



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Interviews with Participants of "Nuns in the West" II

Courtney Bender, Wendy Cadge

from [Bulletin 74, April 2005](#)

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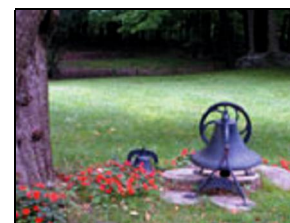
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3. Meditation and action in the world

Conversation about contemplative practice at the dialogue and in interviews also led to broader questions about how participants balance their contemplative lives with their lives "in the world," however they define them. First, it is helpful to consider how participants organize their contemplative lives, and specifically whether they segment out time during their day for prayer and contemplation or whether they see themselves in prayer or contemplation continually. Second, we consider the language that Catholics and Buddhists use to describe the distinction or boundary (or lack thereof) between action and prayer.

All of the nuns interviewed take time each day for prayer and contemplation and, in addition, some consider themselves to be in prayer or meditation throughout the day. One Catholic nun described her deepest practice as "prayer without ceasing" or "ceaseless prayer." In her life, she gradually realized that her work was to pray:

. . . it started with a Jesus prayer, the . . . ceaseless prayer, Jesus prayer which . . . rises whenever I'm conscious of myself. That's what helped me with Divine Office. . . I used to find it an interruption to my work. But when I realized my work was to pray without ceasing, it was a lot easier to do it in common with my sisters than it was to do it always on my own. So I see Divine Office as a really as really a restart of my ceaseless prayer.



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Another Catholic keeps a prayer stone or prayer beads in her pocket, "so that throughout the day I keep the prayer going." She also practices consciousness examination so checks in with her self several times a day, "kind of being observant about where my consciousness is."

Several Buddhists participants also see themselves in meditation or contemplation throughout the day, regardless of what their actual activity is. One does her meditation in the mornings and evenings, "in terms of like a formal sit-down meditation practice," but like many other traditions she explains, "the practice is also in every day life in your interactions with people, in terms of patience. . . ." Another Buddhist describes her daily life and meditation as interrelated and complementary, "I don't see my daily life as something separate from my meditation or my meditation as separate from my daily life. . . ." A Zen priest describes the interrelationship more directly,

Certainly, there's practice all of the time. It's not just that we do the cleaning, but how we do the cleaning, how we do the cooking and I can taste the food and I can tell whether somebody's holding a grudge or if they need a little extra TLC and I should bring a box of chocolates home, or I can look at how the vegetables are cut and see if their mind has been on that or on something else. So it's not like it's just that one hour, but the one hour tends to be more academic that then should feed the rest of the day—the activities of the day.

Comparing the zen approach to the Benedictine approach, she explains, "We treat all work as the same—with the same value. Whether we're cleaning the toilets, whether we're peeling potatoes or making a cake for a special occasion, sewing a Buddha robe, all work, similar to the Benedictine idea, is good work, their motto being work and prayer. Ours is work and meditation, I guess."

While "work and prayer" or "work and meditation" may be similar mottos, distinctions between the groups became evident in conversations about the relationship between contemplation and action

more generally. One of the Benedictine nuns shared an inside "joke" that the Benedictine motto "*ora et labora*" (pray and work) might better be written "*ora et labora . . . et labor et labora.*" The theme of the busy-ness of monastic life was consistent among Catholic nuns, and brought to our attention the demands that the Catholic nuns face in administration or the helping professions (teaching, health care, peace and justice activism, administration, counseling and so on), and likewise the "negative" pull that some of these positions create. Speaking of nuns' extensive interaction with schools and hospitals, one nun (Benedictine) remarked

. . . I think monasticism has a uniquely prophetic role within the church and within the culture. And I think we should take that role seriously, I'm not sure we take it seriously enough and partly because we're also within all the other structures. We run colleges, we run hospitals. We need to do fundraising. We can't afford to alienate the people who give us money for those things and all of that—and that is a terrible pressure on taking a radically prophetic stance in some issues. You know, I don't think we need to be wildly prophetic, but I do think that we need to be very firm. So we made some statements as a community, others are more radical and I think it tends unfortunately relate to the number of projects you have going that depend on being accepted in the large culture. So I think we compromise ourselves that way in maintaining these institutions that once were prophetic action because nobody else was doing it, that needed to be done. So, yeah, I think we're coming up against another quantum leap in our evolution of where we stand. I don't think we're going to be running a lot of institutions in the future.

