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An Interview with Patrick Henry

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Patrick Henry, Ph.D.

from **Bulletin 67, October 2001**

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Patrick Henry, Ph.D., was professor of religion for seventeen years at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, specializing in early Christianity. Since 1984 he has been executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Among his books are *The Ironic Christian's Companion: Finding the Marks of God's Grace in the World* (Riverhead Books), and, with Donald Swearer, *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism*. He and his wife, Pat Welter, a junior high school principal, live in Waite Park, Minnesota. Professor Henry also edited *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict* (Riverhead Books).

Sister Mary Margaret Funk: Patrick, what is this love affair with Buddhism? How did you meet?

Patrick Henry: Prior to 1970, I knew nothing about Buddhism. That year, Donald Swearer joined the Religion Department faculty at Swarthmore College. During the 14 years we were colleagues, before I moved to the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, I was introduced to the subject, the texts, the people, the tradition, by one of the foremost American scholars of Buddhism who was himself a Christian. We taught jointly about monasticism, and wrote *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism* (1989). But it wasn't just an academic or intellectual interest. Buddhism "took" with me, a kind of instant affinity.

Sr. Meg: You were at the Gethsemani Encounter and it was your idea to follow-up with the book on the Rule of Benedict. Now that the baby is born and has a life of its own, tell me what you learned along the

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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana and is the author of a number of books, including *Thoughts Matter* and *Islam Is . . .*

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way.

Patrick Henry: First, I learned that Buddhist calendars are as packed as Christian ones; it took two years to get the Buddhist writers and me together for two days! Second, the Buddhists highlighted Benedict's positive view of human nature. Third, I was reminded that there are as many Buddhisms as there are Christianities—which is to say, the reality is Buddhists and Christians, not abstractions like "Buddhism" and "Christianity." Fourth, I was blessed by the largeness of many spirits: authors, editors, colleagues of all sorts.

Sr. Meg: Not being a monastic, what is your view of us?

Patrick Henry: You've perhaps heard me quote a favorite compliment that Abbot Jerome Theisen wrote me, "We appreciate your enthusiasm for the monastic life, which often exceeds our own understanding of it." As you know, I'm only one of thousands, maybe millions, who are looking to you monastic folk to help show us the way out of our cultural and spiritual doldrums. In Collegeville I've lived among you for a long time and am still amazed at your humor, resiliency, holy irreverence, and gift for tenacious friendship.

Sr. Meg: What is your view of monastic dialogue?

Patrick Henry: Monastic interreligious dialogue is especially exciting because you quickly get beyond doctrines to practice, which is where people live.

Sr. Meg: Why are you Christian?

Patrick Henry: The quick answer is what would be for most (though certainly not all) Christians: I was born into it. Of course, I've made decisions along the way, and it's not simply a matter of happenstance. If you put the question differently—Why am I still a Christian?—I'd say it's because I find Trinity and Incarnation compelling: God is community and God is for us. This is the core and it doesn't require exclusivisms that rule out, e.g., Buddhism. A Buddhist friend reminded me that the ultimate Buddhist confession is, "I know nothing." This is



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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very different from saying, "I don't know anything," and would serve very well, I think, as an enlightened Christian confession.

Sr. Meg: You've watched the evolution from academic theology to comparative religions, to spirituality, to interfaith dialogue. If you had your preference, what's the next step?

Patrick Henry: As I do in response to many questions, I appeal to the wisdom of Jean-Luc Godard who, when told that a movie should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, replied, "Certainly, but not necessarily in that order." The evolution keeps twisting back on itself. All the stages can be found in the first few centuries of the church as well as now. The next stage, like every stage, will be complex and convoluted. One thing I hope to see is more reflecting by adherents of one tradition on the central texts of another tradition, always with reference to experience more than to doctrine. Maybe *Benedict's Dharma* will start a trend.

Sr. Meg: In the editing of *Benedict's Dharma*, were there any surprises?

Patrick Henry: A specific surprise was a corollary of the editing. I visited Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, where one of the authors, Judith Simmer-Brown, teaches. I learned that among the criteria for tenure at Naropa is regular, active, engagement in contemplative life in one's own tradition. For most of the faculty that's Buddhist, but if you're Christian, it would be Christian contemplative prayer. Did you catch that? A criterion for tenure! I don't know of a Christian academic institution that would be so bold as to say that praying counts for tenure and that not praying counts against it.

Sr. Meg: What's it feel like to know 'nothing'?

Patrick Henry: It puts me somewhere between Socrates, whose wisdom was recognizing he knew nothing, and screenwriter William Goldman, who famously said, in his *Golden Rule of Hollywood*, "Nobody knows anything." The feeling is one of openness to surprise. It's like the coming-full-circle of Eliot's "Little Gidding": "And the end of all our

exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time." It's expecting the future to be like the past in which, over and over again, what I thought was sure, fixed, "known," turned out to be just one more myopic distortion. When Jacob woke from his dream of the ladder between earth and heaven, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place-and I did not know it!"

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