

Gülen, Focolare, and Risshō Kōsei-kai Movements

Commonalities for Religious and Social Renewal

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and to collaborating with persons of other faiths as they address today's problems. They are lay movements founded by laypersons who base their views on their scriptures and accepted traditions in lay spiritualities that emphasize transforming the human condition. They give special attention to the communitarian aspect of religion while balancing it with the personal. Their leaders have a charismatic authority that their followers acknowledge.

Introduction

This paper reflects on the contributions in recent years of three religious renewal movements that have become vehicles for interfaith dialogue. The phenomenon of interfaith dialogue started in the Catholic Church during the years before the Second Vatican Council, has developed in the last forty years, and remains very much alive and growing today. While this fact is known globally, there are renewal movements in other religions that are perhaps less known. This paper reflects on how renewal processes taking place within two religions (Buddhism and Islam) show similarities to one happening within the Christian tradition.

Today, much of the attention concerning the interreligious movement focuses on unexpected changes that happened in the Catholic Church. They were prepared and fostered through theological reflection before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council in the form of messages, documents, and prophetic gestures by the popes, from Pope John XXIII to Pope Francis, as well as by official statements and concrete initiatives and projects organized by the church in the last fifty years. Moreover, in the course of the past half a century, there have been many protagonists in the enterprise of fostering dialogue among people who hold different

This article compares the characteristics of three movements of religious renewal that were born in the second half of the twentieth century and that have been active in interreligious dialogue: the Buddhist movement Risshō Kōsei-kai, which originated in Japan; the Catholic Focolare Movement, which started in Italy; and the Gülen Movement, which was born in Turkey. These religious renewal phenomena hold in common some elements that offer fertile ground for the development of interreligious dialogue: They are open to other religious traditions

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beliefs. One thinks of the Dalai Lama and Thomas Merton, to mention only two widely known and acknowledged figures.

Some institutions and international bodies born in the last few decades have also promoted dialogue. These include the World Conference of Religions for Peace, the Parliament of the World's Religions, the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel, and the recently established King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. Certain religious renewal movements are also important players in the interreligious field, but they tend not to be given the attention they deserve. These movements constitute an interesting phenomenon that is taking place within different religions and appears to be of historical importance. The present paper is addressed to this subject, in the belief that these phenomena deserve more careful study.

Renewal Movements in Different Religious Contexts

The Catholic Church:

An Unforeseen Council and Post-Council Phenomenon

During the middle and last decades of the twentieth century there appeared “new Catholic movements” rooted in and endowed with a strong spiritual dimension. They were born and grew up within the Catholic Church, are active in different parts of the world, and are often referred to as a “Pentecost of the laity.” A good number of the new movements were born out of a reawakening of laymen and, more often, laywomen.¹ A few of them made their

1. This is not something new in the church. But we cannot ignore its significant novelty. In the past, the laity received a spirituality from the monasteries or the communities of consecrated people. Today, the contrary is happening. The spirituality of these

appearance before the Second Vatican Council, and many others emerged after. In general, all are identified as “fruits of the post-Second Vatican Council.”² Whatever the perspective may be, these movements have enriched the *modernity* of the Catholic Church, taking as their priorities some of the great social and ecclesiological issues while ignoring or downplaying other aspects that were considered central in the past.³

These “new Catholic movements” present a variety of characteristics that make them rather different from one another. Nevertheless, they all bear certain distinguishing marks that serve as common denominators. Practically all of them are largely constituted by laypeople following a charismatic leader. They propose a radical commitment to living the gospel. At the same time, they identify their charism with a specific aspect of the evangelical message. Moreover, provide a program of formation for their

movements is often shared by priests and consecrated women and men. Often the religious life of communities is renewed and animated by spiritualities of the laity. See Jesus Castellano Cervera, “Tratti caratteristici dei Movimenti Ecclesiali contemporanei,” *Rivista Vita Spirituale* 39 (1985): 561–64. (English translation by the author of this article.)

2. Massimo Faggioli, *Sorting Out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press), 2014, 6. Lay members of these movements have lived in the postconciliar phase in a different way from the laity who were not associated with any of the new emerging movements. On the one hand, people outside these organizations lived a less complicated experience without the search, which is common to the movements, for adequate recognition by the church. On the other hand, laypeople who were part of the movements suffered much less from the main problems the Catholic Church experienced after the Council. In the face of the progressive failure of the authority of bishops, clergy, and the church in general, they had the reassuring figures of their charismatic leaders and their communities. Second, the pastoral *impasses* experienced by parishes and dioceses after the 1960s were unknown to the growing realities of the new movements. See Faggioli, *Sorting Out Catholicism*, 67.

3. *Ibid.*, 140.

members, focusing on the spirituality brought to life by their charismatic founder. In addition to these aspects, they present a rich galaxy of patterns within the Catholic Church. This diversity justifies the mosaic of definitions they have been given and categories they have been divided into by different scholars and observers.⁴

These movements were born in different cultural and geographical areas of the church. Initially, most began in Europe, but later others appeared in Asia, South America, Africa, and North America. A good number have shown and continue to show great mobility and a remarkable capability of spreading throughout the world, where they are often successful at establishing roots in many different cultural and religious contexts.⁵ In these new situations, and in a relatively short time, they have developed a remarkable capacity to establish bridges among followers of different religions. This development has been surprising and was in no way preplanned. Two such examples are the Sant'Egidio Community and the Focolare Movement. They each pursued a sort of a

4. They have been distinguished as “reform,” “mobilization,” and “church-movements” (Alberto Melloni, ed., *Movements in the Church* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 2003), 13–35); as “lay,” “spiritual,” and “ecclesial” movements (Jean Beyer, *Il diritto della vita consacrata* (Milano: Ancora, 1989), 437–52. An interesting description is offered by Vanzan, who makes a two-fold distinction among the new movements in the Catholic Church as “movements with an intra-ecclesial spiritual and apostolic commitment” and “movements of Christian animation of worldly realities.” (Piersandro Vanzan, “Elementi comuni e identificativi dell’attuale fenomeno movimentista intraecclesiale con cenni a rischi e speranze” in *Fedeli Associazioni Movimenti*, ed. Gruppo Italiano di Docenti di Diritto Canonico [Glossa: Milan, 2002], 187–206). (English translation by the author)

5. This seems to confirm the fact that these Movements are *universal* and *catholic*. They spread all over the world with an extraordinary rapidity. This is an important factor for appreciating their *catholicity* and capability, along with the local church, to enter into different situations and cultures. See: Cervera, “Tratti caratteristici dei Movimenti Ecclesiali contemporanei,” 571.

practical theology that enabled them to meet the growing quest for interreligious dialogue and to address issues such as justice, world peace, religious freedom, and social integration in a world facing unprecedented waves of migration.