Another difference we noted in relation to contemplation and action arose in what both groups understood as the complement to meditation or prayer. Buddhist nuns typically emphasized the self and improving themselves and others when they spoke about the balance between contemplation and action. The Catholic nuns, in comparison, typically spoke about being of service to others through social service programs

and other forms of social activism.

When asked about how she balances contemplation and action, one Buddhist nun explained that, "A lot of Tibetan Buddhist practice is sort of like aimed at habituation toward changing—habituation of changing your mind from one habit to another. And the habit would be that you would familiarize your mind with always being conscience of your actions and your thoughts and your speech when you're in the world. So, I'm always working at, always trying to develop mindfulness and it's a habit that you acquire and a lot of us are better at habituation than we realize." Another Buddhist described her contribution "to the world" via teaching about suffering,

We want to help people. But this is what we do. This is our way of helping people, by teaching the dharma and showing how it can make a difference to us in life and help with suffering." She continues, "if we can deal with our own suffering and help other people to deal with theirs, that is our action in the world, but we're not out there waving placards about, you know, the environment or war in Iraq or anything like that, and we're not feeding the hungry in India and that kind of thing. We leave that to other people.

It is by training and changing the mind that these Buddhists describe their contributions to "the world." Interestingly, [the Buddhist from whom this last quote comes] spoke in our interview of a woman who wanted to become a monastic in her tradition and do social work. This kind of direct social service work was not recognized or valued in a way that enabled this woman to do it, and so she did not ordain. (It is difficult to imagine this kind of situation happening among the Catholics—even if a particular order was not receptive, she could join another with a stronger emphasis on social service work).

This is not to say that Buddhist nuns are not involved in social service work: some are, though normally in smaller or more limited ways than some of the Catholic nuns. Those that are so involved spoke of the quality of their interactions and efforts as being as important as their "ends." One Zen priest describes herself as "fully engaged in the world"

and does quite a bit of work in prisons and with recently released prisoners. In addition to emphasizing the ends of these efforts ("trying to establish a residence for men who are coming out of prison to stabilize their lives so that they don't re-offend"), however, she also emphasizes the process; "So, it isn't so much about what I do in the world, but how I do it in the world, that is important. And whether conscious presence is really brought to bear on interactions and the recognition of our interrelatedness."

The Buddhists' approach contrasts with how many of the Catholic women speak about balancing contemplation and action in direct service with others. For example, one Catholic nun described how her zen meditation practice has taught her to be present and aware of the moment and how her challenge is not to be "too absorbed by my contemplation and by loving my sitting, [when] I ought to be out there working for the poor." In describing her approach to "action in the world," she borrowed Paul Netter's phrase, "mysticism of service." She explains, "that rang a bell with me because, you know, mysticism, you think of total absorption, total gift of yourself, and I remembered how I felt working with homeless people. The reason I got into working with homeless people was that I couldn't tolerate walking over those bodies on the street, I just couldn't allow that to happen, and it absorbed my whole being. So that was my prayer for a while." Much of the Catholics' attention to social service is clearly related to their history of building schools, hospitals, and other social service programs and to the ways they were introduced to religious life. One Catholic nun described her decision to become a nun as an outgrowth of volunteer work she did with nuns as an adolescent.

These nuns were training us in mystical life because they would say, "You are not just touching the body of an eighty-five year old bedridden person with Alzheimers, you are touching Christ. You are touching Christ. You are to kneel in front of that person. When you bathe them you are bathing the feet of Christ. When you are changing their wet diapers or whatever, and dressing their bed sores, this is Christ." And I'm telling you Courtney, I don't know maybe never since. When I was a little kid on those buses going from house to house with the nuns you didn't talk a lot. In those days they were,

they had to keep a kind of silence. Sometimes you could talk. I always was next to these incredible women and thought, yeah I want to do this.

These two examples demonstrate how Catholic nuns in many cases understand acts of service as a form of prayer or meditation, or even mysticism, where a key component is a full absorption in the other's needs. These examples provide an interesting counterpoint to the Buddhist's statements that define sitting practices and dharma teachings as service to the world. In both cases, nuns are actively reworking more commonplace views of what it means to live in ways that are simultaneously engaged in the world and devoted. These various models differ from each other (and we expect that these differences have substantial "theological" roots). Nonetheless, they both offer critiques of views that prayer/meditation and action "in the world" are distinct spheres of action.

