

INTER-RELIGIOUS FAITH DIALOGUE - THE CASE OF VIETNAMESE CATHOLICISM

Abstract: *All world religions, local religions, monotheism, pantheism or polytheism have religious faiths. Religious faith is the most important factor to determine whether it is religion or not. When religious faith changes, the identity of religion also changes. Keeping religious faith helps to hold of religious nature. When religious faith is offended, religious conflict will happen. Religious conflict can lead religious war. Vietnam is a multi-religious nation, but religious war never happens in Vietnam because Vietnamese religions usually realize inter-religious faith dialogues. Before the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism had not inter-religious faith dialogue, so there was the conflict on religious faith. Since the Second Vatican Council, concretely after the Pastoral Letter 1980 of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, the inter-religious faith dialogues of Catholicism have been realized. In the past, the inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholicism in Vietnam was unofficial activity; it was carried out by believers, and it has gradually become an official activity. At present, the inter-religious faith dialogue has been indispensable tendency. It can bring happiness to humankind and enriches spiritual life. Based on documents, the author analyses each content and form of dialogues, and then points out three values of the inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholicism in Vietnam.*

Keywords: *Inter-religion; dialogue; Catholicism; Vietnam.*

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Introduction

All world religions, local religions, monotheism, pantheism or polytheism have *religious faiths*. Religious faith is the most important factor to determine whether it is religion or not. Religious faith also determines theology, object of worship, rites, ritual practices, religious life of each religion. For example, the faith of Catholicism is Trinity, but Trinity is one God in essence without division, so Catholicism has been considered as monotheism. Its faith has determined its theology, object of worship, rites, ritual practices, religious life.

The religious faith is identity of each religion. If religious faith changes, the identity of its religion also changes. From past to present, all religions have tried their best to uphold their identities. The religious conflict can happen when one religious faith has been offended by another religious faith. Religious conflict can come to religious war.

Some religions have avoided religious conflict in process of spreading and developing their religions because they have preserved their religious identities, at the same time they have carried out inter-religious dialogues, for example *Tam giáo đồng tôn* (three religions in the same origin - Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism).

This article would like to mention following contents: Vietnamese Catholicism has carried out inter-religious faith dialogues, has not? What are contents and forms of inter-religious faith dialogues? What are values of inter-religious faith dialogues of Catholicism in Vietnam. How have the inter-religious faith dialogues of Catholicism taken place in Vietnam.

This article points out that inter-religious faith dialogues of Catholicism manifest clearly in two periods. The first period lasted from the beginning to the pre-Second Vatican Council (1962- 1965). The second period is lasting from the post-Second Vatican Council to this day. The contents of these dialogues principally and primarily have dealt with following things (1) the Creator, (2) life and death. The practices of dialogues are (1) accepting and respecting other religions, (2) learning, acquiring and integrating with other religions.

1. The inter- religious faith dialogue of Catholicism in Vietnam from beginning to the pre-Second Vatican Council

In this period, Catholicism had not gotten into conversation with other religions so there were not acceptance, respectability, and integration between religions. At that time Catholicism conflicted with three religions in same origin and Vietnamese traditional faiths.

Some people explain that the difference on rites led to religious conflict. According to me, this explanation only showed the appearance of religious conflict. In fact, the conflict between Catholicism and Vietnamese traditional religions and faiths manifested in religious faith. In other words, religious faith was the main element of religious conflict. Before the Second Vatican Council, religious conflict was not settled through inter-religious faith dialogue. It was solved by eliminative and coercive measures.

The conflict between Catholic faith and Vietnamese traditional religions and faiths also manifested in some aspects. In this article, the writer pays attention to two main contents, (1) faith in the Creator, (2) faith in life and death.

