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Interviews with Participants of "Nuns in the West" I

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From May 23 to May 26, 2003, thirty monastic women gathered at Hsi Lai Buddhist temple in Hacienda Heights, California for the first ever "Nuns of the West" Inter-Religious Dialogue. Conceived and organized by Catholic Sister Margaret (Meg) Funk and the Monastic Inter-Religious Dialogue, and hosted by Buddhist nun Ven. Yifa, "Nuns of the West" brought Buddhist and Catholic monastic women from across the United States into dialogue about issues such as contemplative life, balance between contemplation and social engagement, and the importance of monastic training, community, and tradition. Catholic participants represented the Benedictines, Maryknolls, Sisters of Providence, Religious Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Congregation of Notre Dame, and Catholic Orthodox orders. Buddhist participants included women in the Soto Zen, Fo Guang Shan, Thai Forest, Tibetan, Korean, and Japanese traditions. The dialogue took place without a formal agenda, papers, presentations, or outside observers. Rather, the group decided collectively on issues for discussion and held those conversations in formal groups as well as informally over meals and in the evenings during their time together.

At the conclusion of the "Nuns in the West" dialogue, Sister Margaret (Meg) Funk invited us to interview the women who participated to learn more about their lives and experiences. We agreed and mailed each woman a letter in January 2004 outlining the purposes and goals of the research project and a list of interview questions. Between January and April 2004, we contacted all of the dialogue participants, 21 of whom agreed to be interviewed (9 Buddhists and 13 Catholics). These interviews took place by telephone and normally lasted between one and two hours. We asked each woman about her own religious tradition and life story as well as about her experience of the commonalities and differences in monastic traditions, about the relationship between contemplation and action in the world, and about her experiences in inter-religious dialogue. A complete copy of the interview guide is included as Appendix A.

We focus in this report on three of the many themes engaged in the interviews. First, we explore what the Buddhist and Catholic monastic



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women believe they share, and how they describe the sources of and limits to their commonalities. Second, we briefly describe the range of ways participants are prayerful or contemplative before considering how they conceptualize the relationship between contemplation and action. Finally, we compare how participants are formally and informally connected to their communities, institutions, and traditions, paying particular attention to the educational and financial support available through organizations they are (or are not) affiliated with in these traditions.

The overarching theological questions about the degree to which an underlying spirituality is "shared" among religious traditions seems to be much more of an issue for Catholics than Buddhists. As we will say more about below, these differences are in part likely to be a manifestation of the comparatively different institutional and cultural positions of Catholic and Buddhist nuns in the United States. Briefly, it seems that Catholic respondents who enjoy a stronger institutional basis and legitimacy in the U.S. (and who, as members of the Vatican II generation), are more eager to explore commonalities and differences in diverse spiritualities, while the Buddhist respondents most of whom are working at present to develop institutional and religious legitimacy, have less interest (and time) to do so.

Theme One: Commonalities and Differences in Monastic Traditions

"Monasticism is a word that we all understand," one Catholic nun stated. While we generally found this to be the case, we were also surprised to find that even basic issues of who was gathered, and what was shared (and what all participants should be called) were called into question by respondents. Indeed, bringing together Catholic and Buddhist nuns raises the question of whether "nun" is the correct word to define all participants. "Nun" and "monastic" are both words of Western origin that are used to describe individuals and collectives that share certain "family resemblances."

Although this section began with the statement that "Buddhist and Catholic traditions do not share religious beliefs," a number of dialogue participants said they would welcome more explicit dialogue on theological differences. As one Buddhist nun said, although there are

shared "common interests, common concerns, common values . . . There are philosophical differences that have yet to be fully explored." This Buddhist respondent was somewhat critical of many other interfaith dialogues, which

skirt around the edges of some of these major differences. Some have more understanding than others. Some Buddhist nuns are really trained or have grown up Christian, and they know quite a bit about Christianity. Very few are really trained in Christian theology. From the Christian side, the same is true. Many Catholic nuns have done a wonderful job in studying Buddhism and practicing Buddhism on a very deep level, but very few of them are trained fully in Buddhist philosophy, right? So, if we were going to go further with Buddhist-Christian dialogue, my feeling is that we need to provide in-depth forums, where, Buddhist and Christian nuns can explore Buddhist philosophy and Christian theology together. I think that monastics would be really the best people to do this in a way, because they have both the theoretical backgrounds and the spiritual training, to sit down and really explore where our philosophical common ground is and where we've got major differences.

