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Interviews with Participants of "Nuns in the West" I

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Overview of Interview Analysis

In the following pages, we discuss three themes that emerged in the interviews. The first two issues were directly addressed in interview questions; the third emerged in a number of ways.

The first theme, "commonalities and differences", addresses what nuns felt they shared, and in a round about way, the purpose and value of interreligious dialogue. From these questions we heard a general consensus or self-recognition in others' commitments to a vowed life. Celibacy emerged as one important, even central, vow that links nuns of different traditions. We also learned from these answers that nuns have very differing views of what "spirituality" consists of, and whether (or not) "spirituality" is shared among nuns of different traditions. Some dialogue participants also remarked that what they imagined they would share, or would hold in common, was not as clear or as transparent as what they had imagined. A few called for more dialogue and conversation in the future on theologies and beliefs.

In the second theme, "contemplation and action in the world," we first note nuns' meditative and prayer practices. Of particular interest is the extensive interest among all nuns in 'Eastern' and particularly Buddhist meditation forms. We discuss these interests, and likewise, some Buddhists' concerns about the degree to which these "forms" can be translated into new contexts. This discussion then shifts to a discussion of what appear to be divergent understandings about what "action" is among Buddhists and Catholics and how it connects to meditation and



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prayer. Nuns' responses demonstrate that the differences lie not just in how nuns from different traditions think the relationship between contemplation and action should be ideally managed, but at a deeper level, what that relationship entails. Although Catholics and Buddhists come at these issues from different positions, both sets of nuns demonstrate in their life's work various ways to present alternatives to contemporary American/Western cultures.

In the third theme, "community and institution," we highlight what we perceived to be misunderstandings of both Buddhists and Catholics about each others' connections to larger religious structures and institutions, in terms of ordination processes, financial resources, and the importance of community life. For example, Catholics perceive the non-communal lives of Buddhists as the "norm" for Buddhism, where it is better characterized as the consequence of there being so few women Buddhist monastics in the States with whom to join in community. Likewise, Buddhists perceive Catholics' strong communities as the consequence of direct funding and sponsorship from the Catholic Church, rather than understanding monasteries' positions as quasi-independent bodies within it, which raise their own funds and maintain their own institutions and communities. The consequences of these misunderstandings are several: in the short run, each tradition has the tendency to see the other as more accommodating to patriarchal systems than they see themselves. Paying more attention to such "details" in future dialogues will most likely overcome the limitations that such assumptions place on dialogue. Learning more about how all nuns creatively and actively work to establish vowed, countercultural lives that are "fundamentally oriented toward religion" (to quote one Buddhist) will certainly benefit all participants.

The most striking example of this appeared in the responses of the Soto Zen Buddhist nuns, who preferred the term "priest" to "nun" to describe themselves. The term "nun," as one Soto Zen participant explained, implies a status secondary to men in the tradition leading them to prefer the term "priest" which can be applied to both women and men. While all of the Zen participants noted, as one put it, that "in a lot of ways [using nun or priest] didn't make any difference, at the conference itself," the question of who is a nun brings us, as this respondent said, "back to the first question of 'who are we?' Not to let a word "nun" seem to iron out variety and not even to be sure that that

is the right word."

Variety seemed to be an extremely important aspect of this dialogue, both between Buddhists and Catholics and among them. The issue of comparison and similarities became even more complex as we noted that nuns almost always focused first on their own family of traditions (e.g., what Buddhist nuns share, or what Catholic nuns share) when we asked what all nuns shared, despite our contextualizing the interviews in relation to the interreligious dialogue. It seems that both Buddhists and Catholics are (for different reasons) working on questions of what they share with members of their "own" religious traditions as much as they are with that of the others. We have already noted how Buddhist nuns occasionally view discussions among various Buddhists as "interreligious;" likewise, several of the monastic Catholic participants viewed the apostolic orders as being at a strong remove from their experience (two, in fact, were perplexed by the participation of "apostolic" Catholic nuns in the "monastic interreligious dialogue".) Both Catholics and Buddhists professed a lack of familiarity with other orders/traditions within their larger religious tradition. In general, while the interreligious dialogue is focused on learning about others' traditions, this dialogue has also had the effect of bringing together Catholics and Buddhists who may otherwise not meet.

2. The importance of celibacy

While vocabulary and terminology over "nuns" and "monastics" was at issue for some, and the broader issue of who was being compared was a striking finding for us, more typically the nuns interviewed discussed the importance of taking vows as a mark defining nuns. Among these, celibacy was noted as a central, and in some cases primary, marker of a nun. Celibacy seems to have come to a head among participants in "Nuns of the West" in part due to the presence of a non-celibate participant: it appears that the presence of a "non-celibate nun" crystallized the importance of this vow as a defining aspect that all nuns share in common, regardless of tradition. (Indeed, this view is even shared by the non-celibate nun, who offered, "I'm not a nun by anybody's definition." She took her place at the conference because of her interest in interfaith dialogue saying, "when Sister Meg first invited me. . . . I wrote back and said, "Are you sure you want me? Here's who I am" and she said, "Yes, we do. You're part of whatever the new paradigm is.")

