A Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue of Life in Japan

Finding Shared Values for Global Collaboration for the Common Good

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During the past half century, there have been many examples of Buddhist-Christian dialogues in Japan. This article analyzes the dialogue between members of the Risshō Kōsei-kai association and the Focolare Movement, a dialogue that is based on a friendship and a deep spiritual unity that comes from living radically according to one's own religion and being attentive and open to the other's. From their dialogue of life, these Christians and Buddhists have discovered common values based on worldviews that, in some cases, are quite different. The shared values have become the foundation of an interreligious collaboration that is open to the world and to finding solutions to the global issues we all face today.

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2012) 83–95 © 2012

Interreligious cooperation is based on the dialogue of life: a grassroots, living dialogue between persons of different religions. The dialogue of life between people and communities uncovers common values that are necessary for interreligious collaboration for the common good. Given the global issues facing the world today due to factors such as multiculturalism and globalization, this search for shared values can no longer be regarded as optional. This is not only true from a practical point of view, but also for theoretical reflection on global issues. Nisshō Takeuchi, a Japanese monk and a scholar of the Nichiren School, participated in a Christian-Buddhist Symposium held in Osaka and on Mount Hiei in April 2006 sponsored by the Buddhist Japanese association Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Catholic-based Focolare Movement in collaboration with other Buddhist institutions. After the encounter, Takeuchi affirmed:

> In this twenty-first century, humanity has to face a great variety of very complex problems. The natural and human sciences have to give answers to very serious issues; but it is as if they find themselves up against a wall which they cannot climb over. There is need for a global vision which gives light to the individual questions, and which harmonizes the overall vision with the concrete issues in the various fields. The integration of knowledge is an urgent need. This is the direction towards which Christian theology and Buddhist philosophy must work so as to give a substantial contribution to the twenty-first century. Science alone cannot give the answers, it needs religions. . . . I think that Christianity and Buddhism together, in a harmonious way, like two wheels moving in the same direction, can engage the civilizations

> of East and West in profound dialogue and assist humanity in progressing towards a future where the differences are integrated from the very roots in order to reach unity.[1]

The encounter between Buddhism and Christianity in Japan has recently been seeking common values in order to address global problems. This is not the encounter between doctrines or religions in the abstract, but it is carried out when Buddhist practitioners and Christian believers meet each other with reciprocal interest and esteem. In this sense, I think the relationship that St. Francis Xavier established in Japan in 1549 with a Buddhist monk in the very first period of the Christian mission is emblematical. A few weeks after landing in Kagoshima, in a letter sent from that city he writes:

> I spoke many times with the wisest of the bonzes, especially with one for whom all of those living here have great respect, for his scholarship, his life and the dignity he possesses, as well as for his venerable age of eighty years; he is called Ninshitsu which in the Japanese language means "Heart of Truth". . . . It is wonderful to behold how this Ninshitsu is a great friend of mine. Many people, lay and monks, are very happy in our company and they are astonished to see that we come from countries which are very far away—Portugal and Japan are six thousand leagues apart—just to speak about the things of God.[2]

Returning to today, I think it is significant that many Japanese Buddhist leaders were present in the Interreligious Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in October 1986. The following year, in August 1987, inspired by the prophetic gesture of Pope John Paul II, the late Venerable Etai Yamada, head of the Tendai Buddhist sect, convened a Religious Summit on Mount Hiei that gathered religious men and women from all over the world. Just a few months before this summit, I had arrived in Japan and I remember how impressive that event was for me. Rev. Yamada quoted Saichō (767–822), the Buddhist monk who founded the Tendai School on Mount Hiei at the beginning of the ninth century, where Saichō explained the expression *Mōko-rita*, "to forget oneself, to benefit the others," in this way: "Take upon yourself that which is bad and pass on to the others that which is good. Forget yourself and do good to others; this is the supreme expression of compassion."[3] According to Etai Yamada, in these few words we can grasp the very essence and the heart of Buddhist values and of any true religious commitment.

John Paul II himself quoted and commented on this passage by Saichō during his meeting in Tokyo with the representatives of the different religions in February 1981.[4] Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council declares:

> the Church 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

1. Unpublished interview recorded in Osaka, Japan, by C. S. Chiara Productions (Rocca di Papa, Italy), April 27, 2006.
2. S. Francesco Saverio, *Le lettere e altri documenti* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1991), p. 325.
3. Etai Yamada, *Onore wo wasurete ta wo risuru* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1994), p. 38. This title is modern Japanese for the original expression explained by Saichō.
4. John Paul II, *Address to Representatives of Non-Christian Religions*, Tokyo, February 24, 1981, n. 3.