A similar concern was echoed by a Catholic nun who cautioned about the looseness of much contemporary spiritual language. She asks for a "fleshing out" of the words that people use to talk about God or spirituality. When that happens,

. . . we get into the nitty gritty, but we also get into the spiritual dimension. In other words, all of these things [practices] are tools, or ways and means of a wider motivation or call to seek God . . . My experience is that those words need to be fleshed out in a more existential terms, otherwise anybody can put any kind of interpretation to those words.

More than any other area, issues and questions around shared spiritual

vision, language, or sensibility (or lack thereof) seemed to be the area where most curiosity and interest—and desire for more discussion—laid. From our perspective, it seems that the dialogue opened the eyes of many participants in new ways both to the depths of their own theologies (or philosophies) and how little they knew or understood about how the others' theologies or philosophies are lived out day to day.

Theme Two: Contemplative Life: Boundaries and Balance

1. Meditation and prayer practices

All of the participants in the dialogue include some form of contemplation in their daily lives, either individually or with others. Contemplative practices the Catholic nuns engage in include centering prayer, lectio divina, Christian Zen, traditional Zen, yoga, and other forms of "sitting practices." Contemplation for the Buddhist monastics takes the form of meditation, prostrations, recitations, offerings, mantras, and chanting. Most participants described their periods and activities of contemplation as fundamental parts of their lives. A Catholic nun said,

I would say, for example . . . personal prayer and meditation. Monastics—that's sine qua non. You wouldn't even question that because that without meditation, contemplation as part of your life—your daily life—nourishing your mind with reading that is expansive, not only of the heart, mind, soul, but also what's going on in the world. These are—this is part of what monastic life would be, I think, across the board, with some variance on the theme. But meditation, contemplation I think you'd find—it would not be a monastic life if that were absent.

The content and structure of individuals' periods of contemplation take many forms. Some participants follow a fairly traditional monastic schedule. One Catholic nun who lives in a monastery described rising before dawn to do personal lectio divina before gathering with others for sitting meditation and the oratory, Divine office in the chapel, and the Eucharist. She also participates in short prayers at noon and

Vespers in the evening. One of the Buddhist nuns described a similar kind of routine based on four periods of sitting meditation (some of which include chanting) throughout her day. Others spend less time (and / or less structured time) in formal periods of contemplation, particularly the Catholic nuns in apostolic orders.

2. The cross-fertilization of Catholic and Buddhist meditative practices
One striking feature of both Buddhist and Catholic nuns' meditation practices is the influence of Asian religions, especially Buddhism. The Buddhist participants have obviously been influenced by the Buddha's teachings, many having encountered Buddhism as adolescents or young adults, and making decisions to ordain as nuns. In addition, however, many of Catholic nuns have read books about Buddhism and / or attended classes or retreats, often led by other Catholics (mostly priests) trained in various forms of Buddhism. For example, one Catholic nun learned zen meditation from a Jesuit priest trained in Japan: she has been practicing Zen with him for the past seven years. Another has participated in two zen retreats, one of which was led by a Dominican priest and took place at a Franciscan convent in the Midwest. Buddhism has had an influence on Catholic nuns more in the practice of meditation and retreats than in the content of specific Buddhist ideas or teachings, an influence that clearly reflects the ways Buddhism has been interpreted and taught by and to non-Asians in the United States.

Some of the Catholic nuns spoke of this emphasis of form (i.e. meditation) over content in our interviews, seeing in Buddhism a structure that is missing in their own tradition. One Catholic nun explains,

Well, certainly. I've been a disciple I guess you could say, or a student of Thich Nat Han's for years and years and years. I guess I want to say that I think the Catholic tradition is high inspiration and low on method. And so, for method we've had to go elsewhere. . . So, for one thing, Tai's practice has been just life saving for me, mindfulness practice. And, you know, quite frankly, it's not other or different from anything that we've got in our own tradition in terms of practicing the presence of God, or what I've called the little way -This practice of doing

everything with tremendous attention and love as an offering, as an explicit offering. As an explicit way of being in communion. But, we don't have at all I think, good ways of—or how shall I say this. I think we've abandoned our manuals of practice. . . we've recovered a lot of our own, ironically, our own stuff though the Asian masters.

