

Aligarh Journal of Interfaith Studies



Peer Reviewed, Open Access International Journal
ISSN: 2582-7553 | Impact Factor | ESTD Year 2020

[HOME](#) [ABOUT US](#) [CURRENT ISSUE](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [INDEXING](#) [SUBMIT PAPER](#) [AUTHOR GUIDE](#) [CONTACT](#)

Universal Fraternity: A Critique to Chiara Lubich of Italy

Mohammad Teisir Bin Shah Goolfee

Research Scholar
Department of Islamic Studies
Aligarh Muslim University
gteisir@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History Published Online: _Published _</p>	<p>Universal fraternity is globally perceived as one of the most powerful means of countering animosity, brutalities and promulgating fraternal harmony and prosperity. In a world ravaged by multiple turmoil in nearly all the spheres of life, positive interaction among the people of different faiths helps in constructing a cordial relationship.</p> <p>Various movements and organizations, throughout history, have emerged to carry out this task of disseminating love and affection between citizens belonging to different cultures so as to foster amity and accord as well as to secure religious liberty, which is a basic human right for all. One of them is the one founded by Chiara Lubich (1920 – 2008) called the <i>Focolare Movement</i>. This paper aims at accentuating briefly on the Islamic views regarding interfaith dialogue and significantly on the interaction of the <i>Focolare Movement</i> with various faiths across the globe.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Universal fraternity,➤ Chiara Lubich,➤ Focolare Movement	



Islamic Stand

Islam is a religion which caters for the right of each and every individual with the absence of any sort of discrimination. It promotes conviviality and cordiality thus depicting the most authentic image of respecting all human beings on an equal ground. In other words, no individual is to be disrespected on the basis of creed, race, caste and other related bases. They are all to be treated with a positive attitude. Islam is the first voice which opposes every kind of favoritism, nepotism and unjust preferences. Therefore, it is mandatory upon us to approach people with all warmth and kindness and avoid the nasty practice of belittling each other. Allah says:

O people! We created you from a male and a female, and made you races and tribes, that you may know one another. The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is All-Knowing, Well-Experienced.¹

By this verse, it is clear that knowing each other is a fundamental prerequisite to develop a proper comprehension vis-à-vis other residents of the society. Judging by mere appearance gives birth to chaotic perceptions which in no way help in moldering a sane social atmosphere thus becoming one of the major causes of obstruction in establishing peace and serenity. The following are some of the key points which are of utmost importance to be taken into consideration:

The establishment of universal brotherhood is not addressed to a particular community only, but to the whole mankind.

In various stances in the Divine Text of Allah, He again and again reminds us that He is our Creator. Thus, no one on earth can know any person better than Him.



(1) All individuals have been created via the same process. That is to say, no specific mechanism has been adopted to create a category of people and another one to create others.

(2) The decision of categorizing people into different factions is of God Himself.

(3) The only criterion of greatness among individuals is on the pietistic level and not on the basis of tribalism, racism or nationalism.

Besides, the last sermon provided by the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) is known to be the best speech on the concept of universal brotherhood. In it, he clearly mentioned that individual superiority is based on two criteria namely piety and good deeds. This shows that a person with the best character is the one whose piety reflects both in his words and actions. The Noble Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) has also categorically forbidden the individuals to take pride in their ancestry as all individuals are the sons of Ādam (may peace be upon him) and that he was also created from dust.ⁱⁱ

Chiara Lubich

It is clear that the motive of interfaith dialogue is to open the doors and windows of warmth, construct the pillars of hope, tear down the curtains of hostilities and sow the seeds of understanding. One such movement which possesses the above-mentioned objectives is the *Focolare Movement*, whose foundation was laid down by Chiara Lubich. She was one of the enigmatic personalities of twentieth century in the field of interfaith dialogue. Lubich was very popular due to her dynamic endeavors to promote unity, peace and harmony among people of different faiths and even among the atheists or simply those who do not have a particular set of religious beliefs. During her lifetime, she was honored with a number of awards by various academic institutions on the international platform for her



energetic contributions made in fields such as economics, philosophy, theology, psychology, social sciences and many more.ⁱⁱⁱ

The original name of Chiara Lubich was Silvia Lubich. She was born in Trent in 1920,^{iv} which is situated in the north-east of Italy. Her father was a typographer, who unfortunately lost his job due to his socialist thoughts in fascist Italy, and mother was a practical devout Catholic. In 1943, during the Second World War, conflicts broke out between the Germans and the Allies, which led to the bombardments of Trent. This painful incident annihilated both her neighborhood and her house as well. But it had a massive impact on her. Lost in the profound darkness of the night, she sensed as if something new was about to emerge.^vIn an article titled as *Osservatore Romano*, Lubich reveals or states that she made the amazing discovery of God Who showered an intense love towards her. This love, as she herself claims so, weighed heavier than the catastrophic bombardments which ruined Trent thus gradually bringing important changes in her life.

