

# Become trainer in the interreligious dialogue and mutual acceptance for theological teachers

## *Proposal for a Handbook Research; its necessity and development*



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### ABSTRACT

My intention is to improve the receiving of the idea of 'interfaith dialogue and mutual acceptance' for Romanian people in general and foremost on their teachers, by writing a handbook for teaching it to the students and future public opinion formatters. It is a requirement nowadays firstly to make people understand the benefits of interfaith, then to make them believe it is the only solution of the social common living in such a religiously diverse society, and finally provide methodological and technical support for those who want to become the voices of interfaith in their own environment. I need to lift my training to that level that I can improve myself, maturing from a religious pluralism embracer to a trainer, professionally prepared and systematic instructed. For that matter, this paper is not an unassisted research presentation, but a proposal from which I would like to evolve to a fully developed result that I will share with our Dialogo readers when published (e.g., ask for a review on a possible, future book on the topic).

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH TOPIC

I teach in Romania, a Country with some/relative religious pluralism, extended in the latest two decades, but even so, the most dominant feeling you can always encounter in countries like Romania (or others like it, i.e. countries, secular or not, with a majoritarian

religious belief, a.k.a. a mainstream Church), is that 'others' (i.e., all other denominations or religions) have no belonging in their territory. This is, in short, the kind of training we have ever received in the public schools in Romania before and after the communist regime. However, the freedom of speech and public display of religious beliefs were

enforced by the State firstly by imposing the freedom of expression in the religious life through the *Constitution* (art. 30/2003), then by the new *Law for Cults*, Art 489/2006. “The lack of respect for this principle is what gave free rein to the legal battles that cause the pendulum to swing between freedom and coercion. The widely circulated idea is: “Freedom of speech for me, not for you”.” [1] Consequently, the Law enforcement on religious freedom made some adjustments in the general attitude on the mainstream -Church hierarchy. “Through the new Law of Cults, in Romania another legal regime of religious cults was created, whose principles are common with the Laws of other EU states on religious freedom”[2]. I will come again on this issue furthermore.

I left Romania in 2014 for the *Summer Institute on religious pluralism in the United States of America* with this kind of background and with a strong preconception that ‘religious pluralism’ is functionally and utterly wrong. I was not at all surprised to learn from almost all my program’s mates that this preconception was entirely shared by most of them – adepts of other religions. However, after two months of learning and debating on the subject with USA professors, but mostly after visiting and inquiring all kind of religious communities, seeing them in the public acting, and putting all the information together, we were amazed to see how much that program changed our life views and thinking on religious diversity and its cohabitation. The fact is that we all stood in touch afterward and shared outcomes on our arrivals in countries of origin. The process was almost identical to all of us. I, for example, went both to my cathedra of theology in the ‘Ovidius’ University of Constanta, as well as in my parish and seek support from the higher authorities to expose both footage gathered during the trips through the States, as well as to share the final conclusions I came to think of, about

how each of us should have attitude towards the other confessions. I also have tried to invite other religions’ scholars to dialogue. The end was always the same: a barrier of skepticism and a façade of tolerance that hides an endless denial of religious diversity. And that was not my experience alone. Another colleague of us from an Islamic country, one who became my best friend from that moment on, lecturer in the Faculty of Islamic Theology, encountered an even worse receiving: he was investigated by the State as a traitor and partisan with external forces until recently when he was acquitted by the Court. I officially visited him and his Faculty this year through Erasmus+ program and shared the same dimness in clearing things out for our auditorium – his students – which is mostly theologians and future public-opinion-formatters. Anyone with pedagogical skills can clearly see the clumsiness and inaccuracy of us, alumni of the *Religious Pluralism Program in USA*, in our attempts to pass on what we understood and eventually embraced. This is not by far a negligence or a lack of maturity in teaching; against this seeming aspect are giving testimony both our professorship career (in my case, of more than 20 years), as well as the fact that the same limitation was met by many other colleagues from the same program and from different series which I succeeded getting in touch with.