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" (*Nostra Aetate* 2).

The Catholic Church, therefore, encourages Christians to affirm every positive value found anywhere and to establish sincere bonds of friendship with the followers of other religious traditions in search for the common good.

Buddhists and Christians in Japan Seeking Unity for the Common Good

During the past half century in Japan, there have been many examples of dialogues of life both on the institutional level as well as from private initiatives. I would like to examine one such example, namely, the dialogue between the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare Movement based on recent research.[5] Nikkyō Niwano (1906–99) founded the Risshō Kōsei-kai as a Japanese lay Buddhist association in 1938. Niwano was very active in the interreligious field from the early 1960s. Rooted in the universalistic approach of the *Lotus Sūtra*—one of the most important scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Japanese context—Niwano recognized and stressed the positive significance of all religious traditions. Moreover, he was particularly open to Christianity and he maintained many contacts with the Catholic Church. One such contact in particular was influential in his quest for building global peace.

In September 1965, Nikkyō Niwano was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the fourth and last session of the Second Vatican Council. On September 14, he was probably the only Buddhist in Saint Peter's Basilica. Niwano was very impressed by the whole event, but in a special way he was struck by the following words of Paul VI on universal brotherhood and love:

> The love that animates our communion does not set us apart from other men and women . . . does not make us exclusivists or egoists. On the contrary, because it is a love that comes from God, it gives us a universal dimension; our Truth leads us to Charity. . . . While other currents of thought and action proclaim quite different principles for building human society—power, wealth, science, class struggle, vested interests, or other things—the Church proclaims love. The Council is a solemn act of love for humanity.[6]

In response, Niwano writes in his *Autobiography*:

> The love of God of which the Pope had spoken in his opening message to that session of the Second Vatican Council is the same thing as the compassion advocated by Buddhism. The Pope insisted that the love for the neighbor taught by the New Testament must be interpreted to mean love for peoples everywhere, no matter what their nationality or race. Śākyamuni taught the same thing about compassion.[7]

Here we have already a strong link between Buddhist and Christian life: the fundamental value given to charity or compassion that

5. Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore: Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009).

6. Paul VI, *Opening Address—Fourth Session of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council*, September 14, 1965.

7. Nikkyō Niwano, *Lifetime Beginner: An Autobiography* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1978), p. 225.

leads to the ethical commitment to work for the common good. The day after attending the ceremony in the Basilica, Niwano was received in a private audience by the pope. He explains that on this occasion Paul VI said to him:

> I know what you are doing for interfaith cooperation. It is wonderful. Please continue to promote such a wonderful movement. In the Vatican, too, the attitude toward non-Christian religions is changing. It is important for people of religion not to cling to factions or denominations but to recognize each other and pray for each other.[8]

Many times Niwano said that he could not forget the "warm hands" of Pope Paul VI and that he believed that their firm handshake "put blood into the cooperation, friendship, and mutual understanding between Christianity and Buddhism."[9] From that encounter, Niwano deepened his "determination to be a bridge between the two religions, and to extend this bridge to various others religions, as well."[10]

Nikkyō Niwano met Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, in Rome in 1979. Lubich and Niwano found a common spiritual bond with each other and Niwano invited Lubich to Japan twice, in 1981 and 1985. After Chiara Lubich's second trip to Japan, Hans Urs von Balthasar answered a journalist's question about dialogue among Christians and Buddhists in this way:

> If we question ourselves on the meaning of good, we arrive at the definition of love, which is more than only justice. . . . If you speak about love and you bring it to its extreme consequences, you are speaking as a Christian because God is love. I would like to show you what I mean by giving an example. And I have one which deserves to be known. I am referring to Chiara Lubich. She went to Japan and spoke to Buddhists, and they understood. The negation of self, the negation of egoism, self-denial: this is the center of Buddhism. . . . By doing so, the wise man arrives at self-negation . . . and enjoys a peace in which there is no longer concupiscence but a kind of benevolence towards all that exists. But if you say to this wise man: "Yes, it's true, we must deny ourselves. . . . Yes, I must overcome the concupiscence of being myself, but . . . because I belong to Another, because there is Another who loves me." If you tell him this, he will understand. He will begin to see that there is a link between Buddhism and Christianity. Chiara Lubich did this. I believe it can be a model of dialogue.[11]