From the day she witnessed the bombardment of her native place, she took the decision of dedicating her entire life to God along with a group of girls who got their training under the supervision of the Italian Catholic Action. However, hardly Lubich had any idea back then that the devastating ruins which destroyed Trent would turn out to be or to become the budding backbone for the inaugural development and advancement of such a movement which would later be followed by more than four and a half million people hailing from different races and traditions as well as cultural and social backgrounds across the globe. This movement came to be known as the *Focolare Movement*, which emerged in 1943.



The Focolare Movement

The word *Focolare* refers to *hearth* in the Italian language. The movement emerged as a socio-spiritual one with the objective of propagating the message of unity to the whole world. It also aims at breaking all the social and cultural prejudices and provides a helping hand in constructing a united universe without disrespecting and devaluing diversities. In order to achieve this objective, the means of dialoguing has been opted by the movement with a firm pledge of establishing useful and effective bonding of fraternity between people and cultures.^{vi}The initial pontifical approval of the *Focolare Movement* was given by Pope John XXIII in the year 1962 with the official name of *Opera di Maria*(Work of Mary).^{vii}

This movement, within a short period of time, gained massive fame in the world. The promotion of peace and harmony initiated by Chiara Lubich led her to earn the *Templeton Prize* for the progress of religion in the year 1977 at the Guildhall of London. This ceremony marked the presence of various representatives belonging to different religions. With this recognition was officially resumed the interaction of this movement with the adherers of different faiths. During her speech, she recalled her experience thus bringing about an effective reverberation among the listeners which led them to sense a durable experience of unanimity and accord. Lubich stated that this paved her way for a novel inauguration and launching of the *Focolare Movement*.

Interaction with the Buddhists

The very first interaction of the *Focolare Movement* with the followers of Buddhism took place in the year 1979 when the founder of this movement had a meeting with Nikkyō Niwano (1906 – 1999), a Japanese observer at the Second Vatican Council, and also the co-founder and first president of a massive liberal



movement which aims at the renewal of the Buddhist community called the *Risshō Kōsei Kai* which was founded in the year 1938 in Tokyo, Japan. It is stated that the number of followers who are attached to this movement is six and a half million. Niwano was an active promoter of interfaith dialogue and also provided a helping hand in founding the World Conference of Religions for Peace in the year 1970. Eleven years later, that is, in 1981, Niwano had sent an invitation to Chiara Lubich, urging her to land her feet at the capital city of Japan, Tokyo and share her experience with the followers of Buddhism. It was the opening to the communal ethics as well as the beginning of a productive association in the terrain of humanitarianism.^{viii} Moreover, in different countries of Asia, the *Focolare Movement* has entered into contact with the followers of the Buddhist faith. An institution for the promotion of interreligious dialogue has been established in Tagaytay, a town in the south of Manila situated at the Philippine island Luzon. Over the years, it has transformed into a meeting place for the adherers of various religions which are found in Asia. This has permitted to give birth to dialogue of life, especially with the Buddhists.

In the year 1997, Chiara Lubich visited Thailand where she had a very important meeting with about eight hundred nuns, monks and common people at the Maha Chulalongkon Ratchawitthayalai or Maha chulalongkorn rajavidyalaya University or popularly known as the Maha chulalongkorn Buddhist University, one of the oldest Buddhist universities in the country, and also at a Buddhist monastery in Chiang Mai, which is considered to be the largest city in the north of Thailand. A very important point to be noted here is that this was the first time that a woman with a liberal mind and of Christian faith had an interaction with the Buddhist monks. She was there with the objective to enlighten a dark room. On that occasion, she also had the opportunity to meet Somdet



PhraSangharaja Chao Krommaluang Vajiranāṣaṃvara (1913 – 2013), famously known as Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, the nineteenth Supreme Patriarch of Buddhism (*Sangharaja*) in Thailand, who welcomed the fraternal speech of Lubich, upon which she expressed that it is the duty upon the follower of every faith to work together and come forward to promote amity and prosperity as their common objective is the will for welfares.