It is very important and with the benefit of the worldwide society that the USA promotes and supports for over two decades the *Institute on Religious Pluralism in the United States*. However, the focus of Programs like this one, in particular, is only to emphasize certain details on the role religious diversity and its acceptance by all the actors of the social theatre has, but it does not offer any leverages whatsoever to someone who wants to develop a theological discourse to promote it in turn. For that reason I want to contribute more

to the understanding of diversity inside the religious area and to the problems related to teaching furthermore the ideas US Institute on Religious Pluralism intends to promote as a worldview. Considering the past few years' events on Islamic exodus and its feedback by the world, I find most required that this two stages of training should be encouraged, supported, fully trained and made operational by all theologian's schools: firstly a training on Religious Pluralism as a primary stage of changing the vision of most religious scholars/leaders into mutual acceptance; but this step should also be unflinchingly followed by a second program in which those who need a secondary, upper training in becoming themselves trainers of the same *Institute* in their home country/town should be regarded as partners and undergo advanced training as teachers and public formatters. This second stage of the program should be focused on modeling devoted scholars to this cause, by helping them became systemic trainers for all public-opinion-formatters and giving them the opportunity to enlarge/structure a curriculum that encompasses all the limitations and technics they need to master for that purpose.

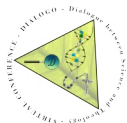
## II. WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH?

I consider as a necessity for nowadays pluralistic cohabitation to improve the receiving of the idea of 'interfaith dialogue and mutual acceptance' and for that matter writing a manual of teaching it to students and future public opinion formatters is also a must-do on behalf of the theologians' teachers. It is a requirement of these latter days, firstly to make people understand the benefits of interfaith, then to make them believe it is the only solution of the social common living in such a religiously diverse society, and finally to provide

methodological and technical support for those who want to become the voices of interfaith in their own environment. I consider useful and equally important to learn from those who conducted such programs over the past years to determine *which are the limits and the limitations of teaching interfaith, who can be selected to do it and who doesn't, and moreover what are the variations and alternatives to interact with other religious believers*, always emphasizing that the interreligious dialogue is the most appropriate one to engage other religions' partisans.

The major aim of this type of research is to find out the reality of an already built-in religious coexistence environment and the facts which are unknown or which has not been yet exposed to the public. For that purpose, the objectives of my research can be grouped into the following categories:

- To achieve skillfulness on teaching 'interreligious dialogue and ways of coexisting' or to get novel opinions into it from people/religious communities that are exposed to diversity in their area (exploratory research);
- To find out the characteristics of the particularity of the religious communities involved in building interfaith acceptance (descriptive research);
- To establish the relationship with which interreligious dialogue occurs or with which it is related to something else, positives like *civil rights, politics, freedom of speech*, or negatives like *aggressive proselytizing, self-preservation or preaching the customized 'single and unequivocal truth'* (diagnostic research);
- To learn what has been done in this regard so far and what were the limitations of this long-term process of building interreligious cohabitation; to learn about the 'who's, 'how's, and 'when's of the process; to find out what are the principles



that run this dialogue as well as the principles from each religion that allow us engage interfaith dialogue. Put them all afterward together in a well-structured handbook on instructing teachers for promoting interreligious dialogue (analytical research).

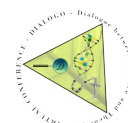
### III. METHODS THAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED IN CONDUCTING SUCH RESEARCH

I made a long and persistent lobby on interfaith within my students and coworkers, and so I finally received some credits on this newer approach for everyone, giving me the possibility of inserting a new discipline (from 2017-2018) in my Faculty of theology for upper students of master, called 'Strategies of the interreligious dialogue', meant to improvise a curriculum for convincing theologian students to go under this umbrella of thinking and embrace mutual acceptance for all other religions. It was tough to do it, especially since I had only the vision of it, without a systematic knowledge and a built-in discipline program. So, instead of organized, well-structured and standardized classes, I had only long hours of conversations, expositions of my traveling and discussions in the USA program, and long conversations/debates on the subject. I cannot say it was unpleasant or fruitless since there were a bunch of students that agreed with the idea and were eager to find out more about this, even if it is not the custom teaching of the Orthodox Church for its students or believers. Still, considering that the State policy is nowadays in favor of integration and tolerance for all religious manifestations, I couldn't be turned off from inserting such discipline and curricula for my students. Yet, a structured and standardized course would make a better chance for both the students and teachers in any faculties from Romania or abroad, that is why I am now conducting such a research with the help of theologians, pedagogues, and social

services, maturing firstly myself from a religious pluralism embracer to a trainer of it, professionally prepared and systematic instructed.

