

Spiritual Friendship and Interreligious Dialogue:

The Experience of Chiara Lubich
and Nikkyō Niwano¹

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Abstract: *This study introduces the spiritual friendship between Chiara Lubich and Rev. Nikkyō Niwano, founders and longtime presidents, respectively, of the Focolare Movement and of the Risshō Kōsei-kai. The two movements, though founded in completely different geographical, social, and religious contexts, are part of a larger phenomenon that characterized the second half of the twentieth century.*

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The article attempts to evaluate the role that the two spiritual leaders and their followers had, and still have, in interfaith dialogue between Catholics and Mahāyāna Buddhists and on a wider scale between the faithful of different religions. Lubich and Niwano had, in fact, a prophetic role in this context.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the spiritual friendship that grew between an Italian Catholic woman, Chiara Lubich, and a Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhist man, Rev. Nikkyō Niwano. They met only five times, between 1979 and 1994. Nevertheless, their relationship opened the way to an interesting and prophetic experience of dialogue not only between the two lay organizations they founded, respectively, the Focolare Movement and the Risshō Kōsei-kai, but also among their followers, offering an ideal platform for projects and collaborations at the social, educational, and spiritual levels. It is an experience that is still in progress, involving youth, and adults in Asia, Europe, and North and South America.

Archbishop Marcello Zago, then Secretary for what is now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, characterized the relationship between Rev. Nikkyō Niwano and Chiara Lubich as multifaceted. Apart from their obvious rapport at the level of protocol, Lubich and Niwano developed a spiritual friendship that activated a fruitful collaboration that favored the welfare of humanity and made a special commitment to the cause of peacebuilding. Over time, they inspired joint social projects and advanced the positive role religions can play in safeguarding the environment. All this cannot be properly understood and valued unless we examine the nature of the spiritual relationship that

Lubich and Niwano were able to build and successfully hand over to their collaborators and followers. The spiritual friendship between these two religious leaders confirms that “dialogue of experience has an irreplaceable role, as it succeeds in opening people’s hearts, whose deep conversation is the foundation for any growth and transformation.”²

The Phenomenon of Religious Renewal Movements

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the birth and development of spiritual renewal movements, within Christianity as well as within other religions. Sociocultural conditioning and religious sensitivity sometimes prevent people from making positive comparisons between these movements. Nevertheless, as we will see, the commonalities between these movements are not marginal.³ While each makes significant contributions to its own religion at the spiritual, anthropological, and religious levels, these new movements have also become effective vehicles for favoring encounters between people of different cultures and religions. Among these movements, the Focolare Movement and the Risshō Kōsei-kai, founded, respectively, by Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, have played a pivotal dialogical role.

The Focolare Movement is among the first “new movements and ecclesial communities” that characterized the Catholic Church in the years immediately before, and, above all, in the decades after, the Second Vatican Council. These movements and ecclesial

2. Marcello Zago, “Introduction,” in Chiara Lubich, *Incontri con l’Oriente* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1987), 7–8.

3. On this point, see Roberto Catalano, “Gülen, Focolare, and Risshō Kōsei-kai Movements: Commonalities for Religious and Social Renewal,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue & Culture* 4 (2015/1): 42–61.

communities share characteristics that make them protagonists of a large phenomenon within the Catholic Church. They are all inspired by charismatic founders and largely formed and animated by laypeople, often with a remarkable presence of clergy and consecrated men and women. They are deeply committed to living the words of the gospel and are usually engaged in social issues. They represent one of the most innovative and vibrant aspects of the Catholic Church over the last five decades, creating complex situations within the traditional structures of parishes and dioceses.⁴ In this context, the Focolare Movement, founded in 1943, represents one of the early expressions of the phenomenon of movements within the Catholic Church. Inspired by Chiara Lubich and a group of young companions, this movement’s rapid growth remained centered on the commitment to living the Gospels with a special emphasis on all words that had a connection with love and charity as ways to achieve unity. This emphasis ensured that the Focolare Movement developed a “robust spiritual of communion,” in the words of St. Pope John Paul II. The Movement spread within a few decades to all continents and among people of all walks of life, cultures, church denominations, and religious traditions, even among those who claim not to have any religious belief.