Hence, the dialogue established between the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare by their founders is not about comparing beliefs or religious practices, but involves living radically according to one's own religion and being attentive to and interested in the other's. In her diary written during her stay in Japan, Chiara Lubich says: "If the Buddhists have the extinguished candle as their

8. Nikkyō Niwano, *A Buddhist Approach to Peace* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1977), p. 87.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 88.
11. Enzo Fondi, "The Focolare Movement: A Spirituality at the Service of Interreligious Dialogue," *Pro Dialogo* 89 (1995): 158.

symbol, a sign that all desires have been extinguished, we Christians have the lighted candle because we are the followers of Love. In fact we have another light in us which must live; it is the light of God in us. If it lives, it is also the extinction of the self."[12]

Interaction between members of the Focolare and the Risshō Kōsei-kai based on generous religious commitments and profound spiritualities has always been a two-way street that brings further light and love to both sides. Being faithful and consistent to one's own religious convictions while remaining radically open to the other's is what assures that from their dialogue of life these Christians and Buddhists discover shared values on which to build a collaboration that is open to the world and to finding solutions to the global issues we all face today.

Truth and the Value of Openness

In the dialogue between the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare in Japan, Buddhists and Christians have many things to learn from each other's visions of life and shared values in building unity for collaboration for the common good. They do not see themselves as religious competitors in the marketplace of spiritual supplies. All are seekers and witnesses of the truth. For the Focolare members, Jesus Christ is the truth itself. Living their spirituality in this light means, in part, to live such that Christ is within and among them giving them his spirit and guiding them to the fullness of truth if they persevere in his love. In doing so, they are open to finding truth lived out by persons of other religions.

Śākyamuni Buddha, explains Nikkyō Niwano, "advocated flexibility when he taught that one must be candid and open and obedient to the truth. . . . One must be ready to accept new truths when they are discovered. . . . There can be no absolute incompatibility among human beings. This is a truth to which we must all become enlightened. . . . To follow the way of truth is to have spiritual and mental flexibility. The person who has these traits can grow in all directions."[13]

Romano Guardini also wrote about the initiator of the Buddhist path using the following words:

> There is only one individual who could be placed in a position close to Jesus: the Buddha. This man is a great mystery. He stands there in a frightening, almost supra-human freedom, at the same time he demonstrates a goodness, mighty as a world power. Maybe Buddha will be the last with whom Christianity will have to argue. What for Christians he signifies, nobody has pronounced so far. Perhaps Christ did not have only one precursor in the Old Testament, John, the last prophet, but also one at the bottom of antique culture, Socrates, and a third one who has spoken the ultimate word of eastern-religious knowledge and overcoming, Buddha.[14]

Given the shared value of openness to the truth in the visions of the other, the dialogue of life and collaboration between the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare in Japan advanced greatly. As a Christian theologian, I would like to explore what other shared values were discovered in this dialogue of life based on openness to the other that in turn have contributed to a long and fruitful

12. Chiara Lubich, *Incontri con l'Oriente* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1986), p. 75.

13. Nikkyō Niwano, *The Richer Life* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1979), pp. 34–35.

14. Romano Guardini, *Il Signore* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005), p. 404.

collaboration between the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare. In doing so, with emphasis on Nikkyō Niwano's Buddhist vision of the truth, I will also describe the substantial insights behind these values that contributed to interreligious unity and to successful collaboration for the common good.

Fundamental Unity and the Value of Peacebuilding

Speaking about why interreligious cooperation is essential, Nikkyō Niwano says:

> In its essence religion does not reject others but instead allows us to think of others with the same regard as we have for ourselves. The oneness of self and others is fundamental to religion. Thus even when it is fractured into different sects and groups, it is not natural that they should fight one another. People of religion should, rather, study each other's doctrines and practices, discuss issues of religious faith that are of mutual concern, and on that basis, work together to establish world peace.[15]

In these words, we find a very important truth: the fundamental unity and equality of human beings. Although it may be interpreted and explained with different categories, we can consider it a common ground of Buddhism and Christianity. For Buddhism, everything and everyone are linked in an interrelatedness of causes and effects, in a continuous interaction among all the elements of the phenomenal world. That is the "Dharma," the Law of dependent arising or the interdependence of all that exists. Nothing exists in or for itself, everything exists in relation to all that exists. Every human being is called to awake to this Universal Law that sustains the whole universe. In every person the same Dharma is at work. If we were to summarize the Buddhist vision of the world and of human existence in a few words, we could possibly express it in this way.