Since there are lots of universities' libraries in the United States filled with books on the subject it will be a tremendous help for this research to receive support from American scholars that helped on the development of this *Institute on Religious Pluralism* for integrating this approach into the present curricula in most of the countries currently still resisting to religious pluralism and cohabitation. I research of course on the internet for any already written handbook on teaching interfaith and I could not say it is unexplored or a virgin territory, but there are hilarious compilations of ideas, desires, aims, or legal bearing – nevertheless written in good intentions, but not strategic and purpose-targeted manuals we really need in this area if we want more than just explaining this fact – of living together in harmony with others. If it comes to convincing people of it, moreover, to transform everyone into allies of promoting interreligious dialogue in a manner that places all the participants into dialogue in a position of equality and embarrassmentless, that requires for sure more than a simple act of preaching and pep talk.

An inherent method needed to be assumed for this aim is to gather additional information from all the religious communities that interact nearby with others or have programs for visiting holy places of other religions, so that it would be a benefit to have a practical chapter about previous attempts to connect with others by all means and objectives, to start or sustain a religious dialogue, and to systemic construct such coexisting. For what it's worth undoubtedly all religions do have pilgrimages to their holy places as well as to other, universal and consecrated places of different religions. In this regard, the religious leaders, teachers,



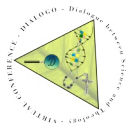
and trip organizers should have figured out strategies on interfaith dialogue and explanations for their own believers to peacefully engage and wonder on the pilgrimages' targets and local miraculous items. We cannot assume that a well-trained tour guide would ever destroy the urban legends that come around the holy items inserted on pilgrimages around the world. Neither would he 'touch' their assumed and consecrated miraculous existence for that would contaminate and abolish the very idea of having a pilgrimage in those religiously diverse land. So, it is easy to foresee that a paradigm speech was always following these pilgrimages to 'others', one we should learn from in order to correct any wrong impressions we thought we'd have in our history on regard to 'others'. I know for sure that there are tremendous efforts from many religious communities worldwide to integrate into the civil society diverse believers (e.g., those of Muslims after 9/11, or the Syrian exodus after 2016), so that it should also be easy to get this chapter done.

Another critical method is to interview and get support from all the professors and assistances encountered during the research. A transcription of their already implemented course – on or outside the program – will also be a considerable benefit in gathering the final curriculum on the handbook.

#### IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS KIND OF RESEARCH

Before going to the USA in 2014, I thought that knowing my religion and protecting 'my people' from entering in contact with other religious partisans is the purpose of any theologian and religious leader. It was a perspective I have learned from the high-school to faculty and doctorate my entire life and the whole professional carrier. Then I received this opportunity to undergo a *Summer Institute on Religious Pluralism* and,

as my teachers from Santa Barbara might testify, I was one of the most questionable, suspicious and doubtful on the reality and possibility of having a diversity of religious manifestation in a single society where all representatives of religious phenomenon can live and interconnect in a mutual acceptance. I was very stubborn to embrace this social creed of my American teachers until the end of the residency in the States. Then I came back from the States to Romania and to my professional carriers, both my parish as well as to my professorship, and I have tried to reconnect with all from that perspective I have lived for three months. When I encountered the inveterate reaction of the people around me against the idea of mutual acceptance and peaceful coexistence with all religious representatives, I was a little disappointed in the beginning, then I remembered that this was my own attitude I went to the States previously with, so I couldn't condemn fellow Romanians for acting according to the custom education. Thus I gave up complaining and pointing fingers on who is most to blame for that, and I became not only a teacher that has embraced an American liberal point of view but an ambassador of that view because I understood the significance of projecting my new education views on interreligious coexistence over everybody that matters onward. For that matter I began writing papers and presentations to all kinds of conferences, national and international, explaining how we should see other religious believers, how they should come to us in dialogue to a mutual acceptance outcome, etc. I went to the representatives of different denominations and ask for their help in building such dialogue, and, as expected, I was received with same awkwardness at first, then I became an example of how religious leaders should try to connect with them, so they offered me a position in their national team-building league on this subject. I even went to Poland and this



year to Turkey, countries with same custom religious education of rejecting 'otherness' when coming to speak of 'heterodoxy' due to their religious majority, i.e. Romano-Catholic in Poland and Islamic in Turkey. I had wonderful experiences with both these teaching visits, for there were students and teachers interested in this point of view, relatively new to them, but very addictive.

