



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Sr. Kathy Lyzotte: Discussion Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Sr. Mary Collins, OSB, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Br. Duff Gaeta, Paul Gailey, Fr. Damon Geiger, OSST, Joseph Goldstein, Stephanie Kaza, John Daido Looi, Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO, Archbishop Felix Machado, Kate Olson, Judith Simmer-Brown, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Sopa, Ajahn Sundara, Fr. Dan Ward, OSB, Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam, Ven. Guo Yuan, Fa Shi

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Dan Ward: My experience of monasticism in our Benedictine tradition is that individuals very much follow the teaching of nonconsumerism. We're sitting in a Cistercian, strict observance monastery, and we know that it was founded from the Trappists, because the original Cistercians became too identified with society. And they were started because the Benedictines, the black monks, became too identified with society. Francis of Assisi said that the Franciscans, neither as individuals nor as an order, could own anything, so technically it's owned by the Apostolic See. But it doesn't seem to have changed their lifestyle at all and the disputes they've had.

So, to me, the situation is not the problem of the individual so much as the monastery or the temple, and how it stands apart from consumers. In the United States a number of religious communities—actually, I'm on a task force dealing with this—are trying to look at the right use of property. How do you use property to preserve the ecology? How do you use property so that people aren't suffering and overconsuming? That to me is where the issue is. It's not with my individuality. It is with

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Sr. Mary Collins, OSB, is a liturgist and former prioress at Mt. Saint Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas.

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the community. That's where I think Kathy has some of the difficulties being a treasurer. Because she doesn't necessarily have to deal with the individuals so much, but the community and its use of its goods. I don't know think monasticism has a clear answer because too often it talks only about the individual.

Mary Collins: I would like to register that I have been suffering because of this conversation, because Father Felix talked about a reality of people who aren't struggling with whether they have one nice robe or a simple roof over their heads or a meal, but who have no clothing, no food, and no roofs over their head. And I don't know what the relationship between monasticism and this is. The notion of generosity, as I understand it and we have practiced it, is providing for the dire poverty of others. But there is a much larger question. If we are going to look at human communion, and I pick up from what Father Dan Ward just said that the issues are systemic, then monasteries become very much a part of their culture. Perhaps it's not yet time to talk to young people about what we have to offer them, because I think we are still struggling ourselves.

Most of us come from places that are well established, have received gifts from wealthy friends, and count on that kind of support. This is all very real. I think that somehow or other the teachings and practices we have had—the restricted use of money, the one bar of soap at a time, etc.—doesn't really address the question of being in communion with one another in a global way. I respect the fact that the spiritual motivation is very important, and that the question of dealing with suffering in terms of attitude may be appropriate as a responsibility for me to take on for myself; but I cannot say to my brother or sister in India, "It's a matter of mind over matter," because the world in which they live is a world of great need, and there is no way to provide for that need. It's not a matter of what we want; and if you want it you can't have it and forget it. This is a question of life and death.

Judith Simmer-Brown: Thank you so much. It's the prophetic Christian voice that pushed me to look from a Buddhist perspective at this issue, because it is a systemic issue that's beyond just our individual practice. Looking from a Buddhist point of view, the current



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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

situation of consumerism and globalization is beyond individual greed, but is a whole system based upon increasing wants. In looking at it from the point of view of dependent origination; the system is something that has been created and built up to a point that many people feel it's inescapable and self-existing. They feel helpless and hopeless when facing it. When we look at it very carefully, however, we can actually see that there are causes and conditions that have set it up.

With the help of John Cobb, I began to read economic theory and found some interesting things that are the weak links that we, as contemplatives, must be aware of in order to bring a critical eye to the system in order to collapse it in some way. I was particularly struck by the work of David Korten, who talks about how corporations and institutions have been given rights and privileges economically that allow them to make money out of money rather than out of making things; how laws in the United States and the West are set up to privilege the wealthy and particularly corporations and institutions; and how by bringing an eye to the legal system that supports money making money and identifying those particular places and change those laws, that there would be a change in the system altogether. So I think that's something we should educate ourselves about and begin to join together to change.