For Christianity, there is also an essential unity and equality between all human beings. It is based on their common dignity, having been created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus reveals the face of God as a loving Father who cares for every man and woman with infinite love; as a logical consequence of this faith, Christianity teaches that all human beings must live as brothers and sisters, as children of the same heavenly Father. The Gospel according to John tells us that the day before his death on the cross Jesus prayed for the perfect unity of his disciples: "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). Jesus is one with the Father. In the Christian faith, he is the Son of God: God who gives himself completely to humankind in the humanity of Christ. As God is one and humankind is created in God's image, humanity is called to realize this fundamental oneness or unity in God. Humankind is called to be perfect in unity, to be one family where reciprocal love renders our fundamental oneness real and tangible, a oneness that embraces all creation.

These notions of a fundamental unity that embraces all beings provides, in part, the shared value of peacebuilding. Both the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare give Buddhists and Christians a living experience of a unity that embraces all creation. Chiara

15. Nikkyō Niwano, "Why Interreligious Cooperation is Essential," *Dharma World* 33 (2006): 33.

Lubich says of her own experience, "[All things] are linked one to another by a bond of love in which each one [has] a reason for loving the other."[16] Here, a hidden unity gives reason for loving others, for peacebuilding, for the ideal of working together for a more united and peaceful world. This shared value has contributed to a collaborating by the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare for peace though the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), of which Nikkyō Niwano is a founder and Chiara Lubich was an honorary president.

Universal Truth and the Value of Compassion

Mahāyāna Buddhism proposes a "Great Vehicle," a path to reach enlightenment suitable for everyone. Within Mahāyāna, the Lotus tradition speaks of *ekayāna* (*Ichijō* in Japanese): the "One Vehicle." This concept, central in the *Lotus Sūtra* and quite popular in Japan, can be understood in an exclusivist way, or, on the contrary, from an inclusive and comprehensive outlook. Usually, Buddhist tradition interprets it from a holistic and all-encompassing point of view: eternal and universal truth must be above every particular expression of it, and at the same time many paths can lead to it. Niwano asserts:

> The *Lotus Sūtra*, in its deepest meaning, is not a proper noun but a common noun meaning the highest and most real teaching, which teaches the truth of the universe to all human beings and leads them to the true way of living. But the real and the highest teaching can never be two. Though it can be expressed in various ways, in its fundamental meaning it is one.[17]

The Zen Master Rempō Niwa, abbot of Eiheiji, the main monastery of the Sōtō Zen School, during the 1986 Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace convened by John Paul II in Assisi, said:

> Generally the faith of human beings is universal: beyond race, sex, or social class. . . . The life of people who communicate intimately in a religious mode is equal without any distinction of rank. . . . Universal truth is reflected in a different way in the diverse religious teachings; fundamentally all the religions are connected with one another.[18]

This deep interconnection between different religious traditions is what is meant in the Japanese expression *Bankyō Dōkon*, "all religions spring from the same root." It is a key notion to understanding the basic Japanese approach to religious diversity and pluralism. As Niwano states, it is universal and it is a way of life, a way of living "truly" as a human being.

The Catholic Church professes her faith in Christ as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) in whom men and women may find the fullness of life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself. At the same time, as the Second Vatican Council declared, "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy" in other religions and "regards with sincere reverence those ways

16. Chiara Lubich, "Paradise 1949," *New Humanity Review* 15 (2010): 9.

17. Niwano, *A Buddhist Approach to Peace*, p. 68.

18. Michael Fuss, Jesús López Gay, and G. Pietro Sono Fazion, *Le grande figure del Buddhismo* (Assisi: Cittadella Ed., 1995), pp. 342–43.

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" (*Nostra Aetate* 2). Here too we find truth referred to as a "ray" of light that "enlightens" people so they can discover a way of living that is "true and holy."

According to Niwano, what is the final, the profound truth? For him, "it is the finding of the infinite life of humankind within the eternal life-force of the universe."[19] True human nature, in its union with the eternal life-force of the universe, is called "Buddha-nature." All beings possess this potential for enlightenment and for Mahāyāna the noblest form of Buddhist practice is the way of the *bodhisattva,* who devotes himself or herself to attaining enlightenment not only for oneself but for all sentient beings. The motivation behind this devotion to the needs of others is compassion. Compassionate care for those in need defines the true way of living in light of the truth.