Another Catholic nun also finds "manuals" in the eastern traditions and describes them as devices Christians can use to quiet the mind enough to move into prayer or other, more familiar, practices. "I've learned a lot from the Eastern traditions that we need to have a form. But then, I don't believe that most Christians are called to a sitting method practice as their dominant form. I think you just need enough of it to get you under the river [aware of the possibility of a deeper contemplative practice / life] and then you may have another form of prayer under there. . . I think some people do colloquy, we just talked to our Lord or Mary or one of the saints. . . " Although a number of Catholic nuns perceived an absence of appropriate "forms" or "manuals" in their tradition, many also clearly drew from Christian practices, including *lectio divina*, centering prayer, the "practice of the presence," the Little Way of Therese Lisieux, and so on. We therefore found this sense of Catholicism's "lack" of contemplative forms puzzling. (As another example, Courtney asked in one interview whether the rosary might be akin to meditative practice. It is, the Catholic respondent replied, but is not often used that way: "Rosary has been a devotional prayer. I don't use it myself. If I use beads, I use some other kind of prayer beads, but it is a perfectly good kind of prayer. . . that can lead one into a more contemplative frame of mind. It tends to be used by the more traditional Catholics as a devotional prayer to Mary. So, we use it in different ways.")

Catholic nuns' use of eastern meditative practices was a subject of conversation at the dialogue, one that participants reflected on in different ways in our interviews. Some were quite comfortable with it, while others, both Catholic and Buddhist, had more reservations. During a conversation during the dialogue in which a Buddhist nun was talking about zen, a Catholic nun asked her about adopting zen practice, who saying "it's all right as long as you realize that for them

its not just a practice but its a whole way of life, a whole way of thinking." The Catholic respondent who relayed this interaction to us then continued, "I think it's an area of concern for me that sometimes you practice things and just, its kind of Christian imperialism, of taking over somebody's practice and not necessarily understanding the whole depth of that. So I would hope that would be overcome but I think its going to take a lot of education. It's a concern of mine." Given that this Catholic nun's community practices what she called "Christian zen," Courtney asked how her community has worked to overcome this concern:

Nun: We haven't (laughter). And it's Christian Zen because Zen is not theistic, so if you're seeking union with God you're automatically right away interested in something else. So it needs to be adapted.

Courtney: But it still makes sense to call it Zen?

Nun: Well, in the sense that the externals are Zen. For now we call it call Zen, the practice. Yet I think its more the external than the internals.

Despite her concern about "Christian imperialism," this nun remains comfortable with the label Christian Zen because of its implied theistic emphasis and attention to external form rather than content.

Some of the Buddhist nuns (and likewise, a handful of Catholics) were not comfortable with the idea that their meditation practices are "forms" that can be extracted from the tradition as a whole and placed in another context. One Zen Buddhist said that she "came away with an experience of absolute admiration for the Catholic women and the sincerity of their lives, and the depth of their practice and their focus and their incredible willingness to do everything that they could to come to terms, or to find the experience they seemed to be hungry for." In their "hunger," she felt that the Catholic nuns wanted something from the Buddhist nuns in the dialogue:

Something that we can't give because we gave up everything in order to find what we were looking for originally. We went the way we went because we were looking for something, and we can't give anybody that,

we can only go there. . . . I think that at one point their question really was, 'How can we get what we think you have?' We said, 'Well, give up everything. Give up everything, you know, give up all your doctrine and everything you believe and try and find it.' Which is what we did.