1.1. Faith in the Creator

Before Catholicism came into Vietnam, three religions - Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism had religious correlation. These three religions have the same origin. Their origin is their religious faith (naturally, their religious faith is general faith). Though these religions came into Vietnam in different periods, they not only found correlation of their religious faith but also created correlation with Vietnamese traditional faiths which were established thousand years ago. Among these traditional faiths was faith in Ông Trời (god). Vietnamese people respect Ông Trời very much. Confucianism codified Ông Trời into the will of God. Buddhism introduced double faiths in God-Buddha. At that time Vietnamese people thought that God could decide their good or poor luck, their good health or illness. They often prayed God when they meet difficulties in their lives.

The double faiths in God-Buddha are the main Vietnamese faiths. These faiths not only affect traditional faith but also correlate with the faith of three religions in the same origin (Buddhism, Confucianism Taoism).

Carrying out missionary in Vietnam, foreign missionaries, especially Alexandre de Rhodes (Vietnamese: Đắc Lộ) knew that Vietnamese people believed in *Ong Troi* greatly. Yet his research did not establish the correlation and dialogues between Catholicism and Vietnamese traditional religions. In fact, Catholicism rejected Vietnamese traditional faith to set up Catholic faith for Vietnamese people. The first pages of *Catechismys in octo dies diuisus* (*Catechism in Eight days*)¹ compiled by Đắc Lộ dealt with *Ong Troi*. In Genesis there is a sentence that “God is Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible”². After reading *Catechism in Eight days*, we find that Alexandre de Rhodes rejected faith of Vietnamese people in three religions in the same origin. He also rejected the faith in Siddhartha Gautama (Shakaymuni Buddha - the founder of Buddhism), in Confucius (the founder of Confucianism) and in Lao tzu (the founder of Taoism).

Catechism in Eight days convinced that God - Father is Creator. This book dealt with dogma that Jesus Christ - Son is the Redeemer. It also dealt with Holy Spirit - Trinity³.

Although *Catechism in Eight days* was not translated into Vietnamese, its contents spread in contemporary Catholic priests in Vietnam. Later, its contents on the faith in Creator were handed down.

Some Confucian scholars in 17th century objected to dogma “God is Creator”. That was reason why the book *Tây Dương Gia tô bí lục* came into the world. This book consisted of chapters; it was written in Chinese characters. It was printed in the 11th year of Gia Long era⁴. Its authors were Phạm Ngô Hiền, Nguyễn Hòa Đường, Nguyễn Bá Am and Trần Trình Hiên. Basing on the story of the life of Jesus, some Catholic dogmas and doctrines these authors criticized three aspects of Catholicism: world outlook, outlook on life and political scheme. The first two aspects belonged to Catholic dogma. Their meaning was also Catholic faith.

When we study carefully *Tây Dương Gia tô bí lục*, we find that stories in this book were supposed. For example, when Society of Jesus was dissolved, two clergymen Pham Ngô Hiên and Nguyễn Hòa Đường complied to Holy See about this matter. Two clergymen met Pope and read *Gia tô bí pháp*. When coming back, they rewrote what they remembered. Later, Nguyễn Bá Am and Trần Đình Hiên continued to take down events although they never went abroad. These above supposed events would like to prove that all events in *Tây Dương Gia tô bí lục* were truth.

When speaking about aspect of faith, one paragraph of this book was written that Catholicism pays attention to the life after death; God is the Creator; Catholicism does not pay attention to Ying and Yang (two complementary principles of Chinese philosophy), and five basic elements (metal, wood, water, fire, according to Eastern philosophy).

Catholicism as well as Confucianism made every effort to protect their dogmas, so these religions often criticized each other.

1.2. Faith in life and death

In *Catechism in Eight days* Đắc Lộ mentioned problem of life and death. He mentioned tangible world and the life in heaven. He rejected samsara (eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth) of Buddhism⁵.

Catholicism awakened the debate of four persons in Hanoi. They debated life and death, the faith in the future world. They were representatives of four religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Catholicism). They also debated three following matters:

The first matter: Human origin

The second one: How are people living in the world?

The third one: Where do people go after they die.

This debate was rewritten in the book with title: “Hội đồng tứ giáo” (Council of four religious representatives). This book was printed in Chinese characters and popularized in Catholics. Nowadays, our researchers can affirm that this council was putative one. In fact, some

Catholics wrote this book to propagated and dignified Catholic dogmas. The Authors of this book would like to reject the faith in Vietnamese contemporary traditional religions at the same time .