For Risshō Kōsei-kai members, this compassion is a fundamental value based on one universal truth as understood in the *Lotus* tradition of Buddhism. For Focolare members, love as charity is a fundamental value based on the truth that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Chiara Lubich often notes that the love of God is most clearly revealed in the moment on the cross when Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). At that moment, he became so one with a lost and suffering humanity that he did not sense the presence of God. His compassion as a "suffering with" all humankind in this moment became for Chiara and her followers in the Focolare the ideal model for loving others.[20] In the Focolare's living out this ideal of love, and in the Risshō Kōsei-kai's living out the *bodhisattva* ideal of compassion, the two movements find another shared value in their dialogue of life on which to build their collaboration for the common good.

Ultimate Reality and the Value of Harmony

Niwano explains that the *Lotus Sūtra* expounds the idea that every person is the child of the Buddha:

> The Buddha in this sense means the great life of the universe, which is the very root of all phenomena. In other words, the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches that even though the individual person appears to live a detached existence, fundamentally everybody is an offshoot of the one great life of the universe.[21]

Niwano was convinced that "the basis of all religions is the belief that all human beings are the children of the Buddha or of God" and that "all religions must transcend the limits of individual organizational differences in order to achieve the goal of religion itself."[22]

The Buddha that Nikkyō Niwano speaks about is not simply the historical Buddha. It is the Original and Eternal Buddha, the personification of the Eternal Dharma that can be recognized in the historical Śākyamuni Buddha. In the Mahāyāna tradition, Ultimate Reality is represented by the image of the Buddha, but it

19. Nikkyō Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1980), p. 113.

20. Chiara Lubich, *The Cry* (New York: New City Press, 2001).

21. Niwano, *A Buddhist Approach to Peace*, p. 77.

22. Niwano, *Lifetime Beginner*, pp. 261–62.

remains something formless beyond any conceptualization and any personified image. Niwano writes:

> There are many ways of naming this biggest, most absolute thing. Some call it the Law that creates and moves the universe. Others call it Truth or universal life-force. No matter how it is called, the absolute is the basic force or rule that makes our existence possible and that gives us life. . . . The universal Law . . . controls the lives of all things and does not, therefore, give special treatment to any one living creature or any one human being. Managing everything in the universe means maintaining harmony among all things, all of which are constantly and dynamically in action.[23]

As it is clearly expressed in this quotation, Ultimate Reality in Niwano's understanding remains the Dharma that gives harmony to the whole universe. It is not a personal ontological entity that brings the world and human beings into existence as it is in Christianity and in other Western monotheistic traditions. Rather, Niwano says that religion "is what enables human beings, living in the relative world of things, to perceive the world of the absolute. Religions make the world of the absolute the mainstay of our hearts, allowing us to walk the path of life with sure-footed confidence."[24] Walking ahead on this inner journey toward the deepest layer of their own existence, human beings are set free from the illusion of their independent and possessive self and become radically aware of their interdependent and relational nature. Here one discovers the value of harmony.

23. Niwano, *The Richer Life*, pp. 104–5.
24. Ibid., 80.

From a Christian point of view, in our earthly journey, all of us are travelers, "fellow pilgrims," related in a profound sense. We are all children of the same Father, we are all brothers and sisters, and we must go forward helping each other to advance more and more toward that infinite fullness that abides only in God. In the spirituality of Chiara Lubich, one is called "to walk toward God in unity."[25] Living that unity, Lubich says, one discovers "the magnificent design of [God's] love in all its splendor. . . . this design would be interwoven with other designs, those of the lives of all the other people . . . and the whole pattern would be the work of God . . . [bringing] them harmoniously together."[26] This value of living together in harmony becomes a touchstone in the Focolare for interreligious collaboration for the good of all peoples, nations, and cultures.

At the same time it is important to note that for his disciples, Christ is not just a historical figure of the past to whose teachings we listen. He is the Risen Lord who promised to be with us always until the end of the world. Therefore, even though only in a spiritual way, we can really meet him on the road. The Christian experience is well symbolized in the scene of the disciples of Jesus who were going from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus and met Jesus on the road, as described in the last chapter of Luke's Gospel.

The Mystery of Life and the Value of Gratitude

The basic expression of Buddhist commitment, common to all Buddhist schools, is to take refuge in the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma (interpreted as the Buddhist Doctrine concerning the Universal Law), and the Saṅgha (the Buddhist community).

25. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2007), p. 31.
26. Chiara Lubich, *May They All Be One* (New York: New City Press, 1995), p. 41.

According to Nikkyō Niwano, taking refuge in the Buddha means "attaining a selfless state and entering directly into union with the great life" of the universe. The profound meaning of taking refuge in the Dharma "is the casting off of the ego to reach a state of complete accord with the Truth and the Law of the universe." The meaning of taking refuge in the Saṅgha is "to revere harmony as the highest virtue in human society, to rely on it in one's own life, and to devote one's body and mind to trying to bring it to real life."[27] A primary aim of the Buddhist path for Niwano is to be liberated from the illusion of the self and to become fully aware of being called to express in our lives the cosmic harmony in which we exist.

In general, the Buddhist religious experience does not usually reach the point of experiencing the Transcendent as a personal God with whom we can establish a personal relationship, as Someone to whom we are invited to open our hearts, to listen to, and to whom we can pray and entrust ourselves as it is in the Christian experience of faith. In the Buddhist religious path, the practitioner is not led to meet the One who is the source of existence and to enter into dialogue with Him, but he or she is trained to become aware of the Oneness in which he or she exists and to reach the wisdom of a non-self-centered insight that guides him or her to a compassionate life. For example, Genkai Sugimoto, a Japanese Zen monk who participated in the East-West Monastic Exchange program between European Catholic monks and Japanese Buddhist monks in the 1980s, wrote the following about his experience in the Benedictine Monastery of Montserrat in Catalonia (Spain):

> I think that one of the essential differences between the two religions consists in the fact that the Buddha was a human being, not God. Through his own efforts Buddha reached a state of peace which was fully realized. And he lived as a master who guides others to reach this state of peace. . . . Instead, in the monastery I saw how the Catholic monks diligently endeavor to become humble and obedient before God, praying and praising his holy name. Their greatest concern is God, while ours is our own hearts.[28]

Nevertheless, in Niwano's writings based on the *Lotus Sūtra* tradition, we can sometimes detect a personalistic approach to the Ultimate Reality. He affirms, for instance:

> If one knows the personal experience of being together with God or the Buddha at all times, waking and sleeping, of maintaining a constant dialogue with either of them in one's heart, of being certain that they support one's life, then can we say one is unhappy? Certainly not. . . . This is because either God or the Buddha fills the universe with his reality. They are the basis of life, the truth. By experiencing unity with them, by always knowing that one is together with them, one is assured of great cheer and courage and of great peace.[29]

In this English translation of Niwano's words, the use of the word "God" and the word "Buddha" in parallel can easily lead to

27. Niwano, *The Richer Life,* pp. 138–39.

28. Genkai Sugimoto, "Japanese Buddhists in the Monastery of Montserrat," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990): 202.

29. Nikkyō Niwano, *The Wholesome Family Life* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1982), pp. 20–21.

some misunderstanding. In Niwano's mind, they are not separate realities as in a polytheistic comprehension of the divine sphere, but just different ways of referring to the same Ultimate Reality. The melding of Shinto and Buddhist categories in the Japanese religious experience throughout the almost fifteen centuries of the coexistence of Buddhism and the traditional religion of Japan on its soil has produced a manifold and typical Japanese way of describing the realm of the Sacred. The word *shinbutsu*, for instance, is written with two ideograms that mean *kami*, the Japanese word used to refer to the Shinto divinities and the "superior spirits," and *hotoke*, the Japanese word for Buddha. This very characteristic Japanese word *shinbutsu* refers indistinctly to the Transcendent without specifying a specific religious comprehension of it. This sense of the Sacred remains strong in Japanese religiosity but rather indistinct and undefined, as Saigyō, a twelfth-century Japanese poet, very well expresses when he describes his feelings while being in a Shinto shrine: "I don't know what mystery inhabits this place, but I cannot refrain from weeping in gratitude for it."

In the Risshō Kōsei-kai, one finds deeply sincere gratitude for the "Eternal Buddha" being expressed in ritual as well as daily life and community meetings. In the Focolare, one also finds a deep sense of gratitude toward God for his love and toward Jesus Christ for the new life he has brought. In both, the mystery of the Sacred is expressed in life and gratitude extends to other persons and to nature as well. For the Risshō Kōsei-kai, the Buddha is the personal expression of the "eternal life force of the universe." For the Focolare, everything that happens in life is linked by a "golden thread" that expresses God's love. The shared value of gratefulness inspires both Buddhists and Christians to collaborate for the common good of humankind and for the environment.