Mary Margaret Funk: I'm conscious here that my brother is a commodities broker, so it is not only money that makes money. . . .

Joseph Goldstein: I want to raise a very touchy subject. I appreciate what everybody has been saying, and the problem is massive and real. But it seems an underpinning of the problem is the great growth of population. There is a relationship to the resources that we have and the needs of a larger population on the earth. That is not to say that we have reached the limit of what the earth could sustain, with greater comfort for everyone, if it were allocated in a more just way. But it's not infinite. Unless we look at the question of ever expanding population growth, no matter what we do systemically, there are going to be problems.

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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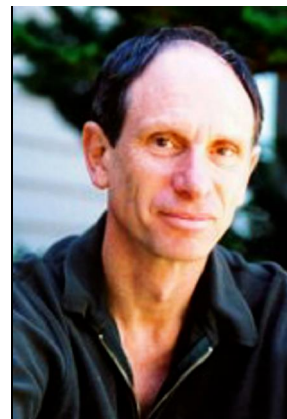
Now, I know this is a very delicate issue, and there may be differing ways of approaching population growth. But somehow I feel that it needs to be addressed, because the growth is happening exponentially. I spent many years in India. It's where I did my practice. When I was there in the 1960s and 1970s, I believe the population was maybe 350- or 400 million people. In just forty years, it's over a billion people. And this is true of many places in the world. How can we keep doing this—in reading the projections for what the population will be in fifty years on the earth? It's something we need to address; and I think in some ways the monastic communities are doing their part, which may be the greatest contribution.

Paul Gailey: As I listened to the conversation, I was thinking about my own experience recently. For many years I was in a position where I had a great deal of authority, and then went to a position where I did not. This has been a great gift, to go through this experience. Because in the second phase, it was very easy to watch from the bottom. You can see certain things from the bottom that are harder to see from the top. What I have seen from the bottom is how various groups come into power. Within that group, there is a great self-containment. In other words, it's very easy to justify all the reasons why you need what you need within that group.

I will never look again at those positions of authority in the same way as I did before, simply because now I've been able to get this different perspective.

As I've watched the groups who have worked in this way, I've come to see that much of the self-containment comes from fear and excessive belief in what we need or want. But it is extremely difficult from those positions to see that stance. So the feeling I keep getting through the conversation is to come back to this central issue about transformation—that without it, no one can ever see a different way to understand how their actions—even though they seem very self-contained, justifiable, and make sense within that system—come from fear and other conditions that are hurting others.

Stephanie Kaza: Last year I invented a new course because I was so



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consumed by this topic, and it was called Unlearning Consumerism. The students were extremely responsive to it and I worked with it as an addiction. The students helped me learn about it as an addiction, and we had support groups around weekly CD binges, coffee, clothing, and so on. I wanted to mention this because one of the biggest conversations in the environmental community is to what degree should we look to population expansion and explosion, and to what degree should we look to consumption explosion. This was raised in a very big way at the 1992 Earth Summit. It shocked the North quite a bit when the southern countries said, "Stop pointing your finger at us and all our people. Point the finger back towards yourself and the huge ecological impact of your industrialized countries." It made people in the North very uncomfortable. That's to a large extent one of the reasons the population question has been frozen, because the finger of blame was shifted so greatly.

When you actually look at ecological impact, developed countries have obviously far greater impact overall. One of the roles that I wonder about for monastic communities is as kind of "detox zones" from consumption, a place where you can actually be away from television. Airports used to be one of those places and no longer are. It's very difficult to find a place to be away from advertising, to find a place to be away from all the addictions that are being offered on a regular basis. The students were absolutely at a loss to find these places, and our classroom became a little haven for them. It's a role that has been offered under the guise of the virtues of simplicity. However, I wonder if we could consider it as a place simply to reorient, to take a break and be able to reconsider some of these things. The younger generations are pretty thoroughly brain-washed and it's harder, I think, for people in the older generations to understand the impact of MTV, computer screens, the Internet from almost birth. One of the most interesting movements to these young people is coming from the Adbusters group in Vancouver. They are breaking through the mental environment conditioning. It's actually spiritual work Adbusters is trying to undertake, and we could join forces around this.