After reading “Hội đồng tứ giáo”, we find that Catholic representative was winner in debate, because the authors of this book were Catholics.

Catholicism has assumed that God created human beings; human beings only worshipped God. Human beings had spirit and body. God formed man’s body from the ground. When he died, he gave up his body, but he had spirit. The righteous went to heaven; the sinner went to hell. That was why Catholicism not only forbad the worship of heaven and earth, ancestor worship but also eliminated traditional ritual practices⁶.

In short, before the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism in Vietnam did not carry out inter-religious faith dialogues with Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism on the matter of life and death.

2. The inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholicism in Vietnam from post-Second Vatican Council to present

2.1. The Second Vatican Council with interreligious faith dialogue

The Second Vatican Council was the 21st council of the Roman Catholic Church. It was renovated and adaptable council. Many ecclesiastical documents produced by the Second Vatican Council. Among them there were 4 constitutions, 9 decree, 3 declarations. The first of *the Declaration on Relation of Church to non-Christian religions* said that “in our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship”⁷. The key word of this declaration was the relation between Catholicism and non-Christian religions. It means that Catholicism has began to adapt the values of other religions. This

declaration also said that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men”⁸. Through this declaration we find that the Catholic Church has decided “dialogue and cooperation” with other religions.

Basing on reformation of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Declaration on Relation of the Church to non-Christian religions*, the Catholic Church has realized ecumenism and gotten into conversation with non-Christian religions. These works were carried out by Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013), Pope Francis (2013-). These Popes have met religious representatives in Assisi. On 27th October, Pope John Paul II met Dalai Lama and representatives of Buddhism, Islam, Judah... On the occasion of the third Assisi meeting, Priest Nguyễn Hồng Giáo wrote an article under the name “Living the Spirit of Assisi” printed in *Công giáo và Dân tộc* (Catholicism and Nation) weekly magazine. It had a paragraph: “the unique character of historical meeting in 1986 is to call for peace. Pope John Paul II is regarded as “symbol of peace”. He is seen as first Pope in history to realize and encourage interreligious dialogue”⁹. Although the contents of Assisi meetings paid attention to two main points: calling for peace and realizing inter-religious dialogues. These meetings did not mention inter-religious faith dialogue. In some respects, inter-religious dialogues have been inter-religious faith dialogues because religious faith is the most important thing of each religion.

The inter-religious faith dialogue not only take place in inter-religious dialogue but also in cultural integration between Christian culture and the local one. Acculturation is the process of cultural

change; Christianity never excludes non-Christian cultures. It respects and accepts values of non-Christian cultures. As the decision of the Asian Bishops' Conference stated: "We promise to uphold local theology, so Evangel is propagated broadly in long-standing and abundant culture of Asia"¹⁰.

2.2. *On the Creator*

Declaration on Relation of Church to non-Christian religions gradually infiltrates into Catholic Church. It has great influence on bishops. In 1980 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam was established. The Pastoral Letter 1980 was written under the light of the Second Vatican Council: "Being faithful to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council which means the spirit of openness, dialogue and social integration with the community we live in". The orientation of the Pastoral Letter 1980 is to attach to nation and country. It is manifested into two main points:

1) With people throughout the country contribute to building and defending the fatherland.

2) Constructing in the Church a way of life and an expression of faith in accordance with national tradition. "One paragraph of the Pastoral Letter explains clearly the second main point: we have, on the one hand, to deeply study the Bible and theology, and on the other hand, to understand deeply the way of life of every people in order to discover its specific values. Hence, we make extensive use of the values taken from our cultural treasure in order to build up a way of living and expressing the faith which is more in accordance with the traditions of all ethnic groups living together in the same motherland and in this ecclesial community". This paragraph shows that Vietnamese bishops approve the inter-religious faith dialogue to serve society.