Communication with the Muslims

In the year 1966, one of the branches of the *Focolare Movement* was established in the city of Tlemcen, Algeria. Many youngsters from the Muslim community developed a very good bonding with the movement thus welcoming its spiritual dimensions. This initiative did not only breach the obstructive fences between both the Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam), but also ended the brutality of civil war.

Back then, the movement was also working to get in touch with many other Muslim countries, especially with Pakistan where the intention and discussion of constructing an Islamic-Christian Center in Dalwal, a village as well as a union council and also an administrative subdivision which is located or situated in the district of Chakwal found in the province of the Punjab, was being made.^{ix} Having said so, the actual turning point regarding dialogue with the Muslim community from the part of the *Focolare Movement* happened in the year 1997 at the very popular mosque of Malcolm X in Harlem, New York, United States of America.^x

Chiara Lubich was invited by Wallace Deen Muhammad (1933 – 2008), popularly known as Imām Warith Deen Mohammed, a very renowned African-Muslim philosopher, thinker, religious leader, revivalist and theologian as well as the former president of the American Muslim Society, which consists about two million black American Muslims, to express her spiritual feelings amidst a crowd of three thousand people. Wallace stated that the Lord of



the universe wants each and every individual to propagate the message of peace and spread goodness in the world.^{xi}

Besides, another meeting was held in Washington, where both Imām Warith Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich delivered their respective speeches on prosperity and harmony. It was attended by five thousand Black Muslims and American Christians belonging to the American Muslim Society which led them to experience a massive atmosphere of fraternity.^{xii} In many other American cities, a deepening of the harmonies and prosperities between the spiritual unity and the religion of Islam had already started to sow its seeds.^{xiii} In the later period, thanks to the efforts made by Piero Coda (b.1955), one of the most prominent Italian experts of theology and who also currently holds the president chair of the Italian Theologians Association as well as a great promoter of interfaith dialogue and a member of the movement, a peaceful and harmonious interaction with the Shī'ah community was also successfully initiated.^{xiv} In the year 2001, precisely in September, Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Khamenei (b.1935), one of the influential religious leaders, clerics and politicians of Iran¹, landed in Italy where he met Chiara Lubich in the city of Rome. In a speech, Khamenei stated that a strong and spiritual love is one of the most significant foundations in order to develop a positive interaction with the religion of Christianity and Islam.^{xv}

In the year 2008, a gathering was held in Rome which bore the title *Love and Mercy in the Bible and in the Holy Qur'ān*. Adnane Mokrani (b. 1966), the Tunisian-Italian theologian, precisely a master in Christian theology as well as a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, who is also involved in promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue, delivered a lecture or speech on the theme titled as *Reading the Qur'ān with the Eye of Mercy*, which

¹ Present Supreme leader of Iran



was highly praised by the scholars and believers of the Islamic Faith who marked their presence on that occasion. Two years later, in the year 2010, about six hundred followers of Islam and Christianity had a meeting at Loppiano, Italy. It is a small town of the *Focolare Movement*, consisting of about nine hundred inhabitants including youths, clerics, religious and sometimes a bishop too, whose foundation was laid down by Chiara Lubich in the year 1964.^{xvi} Kamel Layachi, Imām as well as the Head of the Islamic Center of *San Donà di Pieve*, Member of the Council of Italian Islamic Relations and Head of the Department of Formation and Interreligious Dialogue,^{xvii} stated that this meeting was an arriving as well as a departing point for a number of experiences in various corners of Italy.

In the year 2011, a meeting was organized in Tlemcen, Algeria for Muslims who have membership in the *Focolare Movement*. It was entitled as *Living Unity*. About eighty contributors hailing from ten different nations marked their presence. The Muslim educators were highly appreciated as they discussed or lectured on subject-matters dealing with spiritualism from an Islamic viewpoint which were on the basis of an experience found in the common life of people.

The following year, precisely on November 25th, 2012, another important meeting was held between the Muslims of Brescia and the *Focolare Movement* of Chiara Lubich in Brescia, a city in the north of Italy. It was titled as *Common Paths for the Family*. This conference elaborated on the common familial ethics and morals thus leading to a further important collaboration between the two religions. Many more meetings were later organized to discuss on the social constructions and developments and its publications made via the endeavors of Kamel Layachi by producing many articles for the magazine called *Città Nuova* (New City).^{xviii} On April 23rd, 2013, another conference was organized in Catania, the



second largest city on the Italian Island of Sicily, under the title of *The Muslim Family, the Christian Family: Challenges and Hopes*, where about five hundred people had assembled for the sake of interfaith dialogue.^{xix}

