

THE NEED TO ESTABLISH INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN VIETNAM IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERNITY

***Abstract:** The inter-religious dialogue is not an available route but it needs to be actively effectuated. Currently, the expansion of religious activities in Vietnam has shown that increased participation in ensuring social security, health care and education of religious organizations which has been expressed in the perspective as well as the texts on the religious field of the Party and the State. In recent years, the Institute for Religious Studies of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences has conducted a number of research topics and programs and published some works related to the inter-religious dialogue. However, it needs to refer to other countries in evaluating and analyzing the inter-religious dialogue in Vietnam. In this tendency, the article explains some issues such as why there must be inter-religious dialogue? What is an inter-religious dialogue? and Which are conditions of having inter-religious dialogue?*

***Keywords:** Dialogue; needs; religious faith; Vietnam.*

Introduction

Social dialogues and dialogues between religions in Vietnam are emerging as the real need and can become a main theme of discussion in the time to come.

Interfaith dialogue has been under examination of the Institute for Religious Studies and a conference was held in 2015 among researchers and religious intellectuals. This time, the international conference takes place in April 2017 but with a more coherent

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direction: to have dialogue to express social responsibility of the religious facts, which also means the search for opportunities by which religious facts work together a healthy and harmonious society.

It should be noted here that inter-religious dialogue and social responsibility in Vietnam is considered in these two contexts: (1) in the religious diversity and (2) under the laic regime. Therefore, before all, I need to discuss on secularization and laicity.

1. Some points on secularization and laicity

It is necessary to have a general view on the process of secularization and the formation of the laic institution in the analyses of religion since the society began its modernization, industrialization, and rationalization. Here, we only review some current approaches of sociologists in Europe and America.

Sociology, with aim to analyse the society and the social progress systematically and objectively, began to form from changes in society which led to the rise of modern society. It could be said that, social development is a formative element of modernity and questions the future of the religion in the industrialized societies. It is not a surprise when sociology, at the beginning, paid attention to religious phenomenon and that sociology could think, as a positive science of society, to provide scientific foundations of the free, secular morality for the religion's mystical elements (see Durkheim). The relation of religion in the modernization results in the fact that modernity has tendencies which seen by sociologists as in contradiction to religion. If industrialization, urbanization and rationalization contributed to the elimination of the religious world; if modernity is the "awakening of the world" (Weber), religion can emerge as a form of survival though it was supposed to disappear from the boundaries of the modern societies.

The contrast between religion and modernity is enhanced by the very attitude of the sociologists as well as of a number of religious groups. The attitude of some sociologists toward the evolutionary diagrams by Auguste Comte (the rule of three stages) and according to the trends of the founding fathers of French sociology in the creation of new forms of religion which they believe that are relevant to the

modernity¹: Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim have proposed, at various levels, a secular and neutral religion of the mankind as replacement for traditional religions. Marxism's strength contributes to the promotion of this trend as viewing religion as an outdated social phenomenon and as an irrelevant part of the social progress. From the religions' view, the Catholic church's persistence in the late 19th century and early 20th century showed the completely contrast view to the modern world by providing different choices (*Syllabus* or "List of big mistakes in our times", 1864). This contributed to the reinforcement of ideology on the basic contrast between religion and modernity. In most of the western society - where modernity was typically shown - traditional rituals were dying out, acknowledged that the individuals' church boundaries were being broken, the priests' role was reduced, sociologists often mentioned the disappearance of religious phenomena. Modernity emerged as a factor causing the end of religion, then people could talk about "the lost the sacred in the industrialized societies" (S. Acquaviva, 1961) and analyse changes in contemporary in the framework of the paradigm of changes in secularization at the same operated according to the logic of the zero - sum game: modernity advanced, religion took the step back.

Another land of theory on secularization lies in the Christians, especially the Protestants. Demythologization in *New Testament* by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), thoughts by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) on a non-religious Christianity, analyses by Harvey Cox on *Secular city* (1965), the flourish of theology on secularization of many theologians (typically Friedrich Gogarten), theological theory on the "death of the God", acknowledged the feeling encountered by Christian theologians as they faced the "modern world" - a world seen by them as being more and more freed from religious symbols. The international conference *Church and Society* organized in 1966 by the Council of United Churches, the 2nd Vatican Congress (1962-1965) found that the environment felt by the Christians like encountering the world needs a serious update by the Churches.