On the *Creator*, in the 1988 Conference of Synod of Asian Bishops, Vietnamese bishops stated three main subjects:

1) How to talk about God the Father and the Church in context of culture of Vietnamese society which is founded on family;

2) How to know that the Spirit is at work among all people of good will, especially the people of one faith;

3) How to make Vietnamese Catholics recognize God in the practice of ancestor worship and better understand filial piety.

Three above main subjects deal with the Creator, the role of Trinity and God in the national culture as well as in multi-religious country.

In this Conference Paul Joseph Phạm Đình Tụng, Cardinal, archbishop of Hanoi had an article under the title “Giving priority to evangelization in Asia”. In this article there was a paragraph “Asian people respect their genies who safeguard their motherland.

We, Vietnamese bishops, recognize that we can not reject traditional faiths of Vietnamese people. Because people only approach God through faith practices”. Vietnamese bishops accept traditional and polytheistic faiths of Vietnamese people.

2.3. On the matter of life and death

As already stated, people are interested in the issue of life and death, namely following: where they live in after they die; role of the dead, the duty of the living to the dead. Those relate to the ancestor worship. Some my articles deal with the ancestor worship. When discussing the ancestor worship of Vietnamese Catholics, we find that the ancestor worship was the great obstacle to preach the gospel and develop Catholicism in Vietnam in the past. When embracing Catholic faith, Vietnamese people’s conscience were tormented because Catholicism did not allow them to worship their ancestor. But the Exhortation *Plane Compertum Est* on December 8, 1939 permitted the Chinese Catholics and the missionaries to worship ancestors. Vietnamese Catholic bishops requested to carry out Exhortation. The request was accepted on 20th October, 1964 by Holy See. In fact, this allowance of Holy See was carried out late. In the North Vietnam, we have never read any documents of Catholicism on realizing Exhortation *Plane Compertum Est*. In the South Vietnam, Exhortation *Plane Compertum Est*, documents of Vietnamese bishops (1964), especially the Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life

influenced bishops of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (in the South).

On 14th January, 1974 bishops in the South Vietnam promulgated the announcement and regulations on ancestor worship as follows:

- 1) The ancestral altar is below altar of God.
- 2) Every one has right to burn incense, candle in ancestral altar and pray before ancestral altar.
- 3) Funeral repast is realized in accordance with local custom
- 4) In wedding ceremony, bride and bridegroom kowtow before ancestral altar to pay honor to ancestor.
- 5) In funeral, everyone can kowtow the dead.

Thus, the announcement (1974) mentioned main contents of ancestor worship of Vietnamese people. Catholicism still maintains dogma: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (the first commandment).

After unification of our country and the promulgation of the Pastoral Letter 1980 of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV), Vietnamese clergymen have been interested in the matter of ancestor worship. The seminar on respect for ancestors was organized on 26th-29th October, 1999 in Hue.

The speech of Archbishop Nguyễn Như Thế under the title *Acculturation in context of respect for ancestor and gospel in Vietnam* wrote that we recognized the importance of acculturation in process of preaching Gospel. In Vietnam the acculturation must face a serious problem that is ancestor worship.

In his speech under the title *Acculturation*, Bishop Nguyễn Sơn Lâm wrote that "they preach doctrine of Christianity but they do not understand deeply spirit of Vietnamese Catholics. Their spirit expresses in filial piety and respect of ancestor.

It is necessary to say that on doctrinal aspect the thought of Vietnamese people and Christian thought are not in contradiction with each other".

The speech of Cardinal Paul Joseph Phạm Đình Tụng recognizes that Vietnamese people believe in deities, especially *Ong Troi*. In his speech, Cardinal deals with ancestor worship: “the ancestor worship is popular in Vietnam and China”.

The representatives of Catholic clergymen in Vietnam recognize that (1) Acculturation of Christianity in Vietnam should begin by realizing worship of ancestor first of all; (2) On doctrinal aspect, ancestor worship and Christianity do not contradict each other; (3) The worship of ancestor unites human beings with their origin.