Contact with the Jewish Community

The *Focolare Movement* also entered into contact with the followers of Judaism. The Roman Jews were very cordial towards Chiara Lubich and depicted their gratefulness vis-à-vis her, especially for her endeavors in holding a prosperous interaction with the *Menorah* people. Generally speaking, the word *menorah* simply means *lamp stand* in the Hebrew language. It has been and is still considered to be the distinguished and prominent symbol of the followers of Judaism for years. It is the most ancient uninterrupted utilized religious symbol in both the old and modern Israel. Besides, in the year 1996, the Jews who have great love and attachment for the movement of Lubich had assembled for a congress which would later transform into an annual gathering. In the following year, Jack Bemporad, one of the very popular scholars, a theologian as well as a promoter of interreligious dialogue and also a *rabbi*, who is the Head of the Center for Interreligious Understanding (CIU) working to develop a positive interaction, mutual respect and theological comprehension between the followers or adherers of various religions^{xx} at the University of the Sacred Heart of Connecticut (United States of America), began the presentation of an honorary doctorate to Chiara Lubich.

In the year 1998, Chiara Lubich was invited by *B'nai B'rith*, a Jewish service organization, in Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina, where she met a number of both Argentinian and Uruguayan Jews. On this occasion, Lubich and the chairman or the head of the *B'nai B'rith*, Jaime Kopec, took a positive step in signing a fraternal agreement. The latter states that this accord was



one of compassion, generosity, munificence and of true faith with the objective to construct a better future and to put an end to the years of intolerance.^{xxi} Besides, the *Focolare Movement* also works in partnership with many other nations across the globe to develop and propagate camaraderie and solidarity among the Christian and the Jews. In the year 2002, the *Focolare Movement* was honored by the International Council of Christians and Jews.

Parley with Hinduism

Chiara Lubich took another step of promoting universal fraternity by coming into contact with the followers of Hinduism. In the year 2001, Lubich landed in India to have a peaceful dialogue with the Hindus thus acquiring a pivotal and influential motivation for mutual prosperity. In the city of Coimbatore, located in the southern part of the Tamil Nadu State and is considered to be third largest city as well as the textile capital of South India, two Gandhian institutions namely *Shanti Ashram* and *Sarvodaya Movement* (Universal Uplifting Movement/Progress of All Movement), a term coined by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948), popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, a lawyer, political ethicist as well as an anti-imperial nationalist and the founding father of India, which refers to the foundation of a novel social order based on care and gentleness, which he used as the title of his translation of John Ruskin's (1819 – 1900) tract on political economy titled as *Unto the Last* in 1908,^{xxii} honored Chiara Lubich with the *Defender of Peace* prize. She has utilized the most influential weapon to combat violence, that is, the power of kind heartedness, affection and warmth with a durable conviction and devotion aiming at uniting the whole mankind. In short, she has opted to carry out a determined role in establishing reconciliation and mutual understanding between people of different faiths.^{xxiii} On that occasion, Chiara Lubich addressed various followers of Hinduism and also of other faiths, especially



accentuating the common features found both in the Gospel and the writings of the Hindus. She also visited the city of Mumbai, specifically paying a visit to the K. J. Somaiya Bharatiya Sanskriti Peetham^{xxiv} which works for the promotion of cultivating the essence of harmony, prosperity and universal fraternity via educational means, holding intercultural gatherings, workshops, seminars and conferences for interreligious dialogue and understanding.^{xxv} In the year 2003, Chiara Lubich made another comeback to India where she established good ties with the *Swadhyaya Parivara*, also known as the *Swadhyaya Movement*, a twentieth century Hindu religious movement whose foundation was laid down by Pandurang Shastri Athavale (1920 – 2003), a reformist, spiritual leader, activist, social revolutionary as well as a philosopher. This movement lays emphasis on self-awareness (*swadhyaya*), unselfish devoutness (*bhakti*) and urges its followers to make use of the Scriptures of Hinduism such as *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* in order to attain economic, social and spiritual freedom. Its other purposes are the establishment of fraternity, promotion of unity in diversity and the promulgation of the message of love for the Creator and creatures, the objectives which bear resemblance to the ones developed by the *Focolare Movement* of Chiara Lubich.^{xxvi}

Conclusion

Based on the discussed content, it is clear that Chiara Lubich was one of the most powerful pioneers of interfaith dialogue through which she visited a number of countries in the world to share the experience as well as the message of serenity between the people of major religions. It is true that we are residing into a world where many such factions exist thus operating, directly or indirectly, to hurt the religious sentiments of the global population. They are spreading like wildfires and their numbers are augmenting day by day. But the endeavors of people like Chiara



