

The Word of God, Scripture, and Dialogue

Reflections for Buddhists in Light of the Experience of Chiara Lubich

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This article looks at the nature of the Word as presented in the Prologue to the Gospel According to John, and its creative act in conveying its presence as Jesus Christ as a “living reality” through scripture, and the transforming effect of living the Word in daily life in light of the experience of Chiara Lubich. It goes on to present how the human person distorts this reality in fundamental ways as described in the Letter of James in words that parallel a similar description in Buddhism; and how in Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians and Chiara’s own experience, this distortion can be healed by the Word of God. The final section addresses how these views relate to interreligious dialogue.

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The Christian Bible is made up of the Hebrew scriptures, called the Old Testament, and the New Testament written by early Christian authors. At the beginning of the famous Prologue to the fourth book of the New Testament, the *Gospel According to John*, we find a truly profound description of the Word of God. The Prologue begins:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him,
And without him nothing came to be (Jn 1:1–3).

The Word (*Logos*) of God is itself God and also that by which God created the world. The *First Letter of John* also says that “God is Love” (1 Jn 4:8). So, the divine act of creation through the Word is one of love. This loving creative act is going on all the time and all things that come to be through the Word have their foundation in the love of God.

Chiara Lubich writes about her own experience of creation, of nature, during a time of mystical illumination:

I remember that during those days, nature seemed to me to be enveloped totally by the sun; it already was physically, but it seemed to me that an even stronger sun enveloped it, saturated it, so that the whole of nature appeared to me as being “in love.” I saw things, rivers, plants, meadows, grass as

linked to one another by a bond of love in which each one had a meaning of love with regard to the others.¹

On earth all is in a relation of love with all: each thing with each thing. It is necessary to be Love to find the golden thread that links beings.²

Chiara experienced a divine “sun,” which she later refers to as the love of God, that gives life to all beings through the Word of God. All things exist together “in” this love, in an interrelatedness where things exist in a “bond of love,” each being gift for the others. This interrelatedness of all things expresses the interpenetration of the Persons of the Trinity. Chiara, later commenting on this experience, saw a similarity between this Trinitarian vision of creation and the Buddhist understanding of the dependent arising of beings.³

Returning to John’s Prologue, the text goes on to proclaim:

And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father’s only Son,
full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14).

Here, John is referring to Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the Word of God. For Christians, our sacred Scripture communicates

1. Chiara Lubich, “Paradise ’49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 7.
2. Quoted by Callan Slipper, “Towards an Understanding of the Human Person According to the Mystical Experience of Chiara Lubich in the Paradise of ’49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 30.
3. Chiara Lubich, Unpublished Talk to the Gen (December 20, 2003).

to humankind words of the Word of God. Scripture is the divine self-communication of the Word of God seen fully in Jesus Christ. As Michael Fuss said in dialogue with Buddhists: “Scripture is conceived as a living word springing forth from the mouth of God. . . .”⁴ Note that Fuss refers here to the Word as “living.”

Turning again to the *First Letter of John*, we find:

Something which has existed since the beginning,
that we have heard,
and we have seen with our own eyes;
that we have watched
and touched with our hands:
the Word, who is life. . . . (1 Jn 1:1)

This means that while words of Sacred Scripture are written by persons, the inspired human words contain in fact the *living presence* of God’s Word. The Word of God, that became man in Jesus Christ, is alive and present today in Sacred Scripture. The presence of the Word in Scripture conveys its divine life to the reader. The living divine presence of the creative Word in Scripture has the power to recreate our humanity so as to share in his divinity. As the Prologue of the *Gospel According to John* states:

The true light, which enlightens everyone,
was coming into the world.
He was in the world,
and the world came to be through him,

4. Michael Fuss, “Scriptural Inspiration and Universal Revelation,” *Pro Dialogo* 100 (1999): 71.

but the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own,
but his own people did not accept him.
But to those who did accept him,
he gave power to become children of God. . . . (Jn 1:9–10).

In other words, Sacred Scripture contains the creative life of God as a power to transform the lives of those who read or hear the words of Scripture and make it the foundation of their lives. We become children of God, recreated by and in the very life of God conveyed by Scripture. About this power of the Word, Chiara writes:

The words of Jesus are spirit and life because they come from Heaven: they are a light that descends from above, and their power comes from above . . . His are “words of eternal life” because they contain, express and communicate the fullness of that life that never ends, since it is the very life of God. . . . That is why each month we focus on one word in particular, letting it enter us, form us, act in us. By living out one word of Jesus we live out the whole Gospel, because in each of his words he gives all of himself, he himself comes to live in us. It is like a drop of divine wisdom from the Risen One that slowly sinks in and replaces our ways of thinking, choosing and acting in all the circumstances of our lives.⁵

Callan Slipper writes the following about Chiara’s experience of how it is that the Word of God contained in “a drop of divine wisdom” can transform a person’s life:

5. Chiara Lubich, Commentary on the Word of Life (March 2003 and March 2012).

Human beings have the capability of expressing the whole of the Word. They are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), and reflect the Word, who is the Son, who “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15). . . . “Jesus,” Chiara writes, “is the model of humans: He is the Human Being.”⁶

Human beings have the level of consciousness and free will necessary to express in unique ways the whole of the Word of God and thereby realize the image of God that is our true self. From this Christian perspective, Jesus is the model human being, indeed the truth of each person, who expresses the luminosity and love of the whole Word in relation with other persons and nature. As Paul says about living the Word of God, living Jesus: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ within me who lives” (Gal 2:20). Elsewhere, Paul characterizes the new life generated by the Word within us in this way: “With our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, we grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect: this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

However, we fail in our ordinary existence to reflect this image, to be the unique image of God that is our true self, because it is distorted by a deep and fundamental misdirection of our free will. Based on ignorance of our true self, we choose to produce a false self-centered consciousness full of unwholesome dispositions and states of mind. In the *Letter of James*, we read:

Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your desires fighting inside

6. Slipper, p. 33.

your own selves? You want something but you do not have it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force (James 4:1–2).