The Risshō Kōsei-kai was founded in Japan just a few years before World War II.⁵ It is part of a large spiritual phenomenon

4. Recently the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has published *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, a document addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the subject of the relationship between hierarchical and charismatic gifts for the life and the mission of the Church. See <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/06/14/160614a.html>.

5. The Japanese movement started in 1938, while the Focolare Movement originated in Trent during World War II, in 1943.

that characterized Japan between the turn of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. In those decades, about two thousand renewal movements or “new religions” were founded to promote spiritual guidance among those who expressed interest in religious issues.⁶ In their complexity, these movements and new religions offer a stimulating ground for reflection, since these phenomena were not doctrine-based but were characterized by a great enthusiasm and emotional involvement. Moreover, they were rooted in the ancient religious traditions of Japan and referred to common religious scriptures such as the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁷ The Risshō Kōsei-kai, among the most successful and influential of these movements, teaches its members to follow the *Lotus Sūtra* tradition to achieve the fullness of Buddhahood by helping everyone, especially beings who suffer, on the way toward the perfect Awakening. To achieve this ideal, it is fundamental to practice the ten virtues (*pāramitā*) of the Bodhisattva Path to the point of achieving full awareness of *Śūnyatā*, the Absolute Emptiness in which all things interrelate and that

6. See Peter Nemeshegyi, “New Religions in the Cultural Context of Japan,” in Michael A. Fuss, ed., *Rethinking New Religious Movements* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana 1998), 470.

7. For instance, Kurozumikyō, Konkōyō, and Tenrikyō were all founded in the nineteenth century and carry a clear Shintoist dimension, while other movements, such as Reiyūkai, Sōka Gakkai, and Risshō Kōsei-kai, were founded in the twentieth century and are more Buddhist in nature. The Buddhist renewal movements are often based on the Lotus Sūtra and more specifically on the interpretation of this sacred text by the twelfth-century monk Nichiren. Nichiren presented the Lotus Sūtra as the text that contains the teachings of all other *sūtras* and proposed it as the real and true way to salvation. In more recent years, the Risshō Kōsei-kai has focused on the Tendai Buddhist tradition that preceded Nichiren in the Lotus tradition in Japan. See Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore: Una lettura Cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009), 37.

generates the Great Compassion for all living beings, enabling people to attain Buddhahood.

Nikkyō Niwano and Chiara Lubich

The founders of the Focolare Movement and Risshō Kōsei-kai met for the first time in Rome on February 20, 1979. Their movements were already well established, and the two founders were figures with global reputations. Both received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, Lubich in 1977 and Niwano in 1979. Their attitudes toward people of different faiths and religions were open but also marked by their respective cultural and religious backgrounds.

From the beginning of the Focolare Movement, Lubich inspired her companions and followers to develop an attitude of fraternity and a sense of universal brotherhood/sisterhood. She also considered every man and woman as a candidate for the evangelical love that she rediscovered in the Gospels. In the late 1940s, she emphasized this perspective in a sentence she wrote to some of her companions that would serve as the Magna Carta for the approach to dialogue that she developed decades later:

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.⁸

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

Notwithstanding this early vision, she never thought she would work for interreligious or ecumenical dialogue. Until the end of her life, she remained surprised about the unexpected development of interfaith dialogue that started with her receiving the Templeton Prize and meeting Niwano in 1979:

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 became 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.⁹