Religious Values for Dialogue and Collaboration

My own experience and study of interreligious dialogue in Japan confirms that Saigyō's verse represents a deeply Japanese approach to religion. While Buddhism has its different ways of understanding Ultimate Reality, the import of being religious, of the religious life, has much to do with the value implications of that understanding. The values addressed above of openness, peacebuilding, compassion, harmony, and gratitude lived in dialogue by members of the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare provide a shared basis for collaboration. When a Buddhist encounters a Christian who also lives these values, he or she finds a spiritual friend with whom he or she can live these shared values. Let me cite two quotations taken from Niwano's writings that confirm this fact:

> Caring or worrying about someone else, or being cared or worried about, is what gives happiness in human life. . . . With this caring, we communicate heart to heart, and such an exchange engenders a profound sense of belonging, of oneness. In the Buddhist canon there is a definition of humanity as that which lives between one person and another. The true meaning of this is not what exists merely physically between people but what moves from heart to heart, what thrives on mutual help and a feeling of solidarity. And this, I believe, is the first key to unlocking the mystery of human happiness.[30]

> Christ said that he came not to be served but to serve. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, "Always treat others as

30. Ibid., p. 17.

> you would like them to treat you" (Matt 7:12). This is known as the Golden Rule and is a guiding principle for human harmony. Some proclaim that the golden age of humanity will arrive when the Golden Rule is always observed. Serve others. Be kind. Help those in need. The practice of helping others is in the end the fastest means of making oneself happy.[31]

It is precisely when they put into practice these shared values in the dialogues of life and collaboration that members of the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare recognize each other as religious people and are able to encounter each other's traditions more profoundly. Moreover, they support each other in their shared responsibility to promote these values in society, to educate people in the ideals of solidarity, mutual understanding, and respect, and to work together for the common good and for world peace.

Addressing the Bishops of Thailand in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said:

> The coexistence of different religious communities today unfolds against the backdrop of globalization. Recently I observed that the forces of globalization see humanity poised between two poles. On the one hand there is the growing multitude of economic and cultural bonds which usually enhance a sense of global solidarity and shared responsibility for the well-being of humanity. On the other there are disturbing signs of a fragmentation and a certain individualism in which secularism takes a hold, pushing the transcendent and the sense of the sacred to the margins and eclipsing the very source of harmony and unity within the universe.
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> The negative aspects of this cultural phenomenon . . . in fact point to the importance of interreligious cooperation. They call for a concerted effort to uphold the spiritual and moral soul of your people. In concordance with Buddhists, you can promote mutual understanding concerning the transmission of traditions to succeeding generations, the articulation of ethical values discernable to reason, reverence for the transcendent, prayer and contemplation. Such practices and dispositions serve the common well-being of society and nurture the essence of every human being.[32]

To use Benedict XVI's words, the dialogue of life between members of the Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Focolare Movement is an interreligious example of probing the insights of each tradition concerning "the very source of harmony and unity within the universe." In this joint endeavor, one finds how these insights contribute to the ethical values and dispositions that "serve the common well-being of society and nurture the essence of every human being." Based on this dialogue of life and the values they uncover, many activities of interreligious collaboration between members of both organizations have been carried out in Japan and other parts of the world for the well-being of all humankind and the environment in which we live.

In conclusion, to understand the Buddhist life of wisdom and compassion in depth requires an understanding of the experience

31. Nikkyō Niwano, *Invisible Eyelashes* (Tokyo: Kōsei, 1994), p. 137.

32. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Bishops of Thailand,* May 16, 2008.

that transformed Siddhartha Gautama into the Buddha, the Enlightened One, 2500 years ago. To understand what is at the core of the Christian life of faith and love, we are required to look at Jesus of Nazareth, who gave his life on the cross out of love and who is professed as the Risen Lord by his disciples. But this will not become possible merely with individual, rational effort of intelligence, but rather through vital and spiritual life encounters among truly committed followers of the Buddha and of the Christ. Interreligious dialogue is ultimately not about exchanging information and knowledge, but about communion of hearts in the deepest layer of human existence. It is a shared experience that transforms us into brothers and sisters living together for the common good—for the "common well-being" of all humankind and the natural world.

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