Brother Duff Gaeta from Gethsemani: Somebody said that in a democratic society nobody is really responsible, but everybody is guilty.



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All articles by or about Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO



Archbishop Felix Machado served as under-secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue prior to his appointment as bishop of Nashik (India) on January 16, 2008.

There is a line that Kathy Lyzotte said about her work. She said, "I try to not let the money touch me." I think as monks it's the biggest danger we face: I'm not the treasurer; it's not my fault. We are all guilty. We use the money. I use the heat etc. I read an article lately about what it would take for the rest of the world to live at the same level as the United States. We would need four planet earths to provide for it. So population is not the problem. The problem comes when greed appropriates so much energy that there is none left for the other to eat or clothe himself. As monks we have to be very aware that even though we may not touch the money, we spend it and are responsible for it.

Kate Olson: I was struck by Father Joseph Wong mentioning kind of two different visions, but ending up at the same point, the not clinging. As a lay person, when I think about the benefit of this dialogue to those of us who are not monastics, I hope that in the dialogue you begin to find these common things that you can identify as practices to share with young people and wider audiences to address suffering in these various areas. The dialogue about the differences is really interesting, but I'm really finding my ears perking up when you touch on universal things you agree on. I think concentrating on them would really extend the dialogue beyond this room and way beyond monasticism.

Joseph Goldstein: In my comment on the overpopulation of the whole world, I was not pointing a finger and mitigating the need to look at the systemic problem. I simply don't think the increase in population can be sustained indefinitely, and that somehow that has to be addressed.

Kathy Lyzotte: So many serious important issues have been raised, but whatever little bit we can do as a group here will certainly be a contribution. I would like to say in my view the human race has learned how to live in small local communities. We know how to live in a monastic community. We know how to live in a neighborhood and in rural communities where people just pitch in and help one another whenever there is a need. Somehow we need to expand our views and horizons and get beyond national borders and learn that as everything is moving onto a global level, our awareness has to move onto a global level. We need to realize that we need to be neighborly to all of

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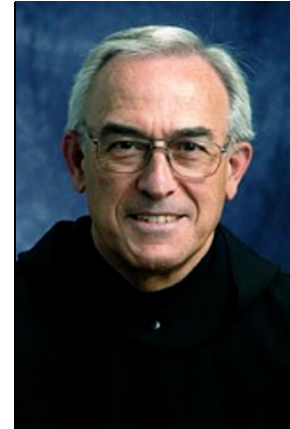
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Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November 1, 2008. Prior to that he served as chair of the MID board from 2000 to 2005, and as Executive Director of MID until his appointment as Secretary General. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, but resides at Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

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Geshe Sopa is one of the few Tibetan scholars to hold a regular position at a Western institution of higher learning: at the University of Wisconsin. He founded the Deer Park Buddhist Center in 1979.

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Geshe Sopa**



Ajahn Sundara is a Theravada Buddhist nun who was ordained in England in 1979 in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajan Chah. She was a participant in Gethsemani Encounter II in 2002.

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Fr. James Wiseman, OSB, is a monk of Saint Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, and teaches theology at the Abbey School and at Catholic University. He served as Chair of the Board and President of MID, has been editor of the MID bulletin since 1998, and again serves as a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

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Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB

Cam, was elected a member of the Council of the Camaldolese Benedictines in 2005 and lives at the Mother House at Camaldoli, Italy. He was involved in the second Gethsemani Encounter in April 2002.

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Ven. Guo-yuan Fa Shi is a monk in the Chan Buddhist tradition. He became Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center until October, 2004, when he went back to Taiwan to oversee the newly built Chan Hall.

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