For his part, Niwano progressively committed to the cause of dialogue out of his growing awareness of the importance of peace-building after World War II. In fact, one of the fundamental goals of Risshō Kōsei-kai is to contribute to fulfilling Buddha's teaching concerning keeping peace in the family, in society, and in the world.¹⁰ Out of this conviction, Niwano's engagement for peace developed into the creation of a world assembly of religions, established in 1970 as the World Conference for Religions and Peace, known today as Religions for Peace. By 1963, the Risshō Kōsei-kai's founder was part of a delegation of Japanese religious leaders, all committed to the abolition of nuclear weapons, that visited Rome and briefly met Pope Paul VI. Niwano, in fact, grew in his

certainty that people of different religions must come together to contribute to the welfare of the entire human race and the universe.¹¹ Moreover, Niwano always said that the decisive moment for his commitment to interreligious dialogue came in 1965, when he met Pope Paul VI during the opening ceremony of the fourth session of the Second Vatican Council.¹² After being deeply struck by the Pope's words to the great assembly of more than two thousand bishops,¹³ Niwano had the opportunity to meet Paul VI:

We met in a marble-walled room. The pope, who was again clothed in white, rose upon seeing me enter and welcomed me by name. I replied by saying that I was honored to be with him. I raised my hands and the prayer beads I was holding in a Buddhist greeting. Then the pope extended his hand, shook mine and finally took it between his, where it remained throughout the audience. "I know what you are doing for interreligious cooperation. It is very wonderful. Please continue to promote this wonderful movement," the pope said to me. As he spoke he looked in my eyes. His voice was low, calm and grave. Continuing, he said, "In the

11. See Nikkyō Niwano, "Opening Speech and Keynote Address to the 1st General Assembly of WCRP," *The Annals of WCRP General Assemblies: Sekai Shukyōsha Heirwa Daiikai Sekai Taiki* (Tokyo: WCRP Japanese Committee, 1970), 62. Quoted in Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore*, 63.

12. The fourth session of the Vatican Council opened on September 14, 1965, and Niwano met the Pope the following day, thanks to an introduction by Cardinal Paolo Marella, president of the recently established Secretariat for non-Christians.

13. This view of St. Peter's Basilica filled with two thousand bishops listening to Paul VI reminded Niwano of the scene of the first chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, which describes the coming together of a multitude of living beings eager to listen to the Buddha. See Nikkyō Niwano, *Kono Michi* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1999), 123.

9. Chiara Lubich, "Can Religions Be Partners in Peace Building?" Paper presented at the Assembly of "Initiatives of Change" (Moral Re-armament), Caux, Switzerland, July 29, 2003. (Unpublished text)

10. Nikkyō Niwano, *A Lifetime Beginner* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1994), 192.

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 recognize each other and pray for each other.” “I shall exert my best efforts for the sake of world peace,” I said to the pope. He replied: “God will surely bless you in the noble work you have undertaken.”¹⁴

This meeting with the Pope gave Niwano a “budding faith in the realization of [his] dream.”¹⁵ From there, he drew strength for his work toward the World Conference for Religions and Peace and for facilitating the encounter among religious leaders.

Working Together for the Common Good of Humanity

Given their backgrounds, Niwano and Lubich, upon meeting in Rome in 1979, immediately understood each other. Their conversation concentrated on a few topics: (1) the commitment to not only reading or meditating on their respective religious scriptures, but living them; (2) the urgency of forming new generations of youth; (3) the centrality of “love” and “compassion” to helping people meet and understand each other; (4) the ecumenical nature of the Focolare Movement and the engagement of Risshō Kōsei-kai in the World Conference for Religions and Peace; and (5) the common lay characteristic of the two movements.¹⁶ These topics largely remained the points of convergence for their following meetings in Japan, in 1981 and 1984.

14. Nikkyō Niwano, *A Lifetime Beginner*, 224.

15. *Ibid.*, 225.

16. For a detailed chronicle of the meeting, see Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, “Youth and Religion,” in *Dharma World* 6.2 (1979): 11–18.