The form is part of a larger package, this nun is saying, and it can not simply be separated and made to "work" in other contexts. Another Buddhist participant also spoke of her profound respect for the Catholic participants before talking about this kind of searching she also felt from the Catholic nuns, a searching that made her even more grateful for her own tradition and experience,

. . . the thing that was the most fascinating about that whole experience was that the Christian nuns were looking to us to help them—it seems that they were looking to us to help them develop a firmer spiritual practice in their lives. Like I felt that that aspect was greatly lacking. That the tradition—the contemplative tradition—in Christianity has died out, or that they don't have any modern-day contemplatives to look to, to help them figure out what would be right for them, other than maybe say Thomas Merton or somebody like that. So, in a way, it greatly—I felt concerned for them, but at the same time I felt really very very fortunate to have gotten myself involved in a practice that is—has—its contemplative aspect is very very vibrant, very vital, very much alive.

The different approaches to eastern practices, primarily Buddhist meditation, evident among the nuns at the dialogue raise further questions not just about the influence of Buddhists (-ism) on the Catholic nuns but also about Catholicism or Christianity more broadly on the Buddhist nuns. It seemed clear from both Buddhist and Catholic responses that the influence of Buddhism on Catholicism has been substantial, and that there has been less impact the other way. On the other hand, it also appears that the situation is reversed when it comes

to the "practices" of community life. For example, several of the Buddhist participants have started Buddhist centers or communities and reported drawing strength and example from the Catholic nuns and their emphasis on communal life. As one Buddhist nun remarked,

the Catholic nuns—it was so wonderful being with them. Everybody was so supportive of starting an abbey. You know, 'cause the Catholic nuns really see the value of community. The Buddhist nuns—some of the western Buddhist nuns—they don't always see that same value in community, because our culture is—most of the ones who have converted to Buddhism have lived rather independent lives and it's hard to get at people to give up some of their independence to be in a community. Whereas, the Catholic nuns, boy, they really see how using community to work on the mind is valuable and important, so I really appreciate that about them and their suggestions. I've learned a lot from them.

Another Buddhist nun remarked on the ways in which her time at the dialogue in conversation with Catholic nuns reaffirmed or strengthened her interest in long-term residential practice. And a third spoke of the ways her monastic community adapted traditional Christian hymn tunes, set to Buddhist teachings or lyrics, into their communal gatherings, "We just translate the scriptures into a language we can understand, music that makes sense to us." The contributions the Catholics and Christian tradition more generally are making to Buddhism are important to highlight, even as it is important to keep in mind that not all Buddhist participants welcomed them with the same level of interest.

We approached these interviews and write this report as social scientists, sociologists of religion. While we are familiar with the Catholic and Buddhist traditions generally and in the United States specifically, neither of us is Catholic or Buddhist, nor are we experts on monasticism. Rather, we write as sympathetic observers who can offer a "bird's eye" view of the themes and issues participants in the "Nuns in the West" dialogue have been considering and contemplating since their gathering. We focus on the three themes we do because of their

importance to the women we interviewed, and in the hopes that these reflections will provide a basis for further conversation at the second "Nuns in the West" dialogue in May 2005.

Background

In deciding whom to invite to the "Nuns in the West" dialogue, Sister Margaret (Meg) Funk and Ven. Yifa chose nuns who live in the United States or Canada, speak English, are fully authorized in their traditions, could pay for their own transportation, and had the time and permission of their superiors to attend. The majority of women who gathered, and all but two of those we interviewed, were born in the United States. The majority of Catholic nuns who participated were cradle Catholics, born in the 1930s and 1940s, currently between the ages of sixty and eighty. Most were raised in Catholic families and were vowed in their early to mid-twenties (before Vatican II). The majority attended Catholic schools and universities and are highly educated. Of those we interviewed, four have PhDs and eight have master's degrees. Many have lived abroad though most currently live full-time in the United States. Most live communally at present; eight in monasteries, two in motherhouses, and three in apartments with other women (nuns and lay). None of the Christian nuns wear a traditional Catholic habit, though most strive to dress simply. Many of the women we interviewed are public speakers and teachers, and have held prominent leadership roles within their communities. Half currently receive salaries for their work and the other half are in non-salaried positions and are supported by their communities.