So what is secularization? It is a controversial paradigm.

The notion of secularization was taken into and used in sociology quite precisely. In a famous article published in 1965, the English sociologist, David Martin, proposed the removal of the concept “secularization” and at the same time discovered that this concept accompanied secular and anti-religious ideologies thus could not realize experiences of such as concept². This is true, like the emphasis by O. Tschannen³. D. Martin “rejects the concept secularization as a lineal progress, but the acceptance of the concept secularization is a complicated and vague process”.

Besides, in 1978, D. Martin published *A General Theory of Secularization* in which many factors were embedded - constituted historical events, different faces of the Enlightenment, relationships between religion and national identities... - in order to point out that secularization has many forms and different level in western societies, especially according to their level of diversity. D. Martin continues to propose a range of basic models, from simple to the most diverse form of religion. The categorization in which the nature of dominant cultures of religion in existence: Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism or Orthodox.

Of course, like a general theory, the subject of secularization has set forth many different issues: whether secularization has not been anticipated before the golden time of religion? Whether religious identity in institutionalized religions is not the same to the non-institutionalized wild piety? Secularization does not accept the excessive importance of such factor as rite - showing the level of participation of individuals in religious activities? Secularization does not explain in rush the decrease of certain rituals and the deterioration of some beliefs as the evidence for the obvious dying of religion? Secularization does not reflect views of the intellectuals - those who completely detach from or are irresponsive toward religion, those express personal views toward religion in their analyses (however sociologists “with beliefs” are not the last element of the idea of secularization)? Secularization does not represent a

view that is unique to the west and to Christianity - centre to the world, as a regional theory which may have some value to the western society but will be not in any way compatible with Asian, African, American-Latin societies...? Secularization does not anticipate in advance the easy approach of modernity. Is everything just the rationalization in the modern society? Is there modernization without secularization?

United States⁴ and Japan are the two nations where their societies can best combine modernity and religion: United States still maintains an important rate of religious participation (around 40% of the religious practitioners) and it is observed that the quite significant of the role of the fundamental movements; Japan is the society with industrialization happened in the framework of Shinto and political-religious movements always seize the political arena. When talked about a “non-secular America”, Roger Finke clearly concluded that “The anticipation of the decline of religion through the secularization paradigm is not verified by American historical development. Modernization has not been accompanied by secularization and this was anticipated long time ago”⁵. In modern Japan, ancestor worship still exists (at home before the ancestor altar or at the temple at important events)⁶. According to “annual statistics on religion, 80 millions Japanese often visit big temples at the New Year eve (Hatsumôde) for protective amulets”⁷. From this, we may think that the Japanese have created a non-secular society.

Besides, the fact that religion plays an important role in the personal motivations for social and political development in many nations questions the paradigm of secularization. Moreover, people discover that it is not the social class that has limited access into modern technology and sciences the main players of political-religious movements.

According to Gilles Kepel, in *Policies of God*, a series of diverse studies for these movements (from the Front of the Muslims, to political Hinduism, Russian Orthodox, and the Pentecostal movements in the Latin-America), “there are two cultural-social classes with

prominent roles”: the well-educated intellectuals with knowledge on applied sciences and the young living outside the city”⁸.

Research on these movements, especially in the third world, suggests the difference between modernization and westernization. Firstly, it is because of modernization in many nations as such has not resulted in similar social consequences: for example, urbanization and industrialization did not intermingle. Like in the west, the community unity (family, ethnic, and religion) still holds on to collective identities. Secondly, because modernization in those nations has seldom implemented according to the political system which is characterized by traditional and non-democratic forms (meaning the west) of the state. Finally, still covered in poverty, illness and death, the survival context of individuals is in nature different to what seen in the western societies. It is more clearly understood that, in such as context, modernization is not compatible to secularization.

The paradigm of secularization can also be seen as being difficult to apply into some religious cultures because it hypothesizes a differentiation between the sacred and the profane - especially emphasized in the Judaist and Christian traditions and could be quite strange to other religious cultures. In 1934, Marcel Granet, in *Chinese ideology*, once stressed that in China, religion was not performing the polarizing function of social activities. Similarly, what is called Hinduism is not relevant to a separated field of social life, but a social-religious system that reflects cosmology and at the same time indicating the mode of life.