In December 1981, Lubich was expected to start her first journey to Asia¹⁷ with a visit to the small Focolare community in Tokyo. She was invited by Niwano to visit the Risshō Kōsei-kai’s headquarters and address several thousand Buddhist members of the Japanese organization. The conversation between the two leaders again touched on the same points they had in Rome. But something new emerged: a shared awareness of commonalities between the two movements. Both noticed with surprise and pleasure that in both of their organizations, members share their own life experiences as a powerful means for creating community life.

Niwano was struck by these commonalities, and Lubich was amazed by the fact that “Buddhists mentioned that they felt as if they were enveloped by God’s love. They were moved.”¹⁸ On December 28, 1981, thousands of members listened to Lubich’s speech in the Great Sacred Hall, where she presented her personal experience of a relationship with God and with men and women, which can be identified with the birth of the Focolare Movement. They all shared the same impression. Lubich concluded her presentation by summing up her life in the following words: “The core of my experience is this: the more you love others the more you find God. The more you find God the more you love others. [In living this perspective] it is possible to walk side-by-side while cooperating all united with God for the common good of humanity.”¹⁹

Niwano and Lubich met again in Tokyo in November 1985, and their conversation was a kind of evaluation of the collaboration

17. Between December 1981 and February 1982, Chiara visited Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, Hong Kong, and Thailand.

18. Chiara Lubich, *Colloqui con l’Oriente* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1987), 55.

19. *Ibid.*, 25.

between the two movements. The Focolare had started working within the World Conference for Religions and Peace, and youth groups had exchanged visits and organized several common events in Asia and in Europe. Evident throughout this conversation was the deep spiritual sharing the two leaders had achieved. One gesture in particular was significant in this regard. Niwano gifted Lubich with a precious, large handheld fan bearing two words: *Ichinen Sanzen* (Three thousand worlds in one single thought). “It means,” Niwano explained, “that a single thought relates to three thousand other things. . . . Unless like-minded people take a hand in a given situation, little good can be done.”²⁰ The following day, during the celebration of Niwano’s eightieth birthday, Lubich opened a window on the spiritual dimension of this relationship:

How to express in a few words the long years of the spiritual striving of his soul towards what is perfect? How to describe very briefly one entire life like yours which is burning with passion for Truth, for the Eternal Law and humanity’s happiness? It is a life that gives rise to admiration and gratitude. How to express a life which has been and still is a search for unity with all persons who love Truth?²¹

Lubich and Niwano last met in the fall of 1994 at the General Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, held at the Vatican in Rome and in Riva del Garda, Northern Italy. In the following years, the two leaders continued the vast correspondence

20. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, “Religious Unity for World Peace,” in *Dharma World* 13 (1986/2): 18–19.

21. Chiara Lubich, *Colloqui con l’Oriente*, 201.

that characterized their rapport, as shown by four earlier letters²² that appeared in some ways prophetic. In those letters they discussed the goal of world peace and security, the preservation of the environment, care for and the formation of youth, the necessity for human beings to recognize their interdependence with each other and with all creatures, and the centrality of religious scriptures to finding adequate answers to life’s questions. To the Buddhist perspective Niwano offers in these letters, Lubich never fails to reply with the Christian perspective, often respectfully presenting God as Love as the center of the Christian message and the figure of Christ as its full expression. The exchange of letters between the two founders ended some time before Niwano’s death, in 1999.

The Spiritual Dimension of the Lubich-Niwano Friendship

We can begin delving into the spiritual dimension of this relationship between these leaders, a Catholic and a Buddhist, by examining Lubich’s message of November 15, 1991, upon Niwano handing over of the presidency of the Buddhist movement to his son, Nichiko Niwano. Lubich writes a sort of final evaluation of her personal relationship with the founder and of the cooperation between the members of the two movements. The two aspects of this cooperation come into evidence in the following words:

I wish to retrace along with you the different stages of friendship and collaboration which have given us all the time a great sense of joy and surprise. There is no greater joy than