Similar Phenomenon in Other Religions

As this change was taking place in Christianity, similar phenomena could be observed within other religions. Among those particularly active in the field of interreligious dialogue are the Mahayana Buddhist Movement; the Risshō Kōsei-kai (RKK), founded by Nikkyō Niwano; and the Islamic Gülen Movement, inspired by Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen. There are also the Swadhyay Movement and the Gandhian Movement in India, the Fo Guang Shan Movement and the Dharma Drum Movement in Taiwan, and the Muslim followers of the Imam W. D. Mohammed in the United States. A great variety of these organizations have appeared in different geographical, cultural, and religious contexts.

This hails a new phase that some scholars have dared to compare to what Jaspers defined as “axial periods” in humanity’s history.⁶ Some observers consider this is an overstatement, the phenomenon being too recent to be identified in this way. Nevertheless, it deserves attention. In this brief analysis, I cannot address all of the communities and groups involved in this process. Instead, I will concentrate on some of them, giving special attention to the

6. Piero Coda, *Teo-logia: La parola de dio nelle parole dell'uomo* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2005), 75. Coda is convinced that today we are witnessing something new; something that in the future could be considered the starting point of a new era. In fact, today, Coda observes, religious identities come in to contact with each other, passing from an exclusive approach to a rather shy but clearly relational approach.

Focolare Movement, Risshō Kōsei-kai, and the Gülen Movement, making occasional references to the Sant'Egidio Community and to followers of Imam W. D. Mohammed and to the Gandhian Movement.⁷ These groups are widely acknowledged as being on the forefront of the interfaith venture, and I will concentrate here on some of the points they share in common.

Religious Movements as Transnational Phenomena

Many of these organizations have become trans- and cross-national phenomena, where interreligious and intercultural dialogue are oriented *ad extra*, rather than *ad intra*, as is the case in many religious organizations. This attitude enables them to work for peace and for the promotion of individuals, communities, and society at large.⁸ This work explains the growing interest in these socio-religious movements on the part of social analysts, political scientists, and diplomats.⁹ Each group appears to be active in the recent and ongoing process of “rethinking religion in world affairs,” and they impact societies at the social and religious levels

7. Gandhi wrote an interesting commentary to the *Bhagavad Gītā* that expressed a clear personal perspective on the tradition of *Sanātana Dharma*. His approach has touched many aspects of religiosity in India, with special and careful attention to the social and political dimension. He is considered one of the last reformers to contribute to what is known as *Neo-Hinduism* or the *Renewal of Hinduism*, a phenomenon that started around the first decades of the nineteenth century and extended through the second half of the twentieth century.

8. Wanda Krause, *Civil Society and Women Activists in the Middle East: Islamic and Secular Organizations in Egypt* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 75.

9. See Gilles Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1991); John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back* (New York: Penguin, 2010); Daniel Philpott, “The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations,” *World Politics* (2000): 206–45; Scott M. Thomas, “A Globalized God: Religion’s Growing Influence in International Politics,” *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali* (2010): 93–101.

as well as in international relationships. It is a phenomenon that is carefully monitored, studied, and elaborated by experts in the field. A number of scholars agree that these movements have an important role to play in the new life religion is taking on in public life and in the relations among nations. Moreover, their inclusive models of behavior and networking expertise represent a new approach to critical socio-religious situations. This positions these movements and groups to serve as vehicles of peace and dialogue not only among individuals but also among communities. That these phenomena were born in the middle or later part of the twentieth century makes them especially attuned to and effective in addressing today’s critical problems.

This context gives them a deep religious foundation and a remarkable capacity to play an important and, at times, decisive role in peace-building processes, in conflict resolution, and in supporting encounters among cultures and followers of different religious traditions. Their members are deeply motivated by long-term religious commitments that have deep spiritual roots, which enable them to facilitate constructive rapports and positive social relations among different groups.¹⁰ These movements, therefore, are transnational and are helping religion regain center stage even in Europe, where for several centuries it was relegated to the private sphere of life.

10. This perspective is shared by many scholars. See John L. Esposito and Ihsan Yilmaz, eds., *Islam and Peacebuilding: Gülen Movement Initiatives* (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2010), 4; Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); Susan Thislethwaite and Glen H. Stassen, *Abrahamic Alternatives to War* (Washington, D.C.: USIP Publication, 2008); Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach, eds., *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contribution to International Peacebuilding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Marc Gopin, “Religion, Violence and Conflict Resolution,” *Peace and Change* (1991): 1–31.

The presence of transnational religious actors is a rather new phenomenon and is not restricted to these kinds of religious movements. Traditionally, religious actors were considered alien to international problems and relations.¹¹ In recent decades, while these renewal movements were born and developed, other religious organizations started gaining a noticeable international relevance. Within the Christian context, the Catholic Church was a clear protagonist, as was Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism. In the Islamic world, organizations from a variety of contexts—including Shia and Sunni—started having a transnational impact. The transnational impact of religious organizations had often been considered a “soft-power” well apart from political and economic influences.¹² But today that analysis is changing.

Vehicles of Dialogue: Focolare, Risshō Kōsei-kai, and Gülen

Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement

Within the Catholic world the Sant’Egidio Community and the Focolare Movement have contributed to the cause of inter-religious dialogue. Sant’Egidio, among its many other activities, has maintained the commitment to the *Prayer for Peace* that Pope John Paul II called for in 1986.¹³ The Focolare has been active on different fronts, basing its experience of dialogue on its vital spiritual dimension of unity, which had developed into different types of collaboration and has reached promising academic levels.

11. Jeffrey Haynes, *Religion, Politics, and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 177.

12. Luca Ozzano, *Tra la Mecca and Bruxelles: Politica in Turchia* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2012), 86–87.

13. The Sant’Egidio Community convenes on a regular basis, holding meetings every fall in a different part of the world with leaders of other religions.

Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, played a prophetic role in this process. She received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1977 in London. Lubich considered that experience the starting point of her opening up to interreligious dialogue and collaboration. Since the early 1980s, she has met with Mahayana Buddhists in Japan and later with Theravāda monks and nuns in Thailand. In the 1990s, she spoke to African-American Muslims in their Harlem (New York) mosque and to the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. Finally, at the dawn of the new millennium, she made several close and deep contacts with hundreds of Hindus in south India and Mumbai. In summarizing the Focolare’s engagement in interfaith dialogue, she has never shied away from acknowledging her surprise at this unexpected development. Her experience of dialogue can be defined more as prophecy than a project:

We are always surprised to see that God has led us along a spiritual pathway that intersects with all the other spiritual ways of Christians, but also of the faithful of other religions. In practice, we become partners along the journey of brotherhood and peace. While maintaining our own identity, it enables us to meet and come to a mutual understanding with all the great religious traditions of humanity.¹⁴

The secret of Lubich’s success in the pilgrimage of dialogue “lies in . . . a spirituality which is both personal and collective [and] . . . which generates a new lifestyle. This spirituality is not the

14. Chiara Lubich, “Can Religions be Partners in Peace Building?” Unpublished paper presented at the Assembly of “Initiatives of Change” (Moral Re-armament), Caux, Switzerland, 2003.

monopoly of our movement. It is the fruit of a charism, a gift of God, and by nature a charism is always destined to all those who want to receive it.”¹⁵ Lubich concludes:

[Working] with many brothers and sisters of the major religions and the brotherhood we experience with them has convinced us that the idea of religious pluralism can shed its connotation of division and conflict, and emerge to represent for millions of men and women, the challenge of re-composing the unity of the human family, so that the Holy Spirit may in some way be present and active in all religions, not only in the individual members but also in the inner workings of each religious tradition.¹⁶

Nikkyō Niwano and the Risshō Kōsei-kai

Nikkyō Niwano (1906–1999) founded the Risshō Kōsei-kai as a Japanese lay Buddhist association in 1938. Niwano became active in the interreligious field beginning in the early 1960s. Rooted in the universalistic approach of the *Lotus Sūtra*—one of the most important scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism in the East Asian context—Niwano recognized and stressed the positive significance of all religious traditions. 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.

15. Chiara Lubich, “What is the future of a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious society?” Unpublished paper presented in London, June 2004.

16. Lubich, “Can Religions be Partners in Peace Building?”

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.¹⁷

This flexibility inspired, in part, Niwano’s openness to interreligious dialogue. Speaking about why interreligious cooperation is essential, he 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.¹⁸

Another dimension of Niwano’s commitment to dialogue is deeply spiritual. It arises from the Awakening of the compassionate mind in Mahayana Buddhism that connects each of us to all living beings. This realization brings out a spiritual connection to others that Niwano describes in this way:

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

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

18. Nikkyō Niwano, “Why Interreligious Cooperation is Essential,” *Dharma World* (2006): 33.

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.¹⁹

In a note written in 1993, Nikkyō Niwano and his son Nichiko, future president of Risshō Kōsei-kai, acknowledged that “only through the grace of God and Lord Buddha’s benevolence” had they come to the awareness of being engaged in “the same mission of working for the salvation of the whole mankind.”²⁰ Lubich, commenting on the developing friendship between the two movements, expressed the “hope that there may be other movements which have come to life for this very goal. We have to discover them.”²¹

Fethullah Gülen and the Gülen Movement

In the vast field of interreligious dialogue, there have been movements that originated in specific contexts whose characteristics were not necessarily oriented toward dialogue. Only in the course of time did they become active in building bridges among communities and individuals of different faiths and cultures. The

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

20. Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore: Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009), 206. Also see Cinto Busquet, “A Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue of Life in Japan: Finding Shared Values for Global Collaboration for the Common Good,” *Claritas* (2012): 83–95.

21. *Ibid.*

movement initiated by Fethullah Gülen in the Islamic context is an outstanding example. Gülen is an extraordinary Turkish imam and religious leader who proposed a new reading of the Qur’an that gave special attention to the education and orientation of young generations toward the values of peace, mutual understanding, and world harmony. The concept of *Hizmet* (Service), which probably best defines this movement, draws its inspiration from the teaching and the life of Said Nursi.²² Born with a markedly national Islamic character,²³ the renewal Gülen initially proposed has changed, opening toward other faiths and cultures. With different names, through independent groups and communities, and operating in a variety of ways, this Turkish-born Islamic renewal organization is fast spreading all over the world.

Collectively, the organizations Gülen inspired offer an interesting and modern example of the possibility of harmonizing, within the framework of Islam, modernity and tradition, spirit and reason. As in the other movements (Focolare, Sant’Egidio, Risshō Kōsei-kai), it is almost impossible to determine the number of persons involved in *Hizmet*. However, notwithstanding the lack of a defined identity, the organization’s international spread in recent years has made it both transnational and cross-cultural, ensuring the relevance of this Turkish religious renewal movement at global, social, and interreligious levels of engagement. Gülen’s own regard for the other religions his movement is encountering has opened the door to committed interreligious dialogue. For example, Gülen comments:

22. For more information on Said Nursi, see Thomas Michel, *Reflections on Said Nursi’s Views on Muslims-Christian Understanding* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2003).

23. We can observe a clear evolution in Gülen’s thinking. His approach clearly originated in Turkish nationalism, the Islamic religion, and the patrimony inherited from the Ottoman Empire.

Regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom are all values exalted by religion. Most of these values are accorded the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, upon them be peace, as well as in the messages of Buddha and even Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and the Hindu prophets.²⁴

Gülen's writings convey deep spiritual insights concerning humanity and unity that in many ways resemble those of Lubich and Niwano:²⁵

Even though the “renewer” (*Mujaddid*) had been awaited as a single individual, at a time when the world has become more global and we are experiencing a “shrinking” of distances both in time and space, and peoples apparently living far apart have become members of the same household, service to humanity (*hizmet*) should be undertaken, not by exceptional individuals, but rather by the collective body.

People who share the same soul, the same meaning, and the same thought will certainly unite, even though they are far apart, just like rivers flowing into the same sea, reaching the target sometimes by carving into mountains or by finding

out different routes when their paths are blocked by visible or hidden obstructions; or like those who have intended for pilgrimage may meet at Arafat, Mataf, or Rawza. It does not matter if they had the intention to meet or not, the domains they would like to do services at will unite them, and they will represent this grand truth with a hope-inspiring “collective gathering” (*cemm-I gafir*).

Commonalities among Renewal Movements

Lay Founders and Lay Leadership

The commonalities among these renewal movements are striking. The first and rather obvious commonality is that most of them were founded by laypeople, keep a lay leadership, and maintain a large majority of lay membership.²⁶ What matters most is that the lay character of these organizations is not seen in contraposition to the tradition or clerical domain of the respective religions.²⁷ Rather, it is a way to actualize religious values and teaching among people in today's social context. The Focolare Movement's president, according to its *Statutes*,²⁸ will always be a laywoman. The

26. This is obvious in the Catholic renewal movements, as with Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant'Egidio Community, and Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement. But Nikkyō Niwano, who gave birth to the RKK, was a layman and so is his son Nichiko, the current president. Gandhi was a layperson. W. D. Mohammad and Fethullah Gülen, though imams, have been involved in lay work and activities and they are not considered part of the formal clergy within Islam.