In 1992-1995 the Institute for Religious Studies carried out a sociological survey of religion and we found that 90% Catholics worship their ancestors. According to the data of the survey that was carried out by Catholics, 100% Catholics worship their ancestor with different forms.

3. The values of inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholics in Vietnam

3.1. The inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholics in Vietnam gives religious war up

Although there were theological arguments, the arguments of Christianity and Three religions in the same origin were not severe. It is necessary to say that our feudal dynasties carried out anti-Catholic edicts because kings of those dynasties respected Confucianism; they considered Confucianism as orthodox religion. They protested against Christian thoughts because Christian dogmas wounded the national custom and culture. When some Vietnamese Catholics helped French colonialists to invade our country, the anti-Catholic edicts were carried out severely. Because of political problems, some kings forbid Catholicism violently.

3.2. The inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholicism has made friendly lives for Catholics and non-Catholics

When preaching gospel in our country, clergymen built some Catholic villages. Their aim was to preserve Catholicism and reject other religions and traditional faiths. In fact, Vietnamese Catholics did

not renounce all traditional religions and culture. They carried out inter-religious faith dialogue unofficially. Although bishops forbade Catholics to respect traditional religions, many Vietnamese Catholics revered traditional faiths because “before becoming Catholics they are Vietnamese people”¹¹. In reality, Catholics and non-Catholics implemented the inter-religious faith dialogue secretly. That is why Catholics and non-Catholics live friendly. They have built and defended country together. In some villages, non-Catholics help Catholics to build churches, or Catholics help non-Catholics to build pagodas. Catholics and non-Catholics attend solemnities and village festivals.

3.3. The inter-religious faith dialogue has created new values for religions and enriched religious life

On theoretical aspect, the inter-religious faith dialogues of Catholicism in Vietnam are to (1) respect the values of traditional religions and faiths and (2) to integrate into traditional religions and culture. On the basis of studying *Ong Troi* in the Vietnamese traditional religions and culture, Alexandre de Rhodes proposed the theology of Three Father¹². The worship of deities of Vietnamese people has influenced on the worship of Mary¹³. Patrons of Catholic villages are considered as tutelary gods¹⁴. In a certain aspect, Vietnamese Catholics still have maintained their monotheist faith, at the same time they are influenced by polytheism. It is the specific character of Vietnamese Catholicism.

We have just spoken of three values of the inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholicism in Vietnam. In the past, the inter-religious faith dialogue of Catholicism in Vietnam was an unofficial activity; it was carried out by believers, and it has gradually become an official activity in orientation of Vatican Council and of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam step by step. The values of the inter-religious faith dialogues of Catholicism and of other religions show that inter-religious dialogue is an indispensable tendency. Only by this, religions just can bring about peace to humanity, enrich religious life and create friend relations in community. /.

NOTES:

- 1 *Catechism in Eight days* compiled by Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660), published in Roma in 1651, and translated into Vietnamese printed in 1993.
- 2 See: *Genesis: I. Origins of Universe and Humankind*, 1- God created fallen man - God created the heaven and the earth (para. 1).
- 3 Alexandre de Rhodes, *Catechism in Eight days*, *ibid*, pp. 11-13.
- 4 See: Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2001), *Rites and Style of Life of Catholics in Vietnamese Culture*, Social Science Pub., Hanoi.
- 5 Alexandre de Rhodes, *Catechism in Eight days*, *ibid*, p. 117.
- 6 The Pastoral Letter 1905.
- 7 The Second Vatican Council, *Constitution, Decree and Declaration*.
- 8 *Ibid*.
- 9 *Công giáo và Dân tộc* weekly magazine (Catholicism and Nation).
- 10 See: *Journal of Choose*, N^o. 4, p. 14.
- 11 See: Nguyễn Hồng Dương (1997), *Lưu Phương Catholic Village from 1829 to 1945*, Social Science Pub., Hanoi.
- 12 Alexandre de Rhodes, *Catechism in Eight days*, *ibid*, pp. 17-26.
- 13 See: Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2016), *The Way of Preaching Gospel in Vietnam*, Religion Pub., Hanoi.
- 14 *Ibid*.

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