As we listened to Buddhist and Catholic women religious reflect on these issues, we were struck by how their answers suggested ways that both groups are thinking and rethinking their institutional roles in the Western world, and how both might learn from each other in this regard. While we do not suggest that there is growing convergence on these issues or on an approach to monasticism, we did note that Catholics and Buddhists alike are learning from each others' ways of negotiating the complex of action and meditation. For instance, the Catholic nun above who voiced concern over the impact of institutional service on monasticism's "prophetic" role might find heart in her Catholic sister's suggestion about monasticism's role in Western society: "I think how we can best be counter-cultural, or be Gospel people in this day and age, is to offer spaciousness and silence because things are going so fast and speeding up. And in order to do that it's got to come from the inside out." Likewise, one of the Buddhist nuns who has been most actively involved in social service / activism work as some of the Catholic nuns, has an approach that echoes many of the Catholic responses, in her understanding of the relationship between personal grounding and service to others: "I think that that basis of contemplative practice is just absolutely crucial. . . if we don't have this kind of core of inner peace, of inner integration, inner understanding, then we cannot be as effective in our work in the world. If we're out at

the soup lines or prisons and we don't have our own, you know basic inner, our basic psychological balance, and some kind of peacefulness and spiritual foundations, I don't think that we will be as effective in the work that we need to do."

Theme Three: Communities and Institutions:

Misunderstandings?

The women who participated in the dialogue are formally linked to their religious traditions in different ways. Each is a part of her religious tradition in a general way as well as more specifically via membership in lineages, orders, particular centers or organizations. These specific linkages and their attendant responsibilities influence many practical aspects of these women's lives—their education, financial support, living arrangements, senses of community, and so on.

In our interviews we sensed that the nitty-gritty aspects of organizational relationships were not clearly marked out as a point for discussion, and that there was some confusion and misunderstanding among both Catholic and Buddhist women about these "basics" of how the others lived. Several of the Catholic nuns, for instance, did not fully understand how ordination takes place in the Buddhist tradition and were puzzled by what they perceived as some of the Buddhists' decisions not to live in communities. A number of the Buddhist nuns apparently presumed the Catholic church fully supports Catholic nuns financially and that resources are rarely lacking. While this theme of organizational connectedness is perhaps less obviously interesting than contemplative life and action, nuns' discussions on these topics generated some interesting and curious points that might be fruitful to address and explore in future dialogues.

All of the dialogue participants were ordained in the Buddhist or Catholic traditions though what this represents differs between and within traditions. Among the Buddhists interviewed, the clearest distinction is between women ordained in the Soto Zen and Tibetan traditions. All of those ordained in the Soto Zen tradition spent time studying in Japan before being ordained and progressed through a set of specific categories in their training before and after ordination. The most senior level of training is open to women in the Soto Zen tradition. All of the Soto Zen monastics interviewed live at Zen centers in the States (some of which they started or helped to start) and

remain quite closely linked to the teachings of Soto Zen. Institutionally different individuals and Zen centers in the States have made different decisions about formal linkages to other Zen institutions. Some Zen monastics are formally linked to Soto Zen institutions in Japan and receive a title ("overseas teacher") and a stipend of a few thousand dollars per year. One Zen priest calls this a close relationship, in the sense that she submits annual reports, but loose "in the sense that it's largely on my own terms." Another zen monastic we spoke with was expecting a Japanese nun to arrive shortly and stay at her temple in the States for two years, another indication of close relations between organizations in the U.S. and Japan. Other Zen monastics have decided not to have this connection. One woman who lives at a center started by another Soto Zen monastic explains,

she [the founder of the temple] didn't register us. She wanted to be—she had the qualifications to proceed independently and so did, because, as a woman, they wouldn't have let her do very much. They would have somebody else as the Abbot of --- and all this kind of stuff and she said, "I'm not having that. We're just going to go do what we need to do." So, we have friendly relations with the Japanese, but we're not part of the Japanese head office. We're not members of that.

And some monastics are on the fence because they are concerned about the rules and regulations that could go along with accepting financial support from Soto Zen organizations in Japan.