27. This is not to suggest that there are no tensions in the course of the developments of these new realities. There have been misunderstandings and difficult encounters between lay reformers and clergy of the respective religions. But these have never led to a fracture. On the contrary such conflicts often have resulted in a positive influence on both the new streams of spirituality and the traditional religious thinking and structure.

28. *Statutes of the Work of Mary*, Article 2.

24. Quoted in Lester Kurtz, “Gülen's Paradox: Combining Commitment and Tolerance,” *The Muslim World* (2005): 377.

25. *Prizma* 1, 130. Quoted from an unpublished paper by Bekim Agai in Marcia Hermansen's unpublished paper, “Understanding of ‘Community’ within the Gülen Movement,” 2005: 25–26.

Gülen-inspired organizations around the world have lay names and are formed and presided over by laypeople, often professionals or teachers. The RKK has already appointed as its next president Mrs. Kōshō Niwano, daughter of the present leader of the movement and granddaughter of the founder, giving a clear sign of continued lay leadership.

An Anthropological Approach

Another commonality among the founders of these different socio-religious realities is the approach to the human person. Though rooted in their respective traditions and cultures, as well as in the scriptures of the different religions, these movements share a common vision of the human being that paves the way for awareness of the universality of the human family and of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all men and women. They all see men and women as embodying the image of God or as an expression of Ultimate Reality (Buddhism) who somehow carry a spiritual presence within. Chiara Lubich wrote to some young friends in 1947:

Always fix your gaze on the one Father of many children. Then you must see all as children of the same Father. In mind and in heart we must always go beyond the bounds imposed on us by human life alone and create the habit of constantly opening ourselves to the reality of being one human family in one Father: God.²⁹

This statement provides the first hint of what later will become the foundation of Lubich's perspective in interreligious dialogue. In fact, all men and women are considered to be candidates for

building a relationship of fraternity and unity. In the course of time, Lubich proposed a technique for making this possible: *the art of loving*. The founder of the Focolare proposed this methodology to people of all cultures, religions, and social backgrounds, taking the Golden Rule, a principle that is present in all sacred texts, as the foundational paradigm. The art of loving can be summarized in the following way. First, we must *love everyone*, which means not to allow any discrimination as we can recognize the "image of God" in everyone. Second, we must *love always* and *take the initiative*, without expecting to be loved in return. Finally, we must *love the other as ourselves*, that is, truly enter into the other and live in the skin of those who are different from us, to the point of feeling their sufferings and joys as our own, in order to understand them and help them concretely and efficiently.

The same year that young Lubich wrote this passage, Mahatma Gandhi, just a few months before he was killed, wrote the following in the journal *Harijans*: "Consciousness of the living presence of God within one is undoubtedly the first requisite [of nonviolence]."³⁰ Fethullah Gülen often quotes a line from Yunus Emre, a famous Turkish mystic and poet, who lived in the thirteenth century: "We love the created for the sake of the Creator."³¹ Influenced by Said Nursi, the metaphor of a community of people as a "family" is very strong in Gülen's thought. Nursi stated that "mutual compassion" is "the pure and powerful 'way of friendship and brotherhood' within the circle of [people and] . . . shows the Companions' way of brotherhood."³² Building this family

30. Mohandas Gandhi, *Harijans* (1947): 209.

31. John L. Esposito and M. Hakan Yavuz, eds., *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 65.

32. Said Nursi Beduzzaman, *The Flashes* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1996), 355.

29. Chiara Lubich, *The Art of Loving* (New York: New City Press, 2005), 29.

of humankind became one of the supreme goals of the Gülen Movement.

In the Buddhist context, one of the key points of Niwano's philosophy of life, which is drawn from the *Lotus Sūtra*, is the teaching that "all human beings are a manifestation of the Vital Force of the universe and therefore are equally important and carry the same value. Here is the crucial element for justifying the potential harmony of the universe among human creatures and among persons, nature and cosmos."³³ It is from this perspective that Niwano develops an anthropological vision of the world that justifies his commitment to peace and harmony and, therefore, to dialogue.

This shared anthropological perspective is the basis for similarities in the philosophies of those who have inspired and initiated these movements. But beyond this preliminary comparison, circumstances, at times unexpected, have put members and even the founders of these organizations in contact with each other. This shared perspective has led to cooperative projects and mutual friendships, despite their differences. This process of dialogue, which initially was rather scattered due to the spontaneity with which encounters happened, little by little has taken an increasingly formal shape, creating a wide network of relationships across geopolitical areas and cultural and religious boundaries.

A Communitarian Dimension

Given the structure and the spirit of these movements, special attention should be given to the communitarian dimension of their religions. In the Christian context, Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement propose a collective spirituality that has as its models the family of Nazareth and the early Christian community

33. Nikkyō Niwano, *Basic Buddhist Teachings* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1981), 9–10.

of Jerusalem. This communitarian dimension probably represents the most significant and characteristic aspect of the Focolare. Its founder spoke about it on many occasions, later finding confirmation in the Vatican II Council and in the thought of many theologians who suggest an image of the church that can be summed up in the word "communion" (*koinonia*).³⁴ The Catholic Church emerged from the Council with a renewed awareness of the meaning of *koinonia* and of its vital relevance to today's world.

The experience of Chiara Lubich, which led to the birth of the Focolare Movement, started in the very years in which the premises destined to lead to the Council's experience were taking shape. The starting point was marked by an overwhelming discovery: God is love! Lubich first lived this experience at the personal level, but immediately shared it with other companions. It was destined to bring into the church the new spirituality that has been defined as a *people's spirit*. There were premonitions of this coming through the writings of theologians and others even before the Council itself. Karl Rahner, for instance, in speaking of the spirituality of the church of the future, imagines it as a "fraternal communion in which it is possible to make the same basic experience of the Spirit together":

Those of us who are older . . . have been spiritually formed in an individualist way. . . . If there ever was an experience of the Spirit made in common and commonly held to be so, . . . it is . . . the experience of the first Pentecost in the

34. Even though the Second Vatican Council does not speak specifically of the church as "communion," but rather as "a sacrament of communion," the fact remains that "ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental ideal of the council documents" (Final Report of 1985 Synod of Bishops, II, C)

Church, an event—we must presume—which did not consist certainly in the casual meeting of a collection of mystics who lived individually, but in the experience of the Spirit made by the community. . . . I think that in a spirituality of the future, the element of fraternal spiritual communion, of a spirituality lived together, can play a more decisive role, and that slowly but surely, we must continue in this direction.³⁵