22. The letters were written by Niwano on March 15, 1987 and on September 25, 1989; and the replies by Lubich are dated, respectively, October 3, 1987 and March 9, 1990. They are kept in the Archives of the International Centre of the Focolare Movement in Rocca di Papa, Italy.

when one God makes flourish in our heart when He favors our meetings as brothers and children of the same Father.²³

The same dimensions of friendship and collaboration are addressed in Niwano's response:

I am grateful that you and others of the Focolare have come all the way from Rome to visit our organization. I have looked forward to meeting you and talking with you because when we have met in the past I have found that our ways of thinking agree. I think world peace can only be achieved through interreligious cooperation, with people of all religions reconciling their ideas. By combining, the Focolare and the Risshō Kōsei-kai's influence for inducing other religious organizations to join in interreligious cooperation can be tripled or quadrupled, and more people of other religions will see that achievement of world peace is possible, though it seems hard.²⁴

In her letter, Lubich underlines a second element: that this friendship has made possible the mutual discovery in each other of what she calls the "divine nature," or "the supernatural element that is present in each of us and which can be expressed and communicated through love, the gift of oneself."²⁵ This kind of in-

terreligious discovery in the other characterizes the relationship between Lubich and Niwano and has been a constant surprise. As Lubich notes, it is a "discovering of always new avenues of collaboration, new stimulus to deepen and appreciate our religious experiences which carry many convergences and commonalities."²⁶

This feeling of surprise always accompanied the relationship between the two founders and leaders. Neither seemed to have any plan initially. This is evident in the Lubich's reaction to those who, before her first trip to Japan, in 1981, asked her about her expectations. She replied that she was completely unaware of what God wanted from that experience. When asked this question by the Japanese journalist for the Vatican Radio, she said: "I go in order to understand what God wants from our encounter, from the relationship which we will be able to establish with brothers and sisters of other religions. . . . I do not know. When I will come back I will tell you."²⁷ She noted in her diary: "Koichiro Taneda, who belongs to the Risshō Kōsei-kai Movement and studies our religion in Rome, . . . shared with me his certainty that a sort of unity will happen between our two Movements. For this reason, he prays to God and Buddha. We shall see."²⁸

Another aspect of the spiritual friendship that became evident over time: the growing awareness that this meeting between a Catholic leader and a Buddhist leader was part of a plan guided by a higher power. Niwano acknowledged that he met the Catholic woman with no expectations:

23. Chiara Lubich, *Lettera a Nikkyo Niwano in occasione del passaggio della Presidenza al figlio Nichiko*, November 15, 1991. Unpublished letter maintained in the General Archives of the Focolare Movement, Rocca di Papa, Italy.

24. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, "Religious Unity for World Peace," 15.

25. Chiara Lubich, *Lettera a Nikkyo Niwano in occasione del passaggio della Presidenza al figlio Nichiko*.

26. Ibid.

27. Interview with Vatican Radio: *Un nuovo passo verso l'unità e la pace*, broadcast on December 14, 1981; quoted in Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore*, 200.

28. Chiara Lubich, *Colloqui con l'Oriente*, 37.

According to Buddha's teachings all men and women can draw closest to one another fulfilling a sharing of life. When, for the first time, I met Chiara Lubich I gained the impression of her openness and loyalty. She speaks of God with great clarity. Later I discovered in her movement many contact points with ours.²⁹

Lubich, for her part, has been always convinced of being part of a great plan guided by God, and she never missed any opportunity to underline this conviction. In December 1981, a few days after their second encounter and her experience of addressing thousands of Buddhists in Tokyo, Lubich stated:

Diversity made us understand that the points we share in common are not the result of a human effort or project. . . . Rather they are a supernatural endeavor by God himself, for a goal that He has thought for us and which is still unknown to us.³⁰

Lubich had the opportunity to share her conviction with Niwano during their third encounter in Tokyo in 1985:

We find true brothers and sisters in Risshō Kōsei-kai members, wherever we meet. We like to say that there is something supernatural, something which is above us.