In contrast, full ordination as a nun (bhiksuni) in the Tibetan tradition is not open to women because the continuous lineage of ordination from previous generations of nuns has not been maintained. The Tibetan nuns, therefore, received their first level of ordination (novice ordination) in the Tibetan tradition and their higher ordination in the Taiwanese, Korean, or Vietnamese traditions. They receive little support, educationally, financially, or institutionally from Tibetan Buddhist organizations. A Tibetan nun explained that "at the three great monasteries in South India, western monks can go there and study, because men are admitted to the monasteries—also the western men. The nuns cannot study at the monasteries in South India. We

can't be admitted there. We might study privately with one teacher, but we wouldn't live in the monastery." There are no places in the States where Tibetan Buddhist nuns can study, making survival an ongoing challenge. Some who have been nuns for some time live at, and / or are starting, centers while others, especially those who have just become nuns, work-full time which requires creative interpretations of their vows. This lack of institutional support is the basis of many misunderstandings, a Tibetan nun explains,

Like, people might think that, as Tibetan nuns, we have a religious institution that financially supports us. They don't realize that we're out on our own. Like in starting the abbey, many people think, "Oh well, the Tibetans are helping her or there's a big religious institution helping her." No. I'm completely on my own starting this. I have to raise every single penny. So, it's. . . America, they—it's different. They don't—you know, because Buddhism is new here, you can't expect people to understand.

The lack of institutional support available for some of the Buddhist monastics at the dialogue seemed to lead to some confusion amongst the Catholics about the degree to which Buddhist want, as opposed to are able, to live in communities. A Catholic nun, said,

Most of the Buddhists lived alone, it seemed to me. And that kind of surprised me, because I had thought it was a pretty important part of monasticism—in any tradition—is the community life aspect, which is also one of the most difficult. But also very supportive and very purifying in the long haul, but especially at the beginning it's very hard for especially some people. . . . Now whether they lived alone because they didn't have another Buddhist nun handy in their geographic area or whether it was their choice, I never quite was able to find out for sure.

One Catholic participant thought that the Buddhists were trained in

group or community settings and then left those to live alone, a pattern that was not the case amongst the Buddhists interviewed. These (mis)perceptions led some Catholics to think that the Buddhists don't value community. One explained, "They [the Buddhists] don't appear to me to have as much immersion in community, nor even particular interests, in some cases, of going that direction—and maybe not interests, but no possibility—because some of them, a number of them, I think, live alone. And therefore that's going to influence their practice tremendously." This nun was not aware, in our conversation, of the limited options available to the Buddhist nuns. In describing a Buddhist friend who was not at the dialogue, she continued, "the biggest difference with her and my life is that she has . . . the communal aspect is not as important in her life as it is in mine." For this Catholic nun, "community is very important as a place where you're going to live out your commitment to seeking God and to becoming who you're meant to be and the Gospel. And the Gospel is very hard to live by yourself" and for her friend, "theoretically, she's attached to a community, to a tradition, but she's not limited. . . she says, her monastic life is —she's like a turtle." Determining the extent to which the Catholic and Buddhists participants value being like "turtles" might be fruitful in future dialogues. It seems like this has begun a little. As one Catholic participant reflected, it was interesting "to see how we on the Catholic side were most interested in contemplative practice or consciousness transformation, however you want to talk about meditation. I think the other [Buddhist] women. . . were more interested in things like, how do you do community? One of the [Buddhist] women . . . kept saying, 'Who pays your bills?' "

The lack of institutional connections and support available for nuns, particularly in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition leads them to describe their relationship with the tradition via the teachings rather than the institutions. One nun explains,

I have a very strong connection to the traditions and here what I mean by tradition I mean the spiritual part of it. I'm not talking about the institution. I'm talking about the practice. When I say tradition, I'm talking about the practice. And I have very very strong commitments and feeling of connection with the Tibetan practice in what I do and also with my Chinese vinaya

lineage [her higher level of full ordination]. . .
.throughout the years, I've learned my practice is one thing the institution is something quite different. And I have to make this distinction, because, if I don't, then what happens in the institution will adversely affect my practice. And I don't want that to happen because an institution was created by human beings and it's operated by human beings, so it's going to be full of ignorance, anger and attachment, even though we're spiritual practitioners, 'cause we're not all Buddhas yet. But the tradition, the practice, the dharma, that's always pure.

The distinction between religious institutions and religious teachings was a theme in our interviews with the Catholic nuns, even though the way their ordinations are structured organizationally are different from the Buddhist nuns.

All of the Catholic nuns were fully vowed in the Catholic tradition via their individual orders. While their vows are "canonically approved by the Vatican," most orders are relatively autonomous in setting their constitutions and rules, and determining whom they will accept as members, and whom they choose as leaders. Likewise, the monastic orders (Benedictine included) are financially autonomous. Many of the Catholic participants told the founding stories of their orders or their particular monasteries in terms of the "very gutsy, vibrant, self-authorizing women, who had a vision within the Catholic community, of the Christian vocation, lived out in some specific way."