Lubich in bringing peace and harmony between different faiths make us realize that we all live on one earth and one sky which remains under us and that all the nuisances which threaten this land cause a danger for the whole humanity. Therefore, all must strive to restore the actual essence of human fraternity. The interfaith interaction is based on mutual respect and recognition of divergences and that one must contribute vis-à-vis the efforts to construct channels of cooperation and understanding. The call for mutual interreligious comprehension must be done in such a way which projects to the whole universe that no religion preaches intolerance and hate. All rumors and other bogus allegations like terrorism must be shunned once for all. It is to be noted that nation-building takes place only with the formation of human beings which occurs via collaboration with other citizens. Interfaith dialogue is no doubt one of the most powerful tools in annihilating ethnic and religious fanaticism or in short the lethal venom called *Islamophobia*.

Notes and References

ⁱ.*Al-Qur'ān*, 49:13

ⁱⁱ<https://www.soundvision.com/article/islams-manifesto-of-universal-brotherhood-of-human-beings>.

ⁱⁱⁱhttps://www.focolare.org/chi-siamo/#more_less

^{iv}Casarella, Peter. *Chiara Lubich: A Saint for a New Global Unity*, CLARITAS, Journal of Dialogue & Culture 8 (2), 2019, p. 17

^vZamboni, D. Stars and Tears. *Living City*, 42(5), 2003, pp:10 – 12

^{vi}<https://www.focolare.org/chi-siamo/>

^{vii}<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/focolare-movement>

^{viii}Lubich, Chiara. *Incontri con l'Oriente*, Roma, CittàNuova, 1986

^{ix}Fondi, Enzo & Zanzucchi, Michele. *Un popolonato dal Vangelo*, Roma, CittàNuova, 2003, p.391



- ^xCoda, Piero. *Nellab Moschea di Malcom X*. Italy: CittàNuovaEditrice. Roma, CittàNuova, 1997
- ^{xi}Lubich, Chiara. *Le monde aspire à l'unité. Rencontre de C. Lubich avec la Communauté afro-américaineetmusulmane à la Mosquée de Harlem*. Nouvelle Cité, No. 406, déc. 1997, pp: 22 – 25
- ^{xii}Lubich, Chiara. *A Spirituality of Unity for the Harmonious Living of the Human Family*. (2000). http://www.focolare.org/En/sif/2000/20001114e_c.html
- ^{xiii}Lemariéet al. *Focolare Movement and American Society of Muslims Share Faith and Life*. (2003). <http://www.sedos.org/arricia03/focolare.htm>
- ^{xiv}Coda, Piero. *Itappeto del sufi. Viaggio in Iran tragli Ayatollah*, Roma, CittàNuova, 1998
- ^{xv}Fondi. *op.cit.* p. 401
- ^{xvi}<http://y4uw.org/centres/loppiano/>
- ^{xvii}<https://www.accademiacattolicadibrescia.it/press-rassegna-stampa/item/kamel-layachi.html>
- ^{xviii}Ibid.
- ^{xix}<https://www.focolare.org/en/in-dialogo/grandi-religioni/islam/>
- ^{xx}<https://classic.iclrs.org/content/blurb/files/Bemporad%20Bio.pdf>
- ^{xxi}Coda, Piero. *Le lucidella menorah. Con Chiara Lubich in Argentina e Brasile*. Roma, CittàNuova, 1998, p.133
- ^{xxii}Aslam, MohdAqib. *Sarvodaya Movement And Its Impact On Indian Politics*. <http://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1824-sarvodaya-movement-and-its-impact-on-indian-politics.html>
- ^{xxiii}*Defender of Peace Award Citation* (2001). http://www.focolare.org/En/sif/2001/20010111e_c.html
- ^{xxiv}Zanzucchi, Michele. *Mille lune. In India con Chiara Lubich*. CittàNuova, Roma, 2001, pp: 40, 56
- ^{xxv}<https://www.careerindia.com/colleges/k-j-somaiya-bharatiya-sanskriti-peetham-mumbai-maharashtra-cp2168/>
- ^{xxvi}Hoegger, Martin. *Le dialogue interreligieuxdans la penséeet la pratique de Chiara Lubich. La fraternité, cheminet but du dialogue*. <https://martin.hoegger.org/index.php/dialogue-interreligieux/139-le-dialogue-interreligieux-c-lubich> See also https://martin.hoegger.org/images/travail_Bossey_francais.pdf