All these denying views are relevant. Like Bryan Wilson⁹, O. Tschannen (as cited above), S. Bruce and R. Wallis¹⁰ have noted, the paradigm of secularization is often satired and misunderstood. Thus, the important thing is to deeply understand whatever possible underlined this concept and the limits of its value. Further, it is clear that sociologists as trying to break through epistemology, are all under the influence of the contemporary ideologies and news - mostly from the mass media, and maintain a certain image of the whole society. As in 1960s, the “decline of religion” arose then in 1990s it was the “religious

revival”. Is this the reason to attach the theory of secularization for the masters after giving them compliments? The critical thinking needs to search for a road at any times and to do that, the perfection of concepts is in need with serious reference to the reality.

Therefore, secularization is a concept that needs to be defined correctly.

According to the original meaning of the concept *secularization* – the concept used to refer to the taking over of the Church’s properties by using civil power - some sociologists such as Peter Berger defines secularization as “The process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols”¹¹. Thus, besides the institutional and legal perspectives, secularization also consists of cultural perspective, as seen in these aspects: free collective symbols out of all reference to religion, form independent knowledge from religion, become autonomous in terms of awareness and activities of individuals toward religious regulations. For Bryan Wilson, one of the best representatives for the theories on secularization in sociology, secularization is just “a process through which institutions, ideologies, and religious practices lose their social significance”¹². Thus it is a process which has impacts on the position of religion in the social system. For Wilson, secularization accompanies with the transition from “a community-based system to the society-based system” (1982, p. 153). This is a transition which causes change in the status of religion:

“Religion in secular society will remain peripheral, relatively weak, providing comfort for men in the interstices of a soulless social system of which men are the half-willing, half-restless prisoners”¹³.

Wilson did not define secularization as the obvious decline of religion, because he did not content that secularization of the society meant “everyone has a secularised ideology” or everyone “has throw away all interests for religion” (1982, pp. 149-150). The important thing is to make different between the secularization of the social system and the secularization of the key sectors.

For Wilson, secularization creates the rationalization of modern organizations and increases the autonomy of social institutions and practices for religion, allowing human beings to think that they can change living conditions and society by experiments and projects. One of the key indicators of secularization is the sharp decrease of materials that the society allocates for supernatural phenomena¹⁴.

Karel Dobbelaere differentiates three perspectives of secularizations: 1) laic secularization at the social macro level, related to the process of functional and structural differentiation of institutions; 2) change in religion related to the progress of the very religious world, especially the secularization; 3) the individual religious relations which relates to the individual's activities and the the normative integration of the individual in institutionalized religion. Like Wilson, Dobbelaere considers secularization is a process mainly relates to the social system as referred to in 1). According to that sense, methods of religious participation seem to be not the reliable indicators of secularization. Different levels that Dobbelaere accumulates allow an effective way to differentiate irrelevant processes toward the society, religious organizations and individuals.

Explanation of the case of the U.S comes from many approaches suggested by the theory of secularization, becomes possible because they originate from such as dichotomy. If the secularization of the social system (which Dobbelaere called laic regime in 1981) does not result in the visible decline of religious participation, the case of the U.S is then understandable in the framework of secularization paradigm.

So, what is laicity and secularity?

Laicity and secularity are the two complicated concepts. The former is familiar to the French speaking communities; the later is familiar to the English speaking communities. By establishing a laboratory for the research on "History and sociology of laicity", Jean Baubérot¹⁵ proposes the difference between laicity and secularity:

Laicity “attaches with clear pressures between social forces (religion, culture, and politics even military) which can form the perspective of an open conflict. The challenge then lies in the control of the state apparatus (or less, a power influences on it) to interfere as a social factor and at the same time proposes, even imposes, a solution related to religion as well as social institution”.

