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Interviews with Participants of "Nuns in the West" I

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4. "Spirituality": shared or not?

While nuns in Buddhist and Catholic traditions do not share religious beliefs, the question about whether they share "spirituality," spiritual "sensibilities," or even a concern for the spiritual was a point of concern for nuns from both traditions. It has often been noted that "spirituality" is a fuzzy term, and its contents are not often explicitly defined, and this fuzziness allowed at least one Catholic to use it to define the sensibility shared among Buddhists and Catholics. As one said, "it has always been my experience, when we talk about religion, I think that's when we get into the differences. When we talk about spirituality, that's where the common ground is."

The fuzziness of spirituality provides a way to mark similarities without naming them, but not all respondents were comfortable with leaving it at that. As another Catholic said:

When I was thinking about this question, I thought we probably share the fact that we're seeking a spiritual life, and then I corrected myself. I think that "spiritual" is totally other than what Buddhists are looking for and I think many Catholics have corrected this sense that spirit is separated from our body or our real life. And so what I think we have in common is that we're seeking an enlightened way to live this life. We're seeking . . . a higher, or not even higher, a human way to be in the



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world. I think that's what we have in common.

As if to echo this concern, many of the Buddhists who talked about spirituality also emphasized shared work on the higher self, or [toward] "enlightenment." For example, one Buddhist said that what was shared was "dedicating time to prayer and contemplation in order to be in—in the case of Catholic nuns, closer to God, and in our case, closer to true understanding. Letting go of the idea of self. So, I feel it as an opportunity of a certain quality of energy meeting another quality of energy and the similarities that I feel there and they're not all similar and that's perfectly fine." And, as another Buddhist put it, "I think another [commonality] is that we're all working on ourselves to become more conscientious and aware of our actions and our attitudes towards others, and to become a better person . . . I feel like we are all working on ourselves and that in the classical sense we're all also looking at some avenue of working for the benefit of others although in the traditional early Buddhist practices it was more about personal liberation, and in the later Buddhist traditions it was really focusing on the past as being part of attaining enlightenment for the benefit of others."

At the center of these questions about whether spirituality is shared is a larger (and indeed theologically tinged) question of whether nuns are "merely" linked by form (certain practices, organizational commitments, and so on) or by something substantively more. This question gets to the heart of one of the deeper questions of interreligious dialogue: whether there is one truth, or many. Recognizing the limitations of "vocabulary" and the differences in traditions, spirituality for some becomes what lies beyond cultural vocabularies. Several nuns spoke of the emotional or almost musical "pitch" of the dialogue. One Catholic said,

It's beyond vocabulary, I believe. I think that there's a very focused dedication to searching for the spiritual life, questing for God or the mystery, or whatever you want to call it. I think that is a commonality. I also think that's not just specific to nuns. I think most of the searches of people are tied to a tradition. But some of the biggest searchers I know would probably call themselves atheist

and are more humanistic or something, but they also are on a search. But I think doing it with nuns focuses it in a particular way. I found that whether Christian or Eastern or Western, people are on a particular personal journey, to become a better human being. Greater self-knowledge is tied to that. I believe that because of that too, that implies service. Making a contribution to the earth, and probably because my own particular lens, I find this means, to the poor and more oppressed. I don't know whether I can say that generally for everybody, but the search definitely. I think maybe, maybe—it could be, rather than justice, it would be a dedication to peace, whether it's inner or outer.

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.

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.

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