Today the Focolare presents a spirit based on the categories of love and communion that generate small or larger communities in cities and towns, schools and factories, offices and parliaments, engaging families, youth, children, priests, consecrated people, and professionals who try to live religion in the very milieu where they operate. For them, religion is no longer a private affair, nor is it something confined to certain aspects of life. It can be lived everywhere and not just alone but in a group giving witness as the early Christians did.³⁶ Lubich has always been strongly convinced that, after centuries of individual commitment, Christians are called to witness to a communitarian dimension of their religion:

Times have changed. The Holy Spirit is now forcefully calling men and women to walk side by side with other people, indeed, to be one heart and one soul with all those who so

desire. Twenty years before the Council, the Holy Spirit impelled our Movement to make this solemn change of direction towards others. In the spirituality of unity, we go to God through our neighbor. “I–my neighbor–God,” we used to say. We go to God together with humanity, together with brothers and sisters; even more so, we go to God by way of human beings.³⁷

Nikkyō Niwano often stated that of the three treasures or jewels of Buddhism, *sangha*, the community, is by all means the most important.³⁸ In fact, the Japanese religious leader notes that a person all alone will never be able to know and to grasp truth. The process is much simpler and more effective if people are in a group: even better is if there is a community where it is possible to support, to encourage, and to enlighten.

This conviction finds practical expression in the *Hōza* (Dharma Sitting), the meetings that take place regularly among members of the RKK. Participation in *Hōza* is one of the main tasks and duties of the members of this Buddhist movement. The groups in which the RKK is divided are places to put into practice the spirit of RKK. They can be defined as its “life.” To ensure the desired results, these groups should comprise between three and twelve persons. The novelty is that the sharing regarding personal, professional, or family problems is not taking place in private but in a group where everyone listens to the problem and then with the group leader contributes to finding a solution. It is a sort of religious counseling whereby the leader guides the person on the path

37. Chiara Lubich, *A New Way: The Spirituality of Unity* (London: New City Press, 2006), 26.

38. The other two are the *Buddha* and the *Dharma* (teachings).

35. Karl Rahner, “Elementi di spiritualità nella chiesa del futuro,” in *Problemi e prospettive di spiritualità*, ed. Tullo Goffi and Bruno Secondin (Brescia: Queriniana, 1983), 440–41.

36. It is worth referring to Tertullian, who bore witness to this: “‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another,’ for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; ‘how they are ready even to die for one another,’ for they themselves will sooner put to death *Apology*, 37).

of authentic life with the support of the others and drawing on the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*.³⁹

The methodology adopted is one of deep silence and listening to the problems of the group member so that he or she may feel understood in the critical period he or she is experiencing. A second phase of the process involves the search for the causes of the problem in view of transforming negative into positive, evil into goodness. At the conclusion, it is necessary to act upon the problems that have been shared and to adopt practical and vital solutions based in part on the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The positive effects will be treasured not only for the individual but also for his/her family, relatives, and colleagues. In this way *Hōza* contains a truly communitarian dimension whose positive effects extend to families, communities, neighborhoods, working places, and so on.⁴⁰ The communitarian dimension proposed by RKK is clear: It is of religious value to tackle problems not so much as individuals but as a group. On the basis of counsels received and help from *Hōza* companions, one can come to a practice that makes individuals better people and has an impact on the environment.

Fethullah Gülen speaks of the communitarian dimension of Islam. Many of his writings demonstrate a perspective that is amazingly close to those of Lubich and Niwano. He is of the opinion that “in our times no single individual on their own can attain such a [high spiritual] stage (*makam*). Indeed we can only seize the heights through the affiliating to a collective personality.”⁴¹ In

39. Tarcisio Alesandrini, *Giappone nuovo e antico: Studio fenomenologico sul movimento buddhista Rissho Kosei-kai; Il vero e il perfezionamento nella condivisione* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2007), 283.

40. Ibid., 283–85.

41. Gülen, *Fasildan Fasila*, 1k 172, quoted in Hermansen, “Understanding of ‘Community,’” 25–26.

the perspective of the Turkish reformer, people who form the collective spiritual body come from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. Each contributes in his/her own way, some more than others, according to their respective possibilities. This collective dimension aims at engaging anyone ready to work in harmony with others. There are no special requirements or qualities needed, though the most suitable people remain teachers and educators, along with the responsible of the madrasa and the animators (or guardians) of the living communities.

A central aspect in Gülen’s perspective is the *cemaat*,⁴² or community. This is a new form of Islamic self-organization that grew in reaction to the urbanization process in Turkey that weakened relations among kin and existing forms of organization such as the Islamic brotherhoods.⁴³ As Hermansen says:

The *cemaat* is a unit of individuals, sharing the same feelings, thoughts, aims and ideas and adjusting their life along this line of unity, helping the individual to enhance the religious productivity through joint work. It helps to profit from the good deeds, which are achieved with others and helps to avoid individual mistakes on the worldly path to God.⁴⁴

These communities help individuals overcome personal limits and give guidance and strength for coping with the secular world that distracts the believer from his or her faith.⁴⁵

42. It is the Turkish equivalent of the Arabic *jama’at* (community).

43. See Hermansen, “Understanding of ‘Community,’” 10.

44. Ibid., 10–11.

45. Ibid., 11.

A second example of the communitarian approach to religion is the “lighthouses” of the Gülen-inspired movements.⁴⁶ These are places where followers meet regularly, and as such they form the core of the entire vast network. Gülen calls them “a tree, the seed of which was planted in the times of the Prophet Muhammad himself. He sees their roots within the Qur’an (24/36f) itself, thus giving the *cemaat*’s own form of organization the highest Islamic virtue and the essence of Islamic education par excellence.”⁴⁷ These communities are a convergence point of two central aspects of the renewal movements: the community dimension and contact with the scriptures.

The Scriptural Dimension and Modern Interpretation of Texts

The reading of sacred texts represents another fundamental characteristic of the renewal phenomenon across the different religious traditions. Although the movements are carriers of great change and adaptation within their respective religions, they never drift away from their scriptures and neither do they offer viewpoints in contrast with them. They are all scripture-based organizations. In fact, the sacred texts are read and meditated upon for the benefit of all members of the group by the founder or by people well trained in scriptural studies. The process ensures a progressive awareness of one’s identity and offers the possibility of transforming through religious teachings the social and human milieu where one lives.

46. In practical terms, the *lighthouses* are flats rented or purchased by *cemaat* businessmen where poor students can stay affordably during their studies. Each “house of light” is under the direction of an *abi* (older brother) who helps to educate the students.

47. Hermansen, “Understanding of ‘Community,’” 13.

All of this is based on the effort to make the holy books of the respective religions relevant in today’s society.

