordanian Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue held their second Colloquium in Rome (from 18 to 19 May, 2011) presided over by Prof. Kamel Abu Jaber and His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran to think of human and religious values shared by Christians and Muslims for a common education. The press release of this colloquium highlighted the following:

1/ Christians and Muslims share basic human values like the sacred character of human life, human dignity and the fundamental inalienable rights deriving from it.

2/ As for the religious values, some of them are common to Christians and Muslims, meanwhile others are specific of each community. It is therefore important to point out commonalities and to identify differences. Respect for differences is in fact an important condition for an authentic dialogue.

3/ Education, religious in particular, should not form identities in antagonism or in conflict, but on the contrary, while helping the youth to be well rooted in their own religious identity, it should favor the formation of identities open to other identities.

4/ A privileged space of common education is that of the schools, institutions and universities, private and public, where Christian and Muslim children and youth study together. Such an experience is to be conserved and cherished, also because it gives the occasion to create strong and permanent

friendships (refers to: Tý Linh, [www.http://xuanbichvietnam...](http://xuanbichvietnam...)).

With this spirit, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the world community to tolerantly coexist for the more peaceful world on marking the International Day of Tolerance (November 16th, 2011). We all have to respect the diversity, protect people to discrimination, peacefully coexist through political and interreligious dialogues,...

Recently, the World Alliance of Religions' Peace Summit was held in the Republic of Korea (September 17th, 2014) with the attendance of about 1,500 religious leaders in the world, with the wish of the first look for an effective solution of disputes through establishment of alliance of religions for peace, especially in the complicated situation of Islamic world, notably the foundation of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS).

The 28th edition of the International Meeting 'People and Religions' held by the Community of Sant'Egidio in Antwerp, the Kingdom of Belgium (September, 2014) chose the theme of *Peace is the future: Religions and Cultures in Dialogue, 100 Years after World War I*. His Holiness Pope Francis believed that this event was gathered by many men and women of different religious traditions to come together on a pilgrimage of prayer and dialogue, at the same time, he accused that all wars are senseless slaughters (Đặng Tài Tính, 2015, pp.58-60). In this meeting, Pope Francis emphasized:

'Authentic religion is a source of peace and not of violence. To discriminate in the name of God is inhuman', 'intolerance towards those with different religious convictions is a particularly insidious enemy' (refers to: Đặng Tài Tính, 2015, pp.58-60).

The first Interfaith Dialogue of Religious Leaders for Peace in ASEAN Community held in Thailand (from 25th to 29th of December, 2014) also took the theme of Religious Tolerance, its representatives were the dignitaries of Buddhism, Christianity, Islamism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Baha'I from the Southeast Asian nations. The conference has made a declaration on the necessity for building the tolerance among different religions, for accusing the terrorist actions in the name of religion aiming at political targets of the extreme elements like the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

In the conference for countering extremism and terrorism in Egypt (December 3rd, 2014) with the participation of 600 Muslim and Christian clerics from 120 countries, the Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb also accused the barbaric crime by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, he blamed khawarij for utilizing religion to export the thought of 'false Islam' (refers to: Đặng Tài Tính, 2015, pp.58-60), at the same time, called the international coalition led by the USA to destroy ISIS.

Thus, the history of interreligious dialogue aimed at resolving the urgent religious problems, mainly the religious

conflicts with the wish of proposing solutions of constructing peace among religions, nations. But there are obstacles, spikes and thorns on the road of realizing this wish, the forms of interreligious dialogue will much contribute to this road.

2. Some forms of interreligious dialogue

Like the other forms of dialogue, interreligious dialogue aims at the mutual learning, negotiating, compromising to collaborate or avoid conflicts.

By nature, dialogue is a form of international relations, diplomacy. To attain the corresponding understanding, first of all, we must respect others, listen to others, regard others as men of conscience, freedom. To achieve a successful dialogue, parties should be well aware of the goals, should know thoroughly about their standpoints and grasp at a certain extent of counterpart's standpoint. Only dialogue basing on the spirit of listening and seeking the truth can avoid the useless controversy. Some main forms of interreligious dialogues can be generalized as follow:

Firstly, *dialogue through official meeting by religious leaders or sects*. This form plays a very important role that may be marking for the further meeting, encouraging the believers to participate in dialogue.

Because of the importance of the meetings between religious leaders, they are often conducted in public with the images, statements propagandized via mass media. For example, they were

the moments of Pope Paul IV and Patriarch Athenagoras embracing for greetings, or Pope John Paul II holding a talk with 130 world religious leaders in Assisi (1986). These were images, signals that have a strong impacts on the public opinions. Although the above mentioned meetings haven't discussed in detail any issue, but they were important benchmarks for the mutual listening, for the wish of getting closer for better understanding and for joint construction for peace in a long term program. However, considering only the symbolic images without further development, the specific issues of common interest are still unsolved.