“Secularity, in contrast, creates prominent method for a process and relates to the losing of social relevance of religion, mainly through the game of social dynamics without the major confrontation between politics and religion. In other words, in this case, economic, political, religious and scientific changes can lead to internal tension in each field, but without any serious disagreement between internal change inside religion and other social changes. Thus, religion can, as interacting with other spheres, change or narrow its social desires in a more reasonable ways, or in some case, contributes to the lost of control”.

According to this vision, Denmark emerges as a non-laic nation but a secular nation: there, Lutheran doctrine is seen as the national religion and the civil society is liberated from the religion’s guard. Meanwhile, Turkey is the typical case of the laic nation but not secularized: Islam, though its position as the national religion was dismissed after the Kemalist revolution, still has the significant impact on the social life.

As repeating this differentiation, Françoise Champion¹⁶ indicates that when the logic of the laic secularization is defined by a process that contrasts the political power with the church, the anti-church persons with the persons within the church. This is often seen in the Catholic nations. Logic of secularization is defined by “the combined transition and advance of religion and other fields of social activities”. In the later case, there is a confrontation between religion and political power that conflicts go beyond churches and society. We often see the second logic in Protestant nations where there are not many anti-church phenomena than in Catholic nations.

This differentiation has the high level of relevance. But is this applicable to talk about secularized laicity? Is this better to differentiate between institutional aspects of the secularity and the aspects of culture? These two aspects allow us to question the secularity of individuals, their practices and symbols. The use of the only concept through the differentiation the level of institutions, concepts of culture and about main factors can open up the research that combines secularization according to those three angles.

Finally, through secularization, we need to understand clearly the cultural transformation at the global level which is taking place through the reduction of the institutional and cultural role of religion. Religion will lose much of its social power: it is then the time religion is an overarching frame for the society and has the significance as a command; also the time when its faith and language embed deeper into daily life of individuals. Religion is then just one of many spheres in the social life, even a world which is only stranger to many people. Such approach mainly reflects two typical processes of modernity: the functional differentiation of the key factors and the increase of personalization of the key factors. The two processes do not bear the meaning of the obvious decline of religion and do not much related to the disappearance of religious phenomena.

2. Religious diversity in Vietnam was and is a fact

We often hear, read, or write that: “Vietnam is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation ...” in many academic contexts. They often say that: There has been no “religious war” in Vietnam though justification of the concept is never adequate. Yet it is the fact that many people have never heard of or written about religious dialogues or inter-religious dialogues.

What is the truth? Explanation lies in the history and the present of Vietnam.

In history, religious diversity existed quite early. This can be proved. The work *Lý hoặc Luận* (Reasons and Arguments) by Mậu Tử¹⁷ shows that at least since the 2nd century, there existed Buddhism,

Taoism, and Confucianism in Vietnam. Of course, there is a form of religion which is often neglected or called inappropriately as “beliefs”. They are actually the ancient religion of the Viet, often called “the cult” such as the cult of deities (in simple Vietnamese they are Gentleman or Lady). They existed long time ago, often transformed themselves but can be traced back using uncovering method (archetype).

What are the interests and attractiveness of the contemporary religious diversity? They are: the people as the subject of such ancient religion (can be individuals, groups, or a region) perceive the foreign religions. Thus, instead of saying there is a cultural break; it can be called as a “supplement model” or “alternative model”, all for satisfying the group’s need to survive. Religion is the need to live on, not only the personal satisfaction in terms of feeling or awareness.

In the 17th and 20th centuries, Christianity and Protestantism arrived. The inception of Christianity followed the supplementary or alternative model by which the Vietnamese tended to protect their own community first. That was the basic need because they wanted to become a group with distinctive identity within a larger community. It cannot be a breakage, rather the growth of the group in order to create a form of spiritual security to self defend at the imposition of other dominant groups in the society.

I call this the theory of supplementary or alternative model to explain the reasons for conversion in the Viet as well as in other ethnics. Of course, this theory needs to be clarified but at least it helps us to explain why in the 17th century, then the 20th century, Christianity could enter the Vietnamese who had been already doing well with the mixture of indigenous religion and the Three Religions. It enables us to identify identities of a group, the need to belong to a community or society taking place at any society or period. This cannot be stated otherwise because it will be impossible to explain conversion happened from ancient history till the 10th centuries in Vietnam. It is meaningful when we witness this model to be continued today with old and new religious groups.