Thus, while Catholic monastic orders, and the apostolic orders represented by dialogue participants (Maryknoll, Congregation of Notre Dame, Religious of the Sacred Heart, and Sisters of Providence) are certainly part of the Roman Catholic Church, they stand at some remove from diocesecan structures and authorities. Monastic orders are not directly (and by no means fully) financially supported by the Catholic Church. Monastic orders support themselves through building and maintaining schools, colleges and hospitals; some monasteries that have maintained a more contemplative focus create income by selling manufactured goods and by opening their monasteries to individuals

and groups looking for spiritual retreat. All of the Catholic dialogue participants work (or, if they are in "retirement," have worked), many as teachers and / or administrators to support and maintain their communities financially. As the median age of Catholic nuns in the United States continues to climb (meaning fewer "working" sisters and a greater proportion with expensive health care needs) financial issues become more of a concern.

The degree to which Catholic nuns receive education, financial, and institutional support from their communities was misunderstood by the Buddhist women at the dialogue. Some Buddhist women assumed that the Catholic nuns were fully supported by their orders—or by the church hierarchy—and that financial resources were not an issue. Describing the challenges to Buddhist practice in America, one of the Buddhists said, "Well, in America, we do not have the incredible established system that Catholicism has. If, and there are Zen meditation teachers who are Catholic monks and nuns, if they wish to hold a retreat somewhere they can make one phone call to a monastery and say what it is they need to do that, and everything's taken care of from there on, because there is a system there in place." Another Buddhist participant described the Catholic nuns' institutional support saying, "Catholic nuns don't have financial concerns. I mean, maybe their order—actually they have a lot of buildings that often need to be closed down. That's their kind of financial concern—that they have too much property and don't know what to do with it." As one Catholic nun put it, many of the Buddhist participants "were under the impression that the male patriarchs, hierarchs pay our way. Which of course they don't."

In addition to misperceptions about financial matters, a number of Buddhists made assumptions about the degree of connectedness among Catholic orders to the Roman Catholic hierarchy and its orthodox beliefs and theologies. Similar to the Buddhist nun above who made a distinction between institutions and teachings, Catholic nuns are engaged in conversations about identity, and many do not easily accept or embrace Catholic identity or associate themselves with more conservative elements of their tradition. A few participants resolve these issues by defining themselves primarily with their orders rather than with the Roman Catholic Church as a whole. "I'm very tight with [my order], my community," one nun explained, "I'm very loose in my

association to the Roman Catholic Church. So how do you be a Roman Catholic nun without being a Catholic? . . . I think that is probably one of my biggest challenges. . . I love the Church. It is my roots culturally, historically. I do believe that it is a great mystery, as is like, and that God works through it. It also has lots of dysfunctional aspects." In many cases, therefore, Catholic nuns understood the importance of the monastic orders for calling attention to the "dysfunctionality" of some aspects of the church, and assisting, where possible, in its return to functionality (for example, one nun described a program she administered, in which Catholic monastic nuns pledged to pray for and write to American bishops).

In other cases, being a member of a monastic order provided enough of a sustainable identity. One nun said, "I am first a Christian nun. Roman Catholic is way off the chart. I am just barely a Roman Catholic." This is not a conflict, she explained, because, "in the monastery, see, we still have a lot of control of our daily life and the bishop just doesn't want to know." She also noted the latitude that women monastics are given in her tradition, including prioresses' authority to welcome new nuns into the monastic order. In this case and for others the monastic realm has provided a place to put Catholic teachings into practice that is distinct from other parts of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Another nun, echoing this view, described herself "historically" or concretely" as a Catholic but identified in terms not of the institution generally but of her order specifically, "I am committed to this little band of women, I probably will stay committed to them for the rest of my life."

On this note, it bears noting that both Buddhists and Catholics in general perceived the other tradition to be more negatively influenced by patriarchal aspects of religious systems (even though most also noted that they had also experienced a negative impact. One Catholic nun said, "all of us are in a patriarchal situation. I mean, it is a patriarchy and it's no different among the Buddhists than it is among the Christians"). We believe that these differences in perception are a result of having "text knowledge" of the others' traditions, while great "daily knowledge" of what happens in their own religious traditions. The creative and powerful ways that nuns in both traditions find and hold onto spiritual and religious authority, sometimes in the face of clear opposition by patriarchal religious traditions could be a point for fruitful

dialogue in the future.

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