The Buddhist nuns who attended the dialogue include women born in the United States and abroad to Buddhist and non-Buddhists families. Among the nine women we interviewed, all but two were born in the U.S. and none were born into Buddhist families making them all converts to the Buddhist tradition. The majority (five) were raised in Christian families and began to learn about Buddhism as young adults. The Buddhist women interviewed were a bit younger than the Catholic women, generally between age forty-five and sixty-five. When they first ordained, they were generally in their thirties and several had been married and / or had children. The most senior Buddhist nuns we interviewed had been nuns for more than twenty-five years and the most junior for less than five. Like the Catholic nuns, the Buddhist women interviewed were highly educated; more than half had some

graduate training. There are currently very few monasteries or centers in the United States where Buddhist nuns can live and, as a result, the living arrangements of the Buddhist women we interviewed were quite varied. Seven of the women live at Buddhist centers either alone (in two cases) or with other monastics or lay people (in five cases). The other two women live alone in private apartments. Regardless of their living arrangements, all wear the robes of a Buddhist nun almost always. The majority of women we interviewed teach and support themselves through a combination of sources. Four receive salaries or stipends for teaching in non-Buddhist colleges and six are supported, partially or completely, by their communities. A number also have private sources of support.

Participants in the "Nuns in the West" dialogue had varying amounts of previous experience in inter-religious dialogues. At least one participant had never attended such a gathering, "I'd always thought [the] interfaith thing was kind of a waste time," she said frankly in an interview, but in the end she says, "I really enjoyed it. . . . I was so impressed by these people" (B-ME). Others had extensive experience gained through participation in other interfaith gatherings as well as through previous involvement with the Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue. Interestingly, some of the Buddhist nuns also participate in gatherings with other Buddhist monastics, and describe them as interfaith. As one participant explained,

There's one thing that I participate fairly regularly in and it's an interfaith dialogue between Buddhist monastics, and that is with Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tibetan—all the different Buddhist monastic traditions. And, that has been so helpful—to just be around other monastic practitioners and see "why are you practicing that in Thailand?" "Why is there emphasis on that?" and just kind of removing the myth or the ignorance to really see why a particular style or view or practice evolved. It is really great and that opens up so much more friendliness, friendship and understanding and dispels this kind of separation or. . . what would you say, like mistaken concepts about other traditions.

Unlike the Christian nuns who are all (excepting the one Orthodox respondent) members of the Roman Catholic Church with its base in Rome, there is no overarching organization of Buddhists, either in the United States or abroad, leading dialogue between people in different branches of Buddhism to seem like "interfaith" dialogue to some. The Buddhist participants in the dialogue were likely less familiar with the other Buddhists traditions represented than were the Catholics with the respective Catholic orders because of these organizational differences and the length of time the Catholic and Buddhists traditions have been in the United States.

Apart from their involvement in formal dialogues, nearly all of the participants have gained exposure to other religious traditions through their upbringing and through time spent traveling or living abroad. Nearly all have devoted significant amounts of time to the study or practice of a non-Christian religion. A number of women also maintain close friendships with monastics and/or serious religious practitioners in other traditions and spoke about the importance of these relationships.

While the nuns all articulated a number of points of connection related specifically to their monastic professions (see below), they also exhibit a high level of sociological or demographic similarity. In addition to all being women, most are from the same generation, most are highly educated, and almost all those interviewed were born in the West: these traits most likely provided a level of affinity and connection in themselves. One Catholic nun, for instance, said that she recognized that each of the others, Buddhist and Catholic, had "paid their dues," and had gained a level of maturity that accompanies it. She said, "I always have a lot of respect for people I know have paid their dues. That they've suffered sometime really tough and they've come out of it a better person or a more compassionate person." A Buddhist nun, speaking on the same theme, stated "To be a nun, especially in the West where everything sort of says, 'you don't want to do that,' I think you've got to be fairly independent and strong and I think the circumstances in some ways are wildly different. . . . So, we're all so different, but it just seemed to me that all the women that were there—the sort of group of us—they knew where they were going." The general feelings of similarity within the group would not likely be repeated in gatherings of monastics that include younger nuns, monks and nuns, and those who are not as highly educated and/or high

ranking in their respective traditions. These feelings of similarity are perhaps even more interesting in light of the distinction between the mostly cradle Catholics and mostly convert Buddhists.

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