This is the foundation for the religious diversity not only in the past but also at the present in Vietnam. It is also the foundation for the religious pluralism which is under recognition and examination in Vietnam.

3. Why we need inter-religious dialogues?

The coexistence of all religions does not mean that they have or do not have direct or indirect “relations”, interactions or conflicts. It depends on each particular case, not the general judgment.

Example 1: Under the Trần dynasty, King Trần Nhân Tông disguised himself as a poor to travel nationwide to tell people not to worship in the wrong ways. This was the rare case when a king-monk used the Buddhist doctrines and his position to deny the masses’ cultic activities which were deemed to be irrelevant to Buddhism and the regime. Can this be seen as the conflict between the official religion and the indigenous religion? It is hard to answer but it could be considered to be an attempt to integrate indigenous religion into the official religion. But also under the Trần dynasty, disagreements between Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks could be clearly seen through Confucian scholars’ comments on Buddhism. However, Confucian scholars could not escape from the dilemma when on the one hand they criticized Buddhism, but on the other hand they participated in the practices of Three Religions in reality. Thus, it is not possible to say that only interactions were observed not conflicts or *vice versa*.

The second example: When King Lê Thánh Tông issued the regulations to adjust monks’ inappropriate activities, there were comments saying that Confucianism was made dominant while Taoism and Buddhism were shirking. These comments actually lack evident. There was no such thing as Confucianism made to be dominant in Vietnamese history, especially since the 10th century. The King’s adjustments should only be understood as the act of using order found in Confucianism to restructure the society which was in turmoil after the Hồ dynasty when the nation was under the Ming’s rule. At that time there were people disguised to be monks to avoid social responsibilities

and undermine the Buddhist authenticity. Basically, though materials are insufficient, we can still observe that religious diversity is a fact under the Lê - Mạc, Revival Lê dynasties. No religious conflicts were present but only the religious order was changed with Confucianism was now the official religion. When the Trịnh Lord of Đàng Ngoài (Inner Land) took the rule, that order was unchanged. Under the time of the Trịnh lords, the cult of Mother Liễu and Nội Đạo Tràng religion emerged one after another which diversified the religious context. This was the time when Catholicism came. What could be observed that the Vietnamese had implemented a subordinated model because they considered it a method to protect and defend when a new religious belief arrived.

The Nguyễn lords in Đàng Trong (Outer Land) accepted religious diversity as taking into the official pantheon the local deities of the Chams and the Khmer. Moreover, they showed tolerance with the western missionaries or Chinese and Japanese Buddhist monks. Of course, this revealed that various forms of religion were practice among the masses and the co-existence of many groups with different religious identities.

The Nguyễn dynasty adopted not a different model. Unfortunately, “violent anti-Catholicism” happened under the Minh Mệnh and Thiệu Trị reigns. This can be seen as one of the peaks of religious conflicts in Vietnamese history. As we come closer to the modern history, when the western imperialism spread to colonies, religious conflicts were seen as a part of the conflict between imperial regimes and the colonized regions. Consequently, Christianity, mainly Catholicism, was spread through voluntary and involuntary ways and this created the sense of conflict within the diversified religious sphere rather than voluntary interactions.

The third example: Under the French colonial regime: Catholicism had obtained a firm position in terms of distribution and the number of followers. The interlace of wars, colonial exploitation, and religious development divided the religious picture in Vietnam into two distinctive components: the western-origin religion under the colonial

regime's patron versus the traditional religions (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) and the indigenous religion. Under the colonial regime's pressure, religious diversity lost its balance significantly because as the Catholicism developed strongly, the rest became weak. Confucianism even lost its cores while indigenous religion turned into a loose religion, losing its systematic foundations and existed in the rural areas. Speaking fairly, the colonial regime showed certain respect to the traditional religions, especially in the sponsor for institutions and individuals to conduct surveys analyse and publish works on religions in Vietnam. Despite of that fact, the diversified religious picture at that time left fragmentations which later confused the ruler who sought to balance the religious situation.