The gospels had a central place in the initial experience of Chiara Lubich and of the first group of her companions. The early stage of their experience was, in fact, a rediscovery of the gospels, accompanied by the understanding that the sentences were not only to be read or meditated upon but above all *lived*. They understood the relevance of religion to daily living by putting into practice the words of the gospels and thus succeeded in joining these two aspects, which were at the time often separated from each other. They started living the gospels, sentence by sentence, and this practice in the Focolare Movement developed into what is called the *Word of Life*: “Having discovered the uniqueness and universality of the Words of God, while we were still in the air-raid shelters, we felt the desire to translate them into life, one by one. This was the beginning of a practice that continues today too, fifty years later, and will never end.”⁴⁸

During her life, Chiara Lubich selected this passage from the liturgical readings of the month and with her commentary proposed it to members and followers of the movement. They read the passage from scripture and the commentary, shared feeling and insights, and tried to put those words into practice in their lives wherever they found themselves. Thanks to this ongoing practice, the members of the movement live a sort of re-evangelization, relearning the gospels by putting them into practice. Moreover, the *Word of Life* contributes to the communitarian dimension of religion since the members of different groups and communities gather together to share how they tried to live the sentence of the

48. Lubich, *A New Way*, 47.

month. In Lubich's words: "It is not enough to live them [the words of the gospels] on our own. We need to share our experiences on the Word of Life with one another. . . . Thus we evangelize ourselves as individuals and as a community. We become more and more Jesus, individually and collectively."⁴⁹

Suat Yildirim acknowledges that an element that clearly and immediately surfaces in Gülen's texts is the author's awareness of the classical commentary of Islamic tradition on the Holy Book. At the same time, there are new viewpoints that nevertheless remain well within the Qur'anic exegesis.⁵⁰ Gülen's reading of the Qur'an is not so much a literal one as one that seeks the deep link with the universe, with humanity, and with Allah. Here are Gülen's words about this connection:

Qur'an is a translation of this universe as a book. Yes, the universe is a book. It is needed for a reader to read this book, which is well-organized with all of its verses and pages. The reader is human and the interpretation of this book is Qur'an. Allah has sent Qur'an as a translation of the universe to the human beings who can not grasp the universe's immense, deep meaning and its huge vision. This meaning that we cannot easily understand by looking at the big pages and phrases of the universe, we can see at a first glance in the Qur'an, the Miraculous. This is a favor for the human beings. Allah is the one to make the universe book speak. As the others' thoughts upon the universe would be wrong, it is also the same with humans. The Universe is the universe

of Allah, Qur'an is the speech of Allah and humans are the slaves of Allah. Allah is the one to establish the interrelation between these three.⁵¹

Gülen suggests that the Holy Book be read in the light of these three elements. But at the same time he emphasizes that a true interpretation is the one centered on the human person since the Holy Book was revealed for humankind. Separation between these three elements in the course of history has provoked true disasters, while peace prevailed every time the text was read in the light of these three elements.⁵² Moreover, an appropriate reading of the Holy Book requires a sharing of heart and soul. It has been noticed that Gülen's comments offer a sort of path that leads the believer to an active life. Other commentators on the Qur'an have defined this approach to the sacred text as a "dynamic exegesis."⁵³ This generation of commentators claims that the Qur'an, when duly examined and deepened, is not a book that leads to the separation of religion from life.⁵⁴

The sensitivity of Gülen's reading requires that two more aspects be taken into account while reading the Holy Book. First, the diaspora, a phenomenon Turkish Muslims witnessed in the

51. *Fatiha Üzerine Mülâhazalar*, 25, translated by Faruk Turcer in a conference paper, "Fethullah Gülen's Methodology of Interpreting the Quran," Second International Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World," 2006, 93.

52. Turcer, "Fethullah Gülen's Methodology of Interpreting the Quran," 93–4.

53. The scholars Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and Mawdūdī (1903–1979) coined the phrase "dynamic exegesis." See Yildirim, xvii.

54. "On the contrary, it is a call that demands implementation and practice in life—a Divine call which descended gradually and in parts in response to questions asked or problems to be solved or in connection with certain occasions and circumstances leading up to the revelation of particular verses" (Yildirim, 2011: xvii).

49. Ibid., 48.

50. Suat Yildirim, *Kuran'la Diriliş* (Istanbul: Timas Yayinlari, 2011), vii.

last decades of the twentieth century, has led to a multicultural experience:

Under the wide umbrella of the deep insight of religio-mystical tradition of Islam embedded in its rigorous multicultural flavor, Fethullah Gülen undoubtedly utilizes and practices [a] hermeneutical method in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. It is important to underline that an interfaith and intra-faith dialogue using hermeneutical approaches by no means require an a priori dismissal of the more exclusivist interpretations of Qur'anic verses. In fact, it would be a misuse of the new matrix of dialogue to load it with a particular political or philosophical agenda other than the foundational conviction that interfaith (and intra-faith) dialogue is inherently good and necessary for the welfare of the participating traditions as well as for the welfare of the human family in general.⁵⁵

Second, a new reading of the Holy Book of Islam must be done in personal contact with the "religiously other":

The infinite potential of scriptural meaning, would encourage two complementary activities when faced with any scriptural text that posed a challenge (either positive or negative) for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding and trust. The first of these activities is delving as deeply as possible into all the contextual resources available for interpreting these texts. This not only means reading Qur'anic or Biblical passages in light of other proximate and otherwise

55. Esposito, 235.

related Qur'anic or Biblical passages. It also means using all the available tools of historical research and even historical development to uncover key elements of the original context of a given passage's revelation (in the case of the Qur'an). . . . The second of these activities should involve a certain imitation of the field actors who have real-living experience in being together politically, economically, and culturally with the religious other in their own country or abroad, beyond their country of origin. Fathullah Gülen communities all over the world have this genuine living experience. They have actual experience of being global. In this case, the experience that would be most significant would be that of the encounter of the cultural and religious other.⁵⁶

This approach seems to succeed in harmonizing a reading of the text with three important aspects: (1) a sensitivity and openness to the Islamic diaspora in the multicultural world, (2) the possibility of an encounter with other religious traditions as a context for reading the Holy Book, and (3) the opportunity for dialogue offered by Gülen's own groups in different corners of the globe. What emerges is a perspective that can be defined as "Oneness of Humankind." This perspective allows a reading of the Qur'an that eliminates the danger of thinking that some communities or groups, because of their religion or culture, do not have a real chance of being in relationship with God.⁵⁷ According to this perspective, it is possible to trace and to appreciate God's presence

56. M. Amin Abdullah, "Muslim-Christian Relations: Reinventing the Common Ground to Sustain a Peaceful Coexistence in the Global Era," unpublished conference paper, 7.