Secondly, *dialogue in terms of teachings or dogmas*. The teachings are the essential fixative elements for religious life of each faith. Conducting a dialogue requires the dialoguers have their own positions, at the same time, they must understand the positions of their counter parts. The dialoguers should have modest and patient attitude. Since each religion has its own specific features, in order to understand other religion, the followers of a certain religion must definitely learn to grasp the different positions.

The most difficulty in dialogue on faith, on teachings is to find out the common standing point. Thus, dialogue needs time and efforts from parties. The movement of universal church was such effort. The first was the theologian Paul Tillich's idea when he proposed the concept of the future church as 'the Catholic Church has the protestantism', it meant that the Catholicism and the

Protestantism were united. The Protestantism and Catholicism should look for the mutual sympathy, build the united church of the new era with both the spirit of reformation and development of the Protestantism, maintaining the nature and council's tradition of the Catholicism. In addition, the Catholicism and the Protestantism also conducted dialogue with Orthodox via special indoctrination of Orthodoxy theology, invited Orthodoxy scholars to work as professors in the theological schools of Orthodox and Protestantism (Zhuo Xinping, 2007, p.151)

Thirdly, *interreligious dialogues in everyday life*. Each believer of different religions lives in a society with distinct culture and history, shares with other people joys, sorrows, concerns, intentions and expectations. Thus, in daily life activities there's a need of association, mutual understanding, cooperation towards the settlement for specific and related issues of common interests like human rights, liberty, peace,... Via dialogues in religious activities, the faithful's awareness is changed. For instance, the Catholic hasn't mentioned the traditional viewpoint of 'outside the Church there is no salvation' (Zhuo Xinping, 2007, p.151) anymore, and has found the positive values of other religions instead. From that, the Catholic urge its followers when facing the world diversified religions to recognize their internal values and culture identities, to be ready for cooperation and friendly dialogue with them.

Fourthly, *the dialogue between religion and Marxism, socialism and other ideologies*. It means that there's not only dialogue among religions themselves, interreligious dialogue in broad sense is interchange with other ideologies, beliefs and faiths. The famous Catholic theologian Karl Rahner proposed the notion of 'Catholic's liberty' wishing to build the entity relation between the Catholic theology and other ideologic movements and social powers. In the diversified world of values, it's can be applied an universal standard of the true, the good and the beautiful as the basis. In all religions, ideologies, social ideals there's a potential effect of the Catholic. According to this key standard, Karl Rahner pointed that communism, socialism devoting to the progressive human kind must be recognized and appropriately appraised. Up to this point, the Catholic believers and the communists have no contradiction and difference in nature (Zhuo Xinping, 2007, p.153).

Thus, interreligious dialogue aims at finding the similarity, common values among not only religions but also among the other ideologic movements towards the building of mutual understanding, harmonized treating attitudes in multipole, diversified world today.

4. The role of interreligious dialogue

The human has the spiritual dimension - religion. Interreligious dialogue can lead people to the thinking of themselves and others in different dimensions so as

to uphold the spiritual in individual belief and at the same time respect the spiritual in other's belief. The role of interreligious dialogue can be generalized in many aspects.

First of all, interreligious dialogue makes the members of different religions learn each others, widen their knowledge. French cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran said, we can not say that all religions are more or less equal, but there are values that we share with others, 'from Christians, we can learn 'many things', especially the riches of a God who has a human face, as Benedict XVI wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, a God who is love and who cares about human life in all circumstances' (refers to: Xuân Bích, [www.http://xuanbichviet nam...](http://xuanbichvietnam...)).

In addition, interreligious dialogue makes religions widen the tolerant spirit, recognize the values of others. The interreligious dialogue was not easy at the beginning because of the cultural, historical difference, in many cases, of the past hate, and the common standing in particular, of the foundation experience of religion. For instance, Judaism, Catholicism and Islamism believe a God, but other religions in China and India do not. Then, language and theory are difficult in common. However, via interreligious dialogue, the different religions gradually recognize other beliefs that beliefs are diversified and may-be-different beliefs are all respected. In current fact, religious life in many civilized nations attain the liberty of belief, there's religious diversity and religions live in harmony.