The fourth example: After 1990, as the Vietnamese Communist Party renovated its approach to religion, a new argument was proposed: religious morality has many characteristics which are relevant with the building of a new society. Thus, this approach showed that religion has been recognized as a social fact (though being special), or as I name it a religious fact which has impacts on the society. Such an argument also means a challenge put forward to the researchers: they need to identify and recognize moral values of religions in general, of each religion in particular so that the society can obtain harmony and just. Further, they have responsibilities to analyse and point out within the religious diversity in Vietnam how religious facts interact with each other and with the society? What kinds of consequences such interactions will cause in the context of industrialization, modernization, globalization and international integration. This can be considered as a total new project which deserves fuller understanding and analyses.

Historical lessons, and situations discussed above, though at a briefing level, show the religious diversity in Vietnam and the need to establish inter-religious dialogues in the national scale with the possibility to expand to the international level scope. This establishment is the hope of the society and of the very religious organizations. As we look back, we only see that religions have

always co-existed, but have not yet seek a form of regular collaboration to show the responsibility to the society which has and will be a preference to serve the society at the present and in the future.

4. What does it mean by “inter-religious dialogue”?

We can consider the Ireland’s framework for inter-religious dialogues as follow:

Dialogue is to find ways to:

- Increase mutual understanding and good relationships.
- Identify reasons for tense relationships among religions (directly mentioning Islam and Christianity). These are often economic, social or political than religious relationships.
- Build up awareness and confidence to overcome or prevent conflicts.
- Demolish walls and prejudices which cause distrust, suspicion, and intolerance.

Dialogue is not to:

- Talk about or brief on differences. Dialogue does not aim to a common faith.
- A form of religious conversion on others. In dialogues, each party still holds on to its faith.
- A space for arguments, attack or deny others’ faith. It has to be the increase of mutual understanding and trust¹⁸.

Therefore, inter-religious dialogues are by no mean an obstacle to social progress. In stead, it creates openness, tolerance, understanding, and social stability. It can be seen as the purpose of inter-religious dialogues, if not, inter-religious dialogues cannot take place.

5. What are the conditions for inter-religious dialogues?

5.1. The laic regime and the social concordance

In this short paper, I do not have the conditions to represent studies which analyse state models which seek to separate the state and

religion. The important thing to state clearly here is: religious pluralism and objectiveness, fair treatment and legal observance are foremost conditions for inter-religious dialogues to take place. The role of the state in inter-religious dialogues is to direct, to create the environment, and to provide necessary legal conditions and policies for such as dialogue to happen.

An ideal context as such if comes into existence will contribute to the desirable social concordance and inter-religious dialogues will not be alien to the ordinary life but a part of the people's daily activities.

5.2. The Will and Need for taking dialogue

Of course, inter-religious dialogue cannot be externally imposed. It can only start from the very need for existence of every social fact, including the religious. In other words, religious-social interactions will take place in practice only when the will for having dialogues and the need to implement dialogues become a part of the strategy and of the social project. In the mean time, all religions have social projects. Thus the will and the need for dialogue will be the shortest way for all religions to realize those projects, contributing to the building of social harmony.

6. Vision

The organization of this conference marks the first time the topic of inter-religious dialogue is set forth at its equivalent importance because this is what the society as well as religious organizations are looking for. Yet I will only consider this conference as the beginning since more will need to be done to provide sufficient academic and practical conditions for establishing inter-religious dialogue in Vietnam.

Encouragement might lies in the future when inter-religious dialogues can take place as soon as possible. It will then be a form of compensation for me and for my colleagues as researchers.

This modest starting point can be seen as a necessary effort to recognize the need for inter-religious dialogue in our life, with the hope for happiness and prosperity. /.

NOTES:

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- 17 <http://www.tuvienquangduc.com.au/lichsu/14vanhocpgvn.html>
- 18 See: *A Journey together* (2013), *Muslims and Christians in Ireland: building mutual respect, understanding and cooperation, A RESOURCE FOR CHRISTIAN MUSLIM DIALOGUE*, Researched and compiled by Gerard Forde MA, pdf, pp. 7-8, <http://www.coistine.ie/what-is-interreligious-dialogue>. or *Principles for interreligious dialogue*, file:///G:/Hoi%20thao%20Doi%20thoi%20Lien%20ton%20giao%202015/PRI NCIPLES%20FOR%20INTERRELIGIOUS%20DIALOGUE.pdf

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