57. Syafa'atun Almirzanah, *When Mystic Masters Meet* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2009), 194.

and His action in all religious traditions. In no way does this approach intend to wipe away real and existing differences. What has to be brushed away is the exaggerated pride that leads to statements such as “God is with us and not the other.”⁵⁸ For Gülen, “spiritual practice and morality are . . . more important than ritual and dogmatism” and, as Lester Kurtz indicates, for him there are four pillars—love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness—“that open the way for dialogue with other faith traditions.”⁵⁹

Although the RKK has so far maintained a remarkable autonomy as far as community and religious ceremonies are concerned,⁶⁰ it has not broken away from continuity with the millennia-old tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. As a text of reference for the followers of his movement, Niwano opted for the *Lotus Sūtra*. The RKK has drawn also on commentaries from Nichiren and Tendai Buddhism, both of which have based their traditions on the same sutra.⁶¹

Niwano has found in the *Lotus Sūtra* what he sees as the essence of Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings, which open up in an exhaustive way the true form of the universe where we live, the nature

of human being, and the modalities of human behavior toward all other living creatures.⁶² This exhaustiveness can well explain his choice of this text as a reference for his own personal religious experience and for those who follow it through the movement he has founded. The Buddhist reformer’s great respect for and commitment to the sacred text is evident in his decision⁶³ to spend seven years in seclusion (away even from his own family) in order to study the *Lotus Sūtra*. The RKK founder spent this time questioning himself on the true meaning of the text. It was for him a paradigmatic experience in his own life.⁶⁴

He found in the sacred text several answers to his own search. First of all, he realized how meaningful is the fact that the *Lotus Sūtra*, written seven hundred years after Buddha’s death, makes its appearance at the dawn of the Japanese civilization and that ever since then it has been handed over from generation to generation.⁶⁵ Moreover, the sacred text provides Niwano with the foundation for action and the path to peace. This foundation serves as the inspirational source for the movement he established. Within the folds of the *Sūtra*, Niwano grasps that the search for the Truth cannot be uprooted from the vital context in which human beings

58. This statement, of course, will be difficult for the closed religious societies and will create much and serious difficulty in the traditional culture, which is closed to “the other.” See Abdullah, “Muslim-Christian Relations,” 8.

59. Lester R. Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village*, 1st ed. (London: Sage, 2005), 373–74, 377–38.

60. In fact, rites and ceremonies are officiated by laypeople appointed, after sufficient studies, by the internal hierarchy of the movement, who are themselves laypersons.

61. For many centuries, the *Lotus Sūtra* has been one of the main scriptures of Japanese traditional Buddhism. Some of the main schools, including Tendai and Nichiren, consider it their foundational text. It is important to note that the reading and interpretation of this text, in the course of the centuries, have provoked a number of attitudes and positions within Mahayana Buddhism itself, offering, on the one hand, rigid exclusivism, and, on the other, openness and tolerance. See Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell’amore: Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano*, 109.

62. Nikkyō Niwano, *Buddhism for Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1990), 3.

63. It was strongly recommended by Myōko Naganuma, the woman considered to be a cofounder of the RKK, who died in 1956. For Niwano the decision to devote himself to the study of the *Lotus Sūtra* meant being away from his family for seven long years.

64. “Many people probably consider seven years of concentration on one Buddhist classic to the exclusion of the others was tantamount to mental imprisonment. To be frank, I too sometimes suffered from loneliness and a sense of isolation. I even condemned what I was doing as irrational, but throughout the whole period, I remained convinced that it was part of my discipline. . . . I do not know what the other people may think, but for me this was the time of great fulfilment and immense value” (Nikkyō Niwano, *A Guide to the Lotus Sūtra* [Tokyo: Kosei, 1982], 45–6).

65. Nikkyō Niwano, *A Lifetime Beginner* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1978), xxi.

live their daily lives. On the contrary, scripture has to walk hand in hand with service for the other, which represents the main road toward spiritual perfection and freedom of spirit:⁶⁶

I was unable to restrain my burning passion to seek the Truth and to serve others in the compassionate spirit of the bodhisattva. . . . The person who makes up his mind to devote himself to the service of others suddenly feels relieved and happy. He is no longer burdened with selfish desires. The daily things that cause grief cease to bother him. Bonds dissolve; he is free.⁶⁷

We can now see that the reinterpretation of the respective scriptures and the effort to make them relevant to today's world, finding in them answers to today's problems, makes the scriptures relevant to the cause of interfaith dialogue. Niwano, for instance, expresses the conviction that inasmuch as the different faiths will succeed in remaining faithful to the Truth, while also opening up to the Truth expressed by other religions, they will end up coming closer to each other.⁶⁸ Another common effort involves putting the respective scriptures into practice without limiting oneself to reading or meditating on them. Furthermore, in the course of this process, it is necessary to approach the scriptures of one's own religious traditions in front of "the other," keeping an open mind

66. Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore: Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano* 109. "I was unable to restrain my burning passion to seek the Truth and to serve others in the compassionate spirit of the bodhisattva. . . . The person who makes up his mind to devote himself to the service of others suddenly feels relieved and happy. He is no longer burdened with selfish desires. The daily things that cause grief cease to bother him. Bonds dissolve; he is free" (Niwano, 1978: 81).

67. Niwano, *A Lifetime Beginner*, 81.

68. Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore: Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano*, 111.

in order to avoid the danger of denying the possibility of God's experience within a tradition other than one's own.

For example, as his spiritual experience progressed, Niwano acquired the conviction that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the highest Truth. Truth is, and does remain, one. But in the Buddhist reformer's open perspective, he found that while the Truth may be expressed through Buddha's words, it is not exhausted in those words. Although the Buddha's teachings contain the Truth, the ultimate Truth finds other modalities to express itself. In this way, the sacred text does not become a pretext for exclusivism but a means to lead people to the inner peace that allows them to live in serenity while building mutually harmonious rapports with persons of other religions.⁶⁹

This thirst for and fascination with Truth is traceable also in Lubich and Gülen. In one of Lubich's early letters, she wrote:

I am a soul passing through this world. I have seen many beautiful and good things and I have always been attracted only by them. One day (one indescribable day) I saw a light. It appeared to me as more beautiful than the other beautiful things, and I followed it. I realized it was the Truth.⁷⁰

Balance between Personal and Communitarian Dimensions

The focus on the scriptures helps to harmonize the communitarian dimension with personal commitment. The first aspect cannot be achieved at the cost of the second. Personal decisions and commitments remain of primary importance. Chiara Lubich, for instance,

69. *Ibid.*, 113.

70. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2007), xvii.

never presented what she called a “spirituality of communion” that bypassed the choice each Christian individual is called to make. This is confirmed by the noted theologian Piero Coda:

The truth, novelty and beauty of what Chiara Lubich teaches about spirituality consists—through the breath of the Holy Spirit—in helping to bring about today the light and grace of the unity Christ has realized in human history. So it is teaching both utterly traditional and prophetically creative. Like a branch grafted onto the ancient trunk of the Church’s experience and doctrine, helping the flower anew, it is traditional, and because of its original perspective on the once-and-for-all revelation of Christ, it is creative.⁷¹

On the one hand, Lubich constantly underlined the novelty that her spirituality seems to bring into the Catholic context while, on the other, she insisted on the role of personal commitment and engagement. She says: “In our collective way, we too look for solitude and silence. We do so in order to listen well to the voice of God in our hearts: to live out Jesus’ invitation to pray behind closed doors, and to plunge into the depths of union with God. . . . and we escape other people if they lead us to sin.”⁷² The same can be traced in Niwano’s and Gülen’s perspectives. The community dimension is not meant to suffocate the individual person. On the contrary, as we have seen, the point is to form individuals who are fully committed to their own religion while being able to serve as uniquely authentic communitarian persons open to the world.

71. Ibid., xix.

72. Lubich, *A New Way*, 27.

Conclusion: Fruits of the Interreligious Dialogue

At the conclusion of this study on some of the commonalities among three renewal streams within Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, we turn to some of the results emerging from interfaith encounters, collaborations, and personal experiences among peoples of these different communities.

One of the commonalities that results from experiences of interreligious dialogue among members of these movements is a *deepening of the relationship with God* or the Absolute. This was the experience of a young Japanese Buddhist woman who, at the end of an encounter with Focolare members, said that she now had a confirmation that the divine was in her heart: “For the first time I felt his presence within me.” Naturally, this presence brings about joy, enthusiasm, peace, and light for a better understanding of one’s scriptures. Therefore, this dialogue is by no means superficial. As the vice-rector of the Buddhist University of Bangkok points out, “Here the dialogue is based on the most essential part of one’s faith.”⁷³

Second, the spiritual renewal these movements promote fosters the conviction that interreligious dialogue is based on mutual respect. At the same time, it cautions all involved to avoid the dangerous temptation to create a universal pseudo-religion. Rather, it inspires and helps those in dialogue to constantly deepen the experience of their own faith. That is the explanation of often-heard sentences such as “dialogue made me a better Hindu [Muslim or Buddhist or Christian],” “dialogue has helped me to discover more deeply my own religion,” or “our interest in our tradition and history began to be aroused after these meetings.”

73. Roberto Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso: L’esperienza di Chiara Lubich e del movimento dei Focolari* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2010), 145.

A young Buddhist woman, who at one point met some Focolare young people who suggested that she live the Golden Rule through the art of loving, said after several years of this practice that “she had received a light that helps me to understand my religion more deeply.” A Focolare professor in the United States, seeing how devotedly and lovingly Gülen members in his city prayed and treated each other in their community, felt the need to better his own prayer life and his community relations: “The relationships in dialogue help Christians to be true Christians and Muslims to be true Muslims.”⁷⁴ A Focolare university student, at the end of an experience of dialogue with RKK young people, declared: “I was impressed by their beautiful relationship with the Buddha, and I understood that I too, as a Christian, need to give priority to my personal relationship with God.”⁷⁵

Third, dialogue that flourishes through these experiences leads to the certainty that universal fraternity or brotherhood/sisterhood is possible. In northern Italy, Focolare members and immigrant Muslims affirm: “Being together we discover the beauty of each as a mutual gift so that we give our contribution to see a world united in brotherhood. This is not a utopia, but a dream that can come true because among us this is already a reality.”⁷⁶ In this way, trust in the other and in his or her religious faith and tradition gradually increases. *Welcoming of the other*, after overcoming obstacles, becomes a way of life. And this leads to the collapsing of preconceived ideas. In fact, dialogue and communion enhance the possibility of understanding certain attitudes, ideas, and traditions

74. Donald W. Mitchell of Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, shared with the author his experience with the Gülen students at Purdue.

75. Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 144.

76. Ibid., 135–36.

of the other, and the expression of the other’s faith, far from the stereotypes that normally circulate.

Fourth, this communion contributes to the ideal of one humanity, which does not negate diversity but is enriched by it as taught by Gülen, Lubich, and Niwano. Such experience leads to mutual respect and trust and makes people capable of highlighting what is common, and yet *it does not lead to a confusion of faiths*. On the contrary, it points out the existing differences between traditions. These differences are seen not as obstacles but as enrichments. The leader of the women’s section of the Islamic community in a city in Italy had an experience of collaboration with Focolare women. This helped her become aware that belonging “to a different religion does not hinder our relationships; if anything, it is an incentive to strengthen our relationships in order to live better our respective religion.”⁷⁷

Finally, this explains why dialogue contributes to the *healing of the social texture*; tensions are removed, wounds healed, and communities that historically have been in conflict or in continual tension become integrated.⁷⁸ Interreligious dialogue, therefore, is much more than a theological or ecclesiological expression. In the present world, with its seemingly unstoppable phenomenon of globalization—which involves large and unprecedented migratory waves that bring peoples previously almost unknown to each other in close proximity, along with their ethnic, cultural, and religiously diverse backgrounds—interreligious dialogue is playing a role in national and international relations. In fact, this panorama encourages people of different cultures and faiths to exchange views

77. A comment to the author.

78. Catalano, *Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso*, 141.

and engage in dialogue. The three movements we have discussed all ask people to embrace this opportunity to build and to achieve a greater mutual understanding and unity. Today, political scientists like Thomas Banchoff realize that “religions may have a transformative effect on individuals and communities and no doubt encounter one another within an increasingly global civil society.”⁷⁹ Banchoff concludes:

Dialogue . . . is not solely or even primarily about theological matters. It involves members of different religious communities speaking out of their own traditions in an effort to better understand and more effectively navigate inevitable cultural, ethical, and political differences. Dialogue can have a strategic dimension; it can serve to preserve and extend the size of one’s own community. But its primary aims are not to prevail over the other but to reduce conflict and promote understanding and cooperation across issues of common concern.⁸⁰

In these complex processes, the Gülen, Focolare, and Risshō Kōsei-kai movements, as well as many other religious movements around the world, become precious instruments for preventing confrontation, for conflict solution, and, in the end, for the pursuit of peace. They are the signs of our times to be read with hope.

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79. Thomas Banchoff, *Embryo Politics: Ethics and Policy in Atlantic Democracies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 204.

80. *Ibid.*, 204–5.