In addition, interreligious dialogue also contributes to the rich of cultural values. Interreligious dialogue can be realized via religious leader meetings, interchanging dogmas, the code of canon law, and especially the discussion between members of different religions. In that process, the religions discuss the issues of belief, life style, custom, habit on the basis of tolerant spirit. From that, parties learn and are influenced with values from others. 'In practice, by the Muslims we can learn how to pray, how to fast and how to do charity; by Hindu meditation and contemplation; by Buddhist detachment from material goods, the deep sense of respect for life; Confucianism piety and respect for elders; Taoism from the simplicity and humility' (Xuân Bích, [www.http://xuanbichvietnam...](http://xuanbichvietnam...)).

Interreligious dialogue also contributes to the economic development. There are many factors affecting the development in the society, interreligious dialogue from the diplomatic perspective is also the factor that have the positive influence on the economic development. The interreligious dialogues focus not only the purely religious issues but also the economic exchange, cooperation, since each religious follower is the individual participating in the social relations towards the development too. For instance, at a time, there's a argument that what the role Confucianism plays in the economic development of the Asian dragons, the conclusion in the end come out that Confucianism with the values of the

studious, the economized, master respecting,... plays a positive role in the economic development and social stability in the Asian dragons, and the very these values affect the beyond Asian communities via interreligious dialogue.

5. The emerging issues of interreligious dialogue today

Interreligious dialogue must contribute to constrain, eradicate the extreme in awareness. Now, interreligious dialogue has attained many progresses, successfully built the mutual belief and understanding among followers of the main religions in the world. At the time, has built the mutual respect among different religious communities. However, there has been still not a small the difference in belief other communities, or even absolutizing belief, values of a certain community, leading to the extreme attitude in practice. For instance, many French people are still proud of the achievement of liberty, democracy in France's bourgeois revolution that the very these liberty, democracy values make the success of the France today. And the satirical cartoons of Islamic prophet Muhammad in *Charli Hebdo* weekly newspaper are not the blasphemy of Islamic world but the form of free speech. However, the Muslim did not think so, there's been many demonstrations, some extremists shot the *Charli Hebdo* headquarters, causing the massacre in January 7th, 2015. Recently, there's a scared shooting in France in November 13th, 2015, causing more than 130 deaths. This requires the parties must be reaware of their values. Then, it's

necessary to make the adjustment in extreme awareness of their religions. These values may bring success to a certain community but it doesn't mean to direct the critical point to the belief of other religion. It requires both communities adjustment to avoid extreme in dignifying the self values but violating the belief, faith of other community. Only by doing this, the next *Charli Hebdo* cases can be avoided.

Dialogue must be based on the true tolerant spirit towards the mutual recognizing values, beliefs aiming at the world peace. The highest target of interreligious dialogue is the mutual belief recognizing in tolerant spirit. However, today, some religions supported by economic, political powers have imposed the values of liberty, democracy, human rights towards the Western standards on other religious communities, they considered these as popular values that other religious communities must implement just to achieve the peace, stability and development. The above mentioned imposing awarenesses caused bloody conflicts that makes leaders of religions spend lots of efforts and time to regain the mutual belief, but it seems that the parties haven't been imbrued with the past lessons. In fact, there's no true tolerance. Thus, interreligious dialogue in the next time requires the true respect for values, beliefs of whether minority or majority, although old or new values, beliefs must be respected equally based on the tolerant spirit.

Dialogue is to be aware of the manifestation in the name of religion to

act for the extreme political aims. It can be said that governments, international organizations, politicians are all worried about race, religion conflict and wish to find the soon solution for building peace, friendly relations among nations. But the intention of political powers in the name of religion or taking unfair advantage of religion for political ambition are becoming the factor threatening the world peace.

The establishment of the self-proclaimed IS is a immediate reality of the ideology in the name of religious for the extreme political aim. Originating from the United States's attempt for supporting the opposing camp in overthrowing the ruling regime of the President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, but instantly, the force supported by the United States pointed guns to the US and its alliance, swiftly established the international terrorist organization named the Islamic State, recruiting thousands of foreign gunmen, causing cruel crimes for Iraqi, Syrian, and French communities... In September 24th, 2014, more than 120 Islamic scholars all over the world have signed in the 18 page-long open letter, using the very Islamic terms in the Koran, addressing to the IS fighters, accusing this organization of being non-Islamism, disclosing the extreme ideology of the fighters, who barbarously killed people, destroyed the humankind cultural achievements (Đặng Tài Tính, 2015, pp.58-60). At the same time, this letter calls the world community for opposing those who act in the name of religion for terrorism

and killing people, those are counter-Islamism. Thus, the manner of conflict settling in the Middle East region is not the weapon, but the interreligious dialogue. This is such a manner proposed by the Islamic intellectuals □

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