By not being our true selves as gifts for others, and instead being self-enclosed individuals, we are moved by negative states of mind and afflictive feelings that conceal the truth that we are words spoken into existence by the Word together with all of creation. In the Word of God in Sacred Scripture, one finds the “drop[s] of divine wisdom” empowering us to discover our true way of living. As the *Letter of James* also says:

Wherever you find jealousy and ambition, you find disharmony and wicked things of every kind being done; whereas the wisdom that comes down from above is essentially something pure; it also makes for peace, and is kindly and considerate; it is full of compassion and shows itself by doing good; nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it. Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which bear fruit in holiness (James 3:16–18).

Sacred Scripture contains the “wisdom that comes from above” such that, in Chiara’s words, it “sinks in and replaces our ways of thinking, choosing and acting in all the circumstances of our lives.” This “pure” wisdom discloses our true identity in a life of harmony and peace, kindness and compassion, doing good to all and not being partial to one over another. For this gift of the Word, Christians give praise and thanks. As we read in Paul’s *First Letter to the Thessalonians*:

We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers (1 Thess 2:13).

At this point, the question arises: Is the Word of God only at work in Christians? In fact, both John and Paul drew on the wisdom and values of the cultures around them. The *Gospel of John* is drawing on the Greek philosophical tradition when it uses *logos* for “Word” in the above-quoted passages about the Word of God. The *Acts of the Apostles* records the apostle Paul quoting twice from Hellenistic writings in his speech at the Areopagus in Athens: “For ‘in him we live and move and have our being,’ as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28). St. Justin Martyr and other Fathers of the church refer to God sowing “seeds of the Word” in the hearts of persons of other religions and cultures.⁷ And the Second Vatican Council’s document, *Nostra Aetate*, refers to “rays” of Truth in other religions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. . . . The Church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let

7. *Apology* I, 46.

Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture (NA 2).

Here is the link between Sacred Scripture and interreligious dialogue for Christians. The power of the Word alive in our Scripture, the light, wisdom, goodness, compassion, love that opens our closed hearts and minds to discover and live our relational true selves in the image of God, is present and at work in other religions and cultures. Persons of other religions with whom we dialogue give us an opportunity to discover treasures of true wisdom. As John Paul II says:

In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply. . . . It is an innate property of human reason to ask why things are as they are, even though the answers which gradually emerge are set within a horizon which reveals how the different human cultures are complementary. Philosophy's powerful influence on the formation and development of the cultures of the West should not obscure the influence it has also had upon the ways of understanding existence found in the East. Every people has its own native and seminal wisdom which, as a true cultural treasure, tends to find voice and develop in forms which are genuinely philosophical (*Fides et Ratio*, 1, 3).

Regarding the "true cultural treasures" to which John Paul II refers, I am reminded of the comment of Ewert Cousins at the end

of the first Gethsemani Encounter between Christian and Buddhist monastics:

I was really surprised . . . when on the first day, a treasure chest, as it were, was put on the floor there. The box was completely open, and we could see the gems and the jewels, the shining light, from both traditions. And it is still there! As we see it more profoundly, we discover that what we thought was a Buddhist gem is also ours. And perhaps we have shared some of our gems with our Buddhist brothers and sisters.⁸

Chiara, drawing on the writings of the Fathers of the church, speaks of "the 'seeds of the Word' which the love of God has placed in every religion."⁹ She goes on to say that it is on the basis of these seeds that there is an "exchange of gifts" in the Focolare's dialogue with other religions.¹⁰ But more than this, she says that when this exchange happens by "making ourselves one" through self-emptying love, there is "an atmosphere of communion" where "the truth is gradually revealed and we feel that it has brought us closer to one another."¹¹ In this spirituality of dialogue, Chiara concludes, we contribute together to building "unity and peace in the world."¹²

8. Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, eds., *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 270.

9. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (New York: New City Press, 2007), p. 341.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

Piero Coda expands on this insight of Chiara's when he says that today we may be at the beginning of a new epoch:

The different religious identities . . . are entering into relation with each other. They are moving from an exclusivist conception of the revelation of God (God revealing himself to us, excluding others) to a timidly relational one (the God who is for me is also for others). . . .¹³

Coda says that this means we need to go in two directions in interreligious dialogue. First, we need to go backward to rediscover revelation in the origins of each other's religions, as we are doing here by looking at our scriptures. Second, we need to go forward in order to open the horizon of our cultures "to a 'new' advent of God . . . that cannot but involve other religions, through their experience of new relationships reciprocally agreed upon, in the common service of the one human family. . . ."¹⁴ The contribution of the Focolare's spirituality in dialogue is our living together in an atmosphere of unity that provides a light to find common ground, and that points us toward a new epoch of peace and harmony that embraces all humankind and the natural world.

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13. Piero Coda, *Logos and Nothingness: Trinity, Religions, Mysticism* (Rome Città Nuova, 1987), p. 124.

14. *Ibid.*

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