29. Extract from the Vatican Radio interview: *Un nuovo passo verso l'unità e la pace*, in Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore*, 203.

30. Chiara Lubich, *Incontri con l'Oriente*, 77.

Probably our encounter is part of God's plans, a plan from God's Providence. It cannot be explained in human terms.³¹

Niwano agreed with Lubich's viewpoint. In fact, during the same conversation he stressed this very aspect from a Buddhist perspective:

Our encounter was part of God's plan long before we were born. Unless like-minded people take a hand in a given situation, little good can be done, so I thought I was bound to meet such a person. . . . I felt I was bound to meet with like-minded people, though it was some time before I met you. After hearing that I was to be awarded the Templeton Prize, when I met you in Rome I thought: What a person . . . that this kind of person should appear before me.³²

On the other hand, it is important to note that until the end of her life Lubich maintained an attitude whose basic characteristic was openness to God's plans, an openness that prevents us from forcing predefined projects, willingly accepting whatever events and encounters may arise. On one of the last occasions where she could speak to an interreligious audience, she affirmed clearly:

Even after more than sixty years of experience, we are surprised to see how the spiritual path that God has traced

31. Extract from an unpublished recording of the encounter, maintained at the Archives of the International Centre of the Focolare Movement, Rocca di Papa, Italy, in Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore*, 211.

32. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, "Religious Unity for World Peace," 18–19.

for us intersects with all the other spiritual paths, even those of the faithful of other religions.³³

Returning to Lubich's letter to Niwano in November 1991, we should not ignore another important part of the relationship between the two leaders: the common search for Truth. Lubich writes:

Your words and your attitude gave me the opportunity to appreciate your great interior freedom in search for the Truth and in achieving that virtue and that serene detachment from all things, which flows from a life which is entirely dedicated to the great values and religion and peace.³⁴

Lubich and Niwano have two different perspectives regarding the Truth. Niwano refers to the Truth as the "Wonderful Law" (*saddharma*). In this context, the Truth is identified with the "Law," the state of all things that exist in the universe and of all events that occur in the world. It means also the Truth that penetrates all things. This Truth is the Buddha as well as the Law that rules the relationships between all things, including human beings. Buddha, Truth, and Law are one and the same. The Truth is the Buddha, and all the functions of the Buddha can be expressed with the Law.³⁵

33. Chiara Lubich, *Can Religions Be Partners in Peace Building?*

34. Chiara Lubich, *Lettera a Nikkyo Niwano in occasione del passaggio della Presidenza al figlio Nichiko*.

35. Nikkyō Niwano, *Buddhism for Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1980), 23.

Lubich also was constantly in search of the Truth. This search was one of the fundamental aspects of her life and is well expressed in one of her most poetic passages:

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 (an indefinite day) I have seen a light. I felt it was even more beautiful than the other wonderful things. I decided to follow it. I realized it was the Truth.³⁶

This love for Truth that constantly accompanied the Catholic leader throughout her life emerged in the encounter she had with Niwano. Recalling some previous meetings among representatives of the two organizations,³⁷ Lubich commented that on both sides there was a desire to achieve a certain degree of unity. She emphasized their common "efforts . . . to seek out the truths we have in common, which already unite us and to live them together."³⁸

Finally, the text of the 1991 letter evinces how the relationship between Niwano and Lubich, as well as among the members

36. Chiara Lubich, *La Dottrina Spirituale* (Roma: Città Nuova 2006), 31. Translation mine.

37. In fact, the first encounter between Lubich and Niwano was preceded by several meetings of members, especially youth, of the Focolare and Risshō Kōsei-kai. Toward the end of 1975, a delegation of youth leaders of the Japanese movement traveled to Rome to attend some events at the conclusion of the Holy Year. After attending Christmas Midnight Mass in St. Peter's Basilica and meeting with Vatican officials, they greeted Pope Paul VI and later traveled to Assisi and to the Focolare community of Loppiano (close to Florence), where they had an exchange with about four hundred youth of the Catholic movement. (See "Youth Mission to the Vatican," *Dharma World* 3 (1976/2): 6–9.

38. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, "Youth and Religion," 15.

of the two movements, is not an end in itself but an attitude of openness toward the common welfare of the human family, especially through a concrete commitment toward peacebuilding and dialogue:

A special mention is deserved for all the initiatives which have seen our youth working together, one next to the other, with enthusiasm and dedication for peace and understanding among peoples. . . . And we have fully shared the conviction that only men and women who are animated by a great religious respect towards other human beings and towards creation can truly contribute to the progress of the human family.³⁹

In fact, in her letter Lubich cites in a significant way the Buddhist monk Chih-I (Zhiyi), of whom Niwano had spoken: “If my desire is truly according to God’s heart, then He will make a multitude be born from the very same desire.”⁴⁰ Niwano spoke to Lubich of his belief in the truth of a statement by Chih-I: “Three Thousand Realms in One Mind.”⁴¹ Given the two movements’ growth, numbers, and commitment to high goals such as justice and peace and a value-oriented education for young generations, we can conclude that this saying of Mahāyāna Buddhism was embodied by both of the founders.

39. Chiara Lubich, *Lettera a Nikkyō Niwano in occasione del passaggio della Presidenza al figlio Nichiko*.

40. Ibid.

41. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, “Religious Unity for World Peace,” 18–19.

From Spiritual Friendship to Common Commitment

On their first encounter in Rome in 1979, Niwano spoke to Lubich about the World Conference for Religions and Peace as a way of fostering collaboration among leaders of different religions toward justice and peace. After their meeting in 1981 in Tokyo, Lubich decided to commit the Focolare to the World Conference for Religions and Peace, and ever since the Catholic movement has been active in the conference’s projects and in the different assemblies throughout the world.⁴² Lubich herself was appointed an honorary president of the organization.⁴³ Niwano, as one of the founding fathers of this groundbreaking interreligious organization, was always convinced that if religious people committed themselves to working hard for world peace, through interreligious dialogue this goal could be achieved:

I think world peace can only be achieved through interreligious cooperation, with people of all religions reconciling their ideas. By combining the Focolare and the Risshō Kōsei-kai’s influence we will induce other religious organizations to join in interreligious cooperation, and our efforts can be tripled or quadrupled and more people of other religions will see that achieving world peace is possible, though it may seem hard.⁴⁴

42. Though the official commitment of the Focolare to the *World Conference for Religions and Peace* began in 1982, a Focolare delegation participated in the General Assembly held at Princeton University in 1979.

43. More recently, at the General Assembly held in Vienna in November 2013, Maria Voce, the first president of the Focolare Movement after Lubich’s death, has been appointed among the presidents.

44. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, “Religious Unity for World Peace,” 15.

Lubich considered the collaboration within the World Conference of Religions for Peace to be very fruitful and significant, as it continues to be for the Focolare:

It is very useful to have a goal like peace. This offers the motivation for meeting each other, for knowing one another, sharing spiritual goods. Another goal is to commit to work together for humankind's welfare, for instance for the Third World, as we do in the Philippines and we would like to do in Africa. Finally, as I think God prompted our encounters, let us leave to Him to arrange our programs as we go ahead.⁴⁵