For instance, answering the question of "what nuns share," one Buddhist nun said, "The commonality that we discovered between us within the group was a vow of celibacy and sort of a dedication to a life of prayer, but also service - seemed to be a commonality. And not all nuns have shared the same vows and that was one thing that we really wanted to look at and make sure for the next one that there was that commonality, because there's no getting around it. There's a very big difference between people who are—have taken those vows." Among those vows noted (celibacy, prayer, service), this nun continued, celibacy was the most important for dialogue: "I guess it's the vows give us a commonality of focus—what we've decided to do with this life—with this lifetime. You take the vows so that you—it's sort of the way that a lot of us look at it and an important way to look at it—it's a vow of simplicity. You leave off from the common things that other people do in their lives, like children and family and relationship. So that it frees you up so you can focus more closely on spiritual development."

These views were echoed by Catholic participants. One said that you can "do without" many of the external vows and still be a nun, but celibacy is one that is not "up for grabs:"

I've been a nun some years now, I can say well, we're all celibate, we're all living community, we're all under abbot, we all have a rule, we all have a prayer practice and we all live our lives for others. So those would have been the ingredients I would have thought. But as I get to meet other nuns [in other faith traditions], one or more of those ingredients are missing. Except for celibacy. I'm beginning to think for the form, I think celibacy might have to be there, but other than that, I think you can do without living under an abbot, you can do without living in common, you can do without, for sure wearing a habit, you can do without, but a combination of those things assists the form into being.

3. The "vowed life"

Celibacy is part of a larger package, which for almost all nuns involved

can be called the "vowed life." Indeed, while the vows that the nuns in the dialogue have taken differ quite substantially, all participants had made public commitments to following out particular ways of life which can, at their most basic, be described as religiously-centered. As one Buddhist nun said

With laypeople, you often need to explain what your life is about and why you became a nun and they don't quite understand religion as being the core of your life, whereas with all the nuns, no matter what tradition, we understand that about each other. We don't need to explain that. We also understand that we also share the lifestyle that's committed to simplicity, you know, in terms of possessions that we have; simplicity in terms of not having family. We share that same kind of dedication to spirituality as the center thing in our life for which nothing else is second. And we also share the understanding of how difficult it can be to work with our own minds, even though we're very committed to doing that.

Many of the nuns, both Buddhist and Catholic, described these vows in terms of renunciation, and in many respects most of the vows that nuns in the West take mark a counter-cultural way of life. Renunciation of family, personal possessions, and a certain degree of personal autonomy marked these decisions as more than just "lifestyle choices." The decision to take and live out certain vows, many nuns said, are what all nuns share. Many respondents, both Catholic and Buddhist, both spoke at length about the commitments to meditation, prayer, and community life as well: a whole host of practices and actions which organize individuals' time, comportment, dress, and personal habits, thoughts, and life's work all arose in these discussions. One Catholic put it poetically:

You would express [what was held in common as] a singularity of life, oriented around whatever your tradition described it to be; the ultimate or the sacred. A willingness to sacrifice other things, a certain discipline that goes along with that. A life commitment that goes

along with that. So that it's not part of your life, it's the center of your life, and everything else becomes a (pause), a consequence of that, or has to somehow serve that. So, yeah I would say that. I felt that very, very much with all these women. It was just wonderful. We had different language, we had different. . . . I think in some way we had very different experiences in terms of what we were tending. But that we were tending something which was ultimate to us was not different.

Despite the sense that all nuns shared commitments to the vowed life, the stated goals or purposes that respondents articulated (that is, the purpose of these renunciations) differed substantially in emphasis. Some nuns emphasized the importance of the vowed life to free up time and energy in service of others, some emphasized the importance of the vowed life as an important set of steps on the way to more focused devotion, some understood the vowed life as itself a goal to be attained, through which greater consciousness, or closeness to God, would develop. As one Catholic put it:

To know you're a nun and have an interior practice isn't enough for a human being, I have to have form for my time, I have to be "in place" some place, I have to put my mind some place, I have to be in relationship somehow, so these structures are just my form, and so they are mutually beneficial, I can contribute to a larger form than myself and that's also very satisfying and this form give me a spine to get up and go to bed and you know, to sustain, in sickness and in health, good times and bad times and resources and no resources. So I like the word form right now. It gives and receives me and I give and receive it and so the monastery is my form that mediates God for me.

Interestingly, while it is an oversimplification to say that Catholics described aspects of the "vowed life" as "externals" (implying or sometimes explicitly compared to the "internals" of personal devotion etc.) Buddhists (in particular, the Zen Buddhists) discussed the vows as

necessary processes integrated into (for lack of a better word) "internal" spiritual life (or enlightenment). This suggests that the internal/external split between vows themselves and the proper "goal" of vows is not always appropriate for our respondents. We discuss this at greater length below: for the time being, we note that while viewing the vowed life as a commonality has been crucial to date in this dialogue, without further discussion this apparent commonality might mask or distort understanding of others' traditions. (In other words, while nuns are probably correct in identifying "practice more than beliefs" as where the similarities lie, nuns in both traditions could benefit from learning more about how practice and belief are understood (as connected, related, distinct) in others' traditions.)

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