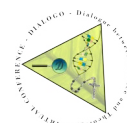
However, I have expended my explanation here with these experiences of mine after the first grant in USA because I encountered a very large and apparently impossible to overcome limitation: the approach I had with all – my students, followers of the church, students from abroad or merely citizens from all these three countries – when I tried to explain my feelings and understanding on religious pluralism, it lets them see the clumsiness with which I tried to fill the workspace and the aleatory approach that stood behind a cheerful desire. In spite of my 20 years of professorship, I couldn't get to make people resonate with this new and challenging way of interacting with other religions and many times the paradigms of thinking and teaching we traditionally work with couldn't get me far in convincing people on the topic of religious diversity. I have tried to improve myself and undergo an online course by Harvard on 'Religious Literacy: Traditions and Scriptures', and I explained this target I want to achieve to Professor Diane L. Moore. Still that course and other that followed could only give me the content for encouraging and filling the information on why we should embrace interfaith, but the "how's" are still missing in the paradigm. The methods of teaching it, the technics of the approach with different kinds of people, trained or not in religious literacy, the limits and limitations of the teaching process are still beyond my reach. That is why I finally decided to reconnect with the titrated teachers in this regard and ask for a higher state of training,

of becoming myself a trainer in religious pluralism, to engage other programs on the topic and train trainees on religious pluralism and coexistence agreement, to write a curriculum and a handbook/manual on that matter as to offer to future public opinion formatters means to teach it up to make people believe in this fellowship.

#### V. THE NECESSITY OF A HANDBOOK ON HOW TO TRAIN OTHERS TO BECOME AN INTERFAITH TRAINER

"A major part of the problem is that a comprehensive religious education does not exist. Furthermore, there is no discussion of religious education in the public arena. When religious education is referred to, it is assumed to be the task of the church, synagogue, mosque, and temple, but those institutions do not use "religious education" for the formation of their members. Each of the religions has its own intramural language of education. This focus of religious groups on the beliefs and practices of their own members is understandable. But where then are the other key elements of education in religious matters that today's enlightened citizen needs? The logical answer would seem obvious: schools that are called public." [4]

As I said previously, there are many books and articles you can find when researching this matter, but all addresses to a general issue, that is why we should engage interfaith dialogue and the motifs or limits we encounter while doing it. Of course, while writing such a handbook you should answer several important questions and issues a paradigm like this is forced to do so. The Paradigm concerns itself with doctrinal matters, but it cannot answer questions such as 'what have different religions to do with each other? What have they to say to each other and in what ways may they benefit or not benefit each other?' [5] And to



those that are questioning the foundation of interfaith we should probably ask in return if the actual religious education is moral or not, since it is always convicting others of something and pointing fingers towards others' beliefs that drove them in society, in families, and in Churches to act as we do too. This is not an ethical appointed issue we should amend, but another problem to address in such research for the simple fact that "adherents of any religion view their religion as the only true religion, and therefore also the only means of salvation" [6].

Building interreligious dialogue is also convicted to many challenges that led to its failure until now on many levels and mostly on producing an un-utopian education in this regard. The first challenge is a lack of focus. For any interfaith dialogue to succeed, all parties must be clear on the conversation's goals. This can help people decide which conversations they should join. For example, if the goal is to discuss complex theological issues, it is necessary to include scripture experts, historians, linguists, and other academics. Lay people and usually younger people may not feel comfortable in these discussions. On the other hand, conversations focused around personal values and experiences would be more appealing to people who do not fit into a defined faith or spiritual category (e.g. agnostics or atheists) or people who are less interested in theology. Academics who want to debate religious minutiae would probably shy away from these discussions. Thus, it is necessary to hold multiple different types of conversations, each geared to a different audience. [7] There are also other, major challenges that the promoters of interfaith have been confronted with over the years. E.g., *proselytizing, or attempting to convert others; compromising their religious identity in order to fit in, and others.* Thus, I find such research on writing a handbook on how to

train teachers and public opinion formatters more than useful, a *Bible* for those who dare to train on the interreligious dialogue of others who can form a positive opinion of the public in this regard.

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