This fruitful collaboration between the two movements also includes a commitment to the education and shaping of future generations. Before the two leaders met in Rome, groups of youths from the two movements already had the opportunity to meet, and both leaders received positive feedback about these experiences. That is why their conversation in 1979 addresses extensively their work with younger generations. Actually, the first question Niwano asked Lubich concerned what the Focolare Movement was doing to educate and shape youth.⁴⁶ Both leaders shared the conviction that if young people deeply understood the significance of the words of Jesus or of the Buddha, and if they made the choice to live these words, they would experience a deep and profound change in their lives. Lubich, sharing about this view, said that she was inspired by the feedback she received regarding the initial

meetings of youth from the two religions. She confirmed, "Our young people feel the desire to be together in loving God. And so when our youth live together the truths that we have in common, we are already one in some way."⁴⁷ Even in the letter of 1991, which traces their two-decade-long friendship, Lubich mentioned this collaboration among youth as one of the most fruitful experiences of the relationship between the two movements.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The spiritual friendship between Niwano and Lubich opened unexpected opportunities for interreligious dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, as well as fruitful collaborations for peacebuilding projects and exchange programs among the youth. These activities continue today with positive and new results. It is important to note that when these encounters and this friendship began, little had been done to engage religions in peacebuilding processes. In fact, as far as interreligious dialogue was concerned, the initiatives taken at that time often occurred at the theological level of discussion. The more engaged dialogue among Catholics and Buddhists took the form of intermonastic dialogue between monks and nuns. These two laypersons, Lubich and Niwano, introduced interreligious dialogue of spiritual friendship among the laity, especially the youth, rooted in a living experience of spiritual encounter open to projects of mutual cooperation. This fact is also acknowledged by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, who said of the two founders: "They were animated by a similar spirit, and friendship grew

47. Ibid., 15.

48. Chiara Lubich, *Lettera a Nikkyo Niwano in occasione del passaggio della Presidenza al figlio Nichiko*.

45. Chiara Lubich, *Incontri con l'Oriente*, 232.

46. See Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, "Youth and Religion," 11.

between them and the two movements which has proved to be extremely fruitful in the field of interreligious cooperation.”⁴⁹

These encounters and cooperative efforts have facilitated a meeting ground not only between members of these two movements but also with Buddhists of other traditions and Catholics of other religious movements and orders. This fact was underlined by Niwano in 1985: “The example of Focolare members’ activities and pure Christian faith has greatly encouraged other Japanese religionists in their attitude toward interreligious cooperation.”⁵⁰ On the Catholic side, the importance of this dialogue was underlined by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who commented very positively regarding Lubich’s first trip to Japan and her meeting with several thousand Buddhists:

I wish to prove my point with an example. And there is one worthy being mentioned. It pertains to Chiara Lubich. She travelled to Japan where she addressed Buddhists who understood her. Self-denial, egoism negation, self-renunciation: this is the center of Buddhism. . . . In this way the wise man reaches the point of self-denial and he attains a sense of peace where there is no longer concupiscence. There is a sort of benevolence towards whatever exists. If you say to this wise man: “*We have to deny ourselves. I have to overcome the concupiscence of being myself, because I belong to Another one, another one who loves me,*” then he will understand. He will see that there is a link between Buddhism and Christianity. This is exactly what Chiara Lubich did. I believe this can be

49. Michael Fitzgerald, “The Venerable Nikkyō Niwano and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Dharma World* 33, (2006/4): 10–11.

50. Chiara Lubich and Nikkyō Niwano, “Religious Unity for World Peace,” 17.

a model for dialogue and dialogue with Buddhism may be the most difficult one.”⁵¹

Finally, over these decades, it has become increasingly clear how religions and spiritual people can help in ensuring peace or facilitating peacekeeping processes. In recent times, political scientists have turned to examining the role that religious movements have played, and are still playing, in these increasingly complex contexts. They appreciate that “religions may have a transformative effect on individuals and communities and no doubt encounter one another within an increasingly global civil society.”⁵² One important conclusion is that “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.⁵³

51. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “*Il Sabato*,” June 14, 1986, quoted by Enzo Maria Fondi, “The Focolare Movement: A Spirituality at the Service of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 89 (1985/2): 158.

52. T. Banchoff, “Interreligious Dialogue and International Relations,” in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, ed. T. S. Shah, A. Stepan, and M. Duffy Toft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 204.

53. *Ibid.*, 204.

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