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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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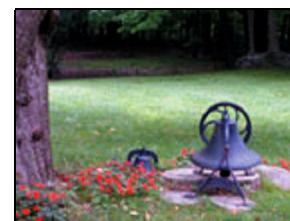
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Conclusion

Any dialogue that takes place over two days is limited in its scope: it can only scratch the tip of the iceberg. This is more so the case when those gathered to share their lives have lived as complex and powerful lives as the participants in "Nuns in the West." The women we interviewed are all articulate and forceful, opinionated, and good storytellers. Moreover, we learned from talking with them that they all came to the dialogue with a spirit of openness and curiosity, and to some degree humility about their own life choices and accomplishments. We are grateful for the opportunity to talk with these women and hope our view of the dialogue and its salient themes will inform and enrich future conversations. In that spirit and with that intent, we summarize here, in conclusion, the key substantive issues addressed in this report that may be fruitful starting points for future dialogue:

1. *Commonalities and Differences in Monastic Traditions*

- What does it mean to have an inter-religious dialogue among Buddhist and Catholic monastic women given the enormous variation in these women's experiences within their respective traditions? How can the dialogue best emphasize the commonalities and differences both within and between each of these traditions?
- To what extent or in what ways is the term "nun" helpful in discussions at the dialogue? Rather than viewing it as a term to accept for practical reasons in the gatherings and move on



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from, what can be learned by interrogating the term and all that it represents in conversation with one another? How does the term "nun" either allow for or iron out variation among participants?

- Is the vow of celibacy the primary commitment or idea that all participants share regardless of tradition? Why is it this commitment that participants emphasized rather than others? What are the implications of viewing celibacy as a fundamental similarity within these very different religious traditions?
- How are religious beliefs and practices connected in Catholicism and Buddhism? If you dig deeper into the idea that all nuns shared a "vowed life," what can you learn about what Catholicism and Buddhism teach about the relationship between practices and beliefs? How does what you learn about this relationship from books or study compare to what you learn from your own (and each others') lives?
- Are participants linked simply by form (certain practices, organizational commitments, and so on) or by something substantively more? Is there a language (or could one be developed) to describe these linkages?
- What are the shared theological and philosophical differences between Buddhism and Catholicism as taught and as lived? Is it possible or valuable to create forums, as one Buddhist respondent suggests, that would allow nuns to explore Buddhist philosophy and Christian theology in a deeper and more substantial way?

2. *Contemplative Life: Boundaries and Balances*

- To what extent have contemplative forms been present in Catholic and Buddhist history? Does Catholicism lack contemplative forms or do the forms available simply not fit within existing concepts of what constitutes a form?
- What are the parameters of "form" and to what extent can "forms" be separated from their traditions? How does it feel when a "form" in your own tradition is separated from the tradition versus when this happens in another tradition? Honest discussion of this question would likely be uncomfortable but worthwhile.
- Are there topics about which Buddhists would like to learn from

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Catholics? Why, thus far, has the influence of Catholicism on Buddhism been minimal?

- Given the relationship between prayer or meditation and action, when do participants in each tradition feel the most engaged in the world? And the most devoted? Sharing stories of these experiences with each other might be illuminating.
- To what extent are monastics suggesting alternative visions by living their lives as they are? Or, as one participant phrased it, what is the "role of monastics as countercultural agents of change"?

3. Communities and Institutions: Misunderstandings?

- What are the guidelines and options for ordination within the specific branches of Buddhism and Catholicism represented at the conference? It might be helpful to spell out these guidelines so the options women have who want to ordain in the traditions are made clear.
- What kind of financial support is available to participants on a regular basis? What options do participants have about how to support themselves? What options do they have about where to live? What options do they have about education? What options do they have about health care?
- To what extent do participants value being part of a community? Are they involved with communities in the way they are because that is the only option or did they decide to be so involved? What factors led to their decisions?
- How do participants think about the relationship between their teachings or traditions and the institutions that currently exist within those traditions?
- How much latitude do participants have within their teachings or traditions and within their institutions to construct their daily routines, their ways of viewing their tradition, their institutions, etc.?
- How or in what ways are the differences between the mostly cradle Catholics and mostly convert Buddhists likely a factor in discussions? Can you envision women in future generations within your traditions having conversations with one another similar to the ones you are engaged in? Why or why not? What would you like to see these future monastic women discussing?

Appendix A. Interview Guide

Introduction

I am interviewing you because you participated in the "Nuns in the West" Inter-religious Dialogue last May. I am one of two researchers interviewing the participants so that we can better understand what it is like to be a nun in twenty-first century America. I'm hoping to talk with you about a few of the themes raised in the dialogue. There will be time at the end of the interview for you to raise any additional questions or issues we don't discuss that you think will help me better understand your experience as a nun in the United States. I'll also have a few questions about your personal background at the end of the hour.

Before we get started, do you give me permission to tape record this interview?

Commonalities and Differences in Monastic Traditions

1. I have been reading and learning about the dialogue among nuns that took place last summer and I wanted to get your thoughts, first, about whether you think all nuns in the U.S. today share certain things? Have some commonalities? (What are they? History? Practice? Teachings? Service? Living Arrangements? Relations with broader traditions? Do you think you share more with other nuns in your religious tradition / nuns in other traditions / male monastics in your tradition? Are there limits to what nuns in different traditions might share? If so, what are these?)
2. One of the themes raised in the dialogue was that all nuns are a product of their history and that this is both a plus and a minus. Could you say a bit more about this?
3. Patriarchy was raised in the dialogue as an issue that all nuns face. What is your sense of this?

Contemplation and Action in the World

Another theme raised in the dialogue centers around the relationship between contemplative practices (study, meditation, prayer, and so on) and apostolic practices (caring for the needy and sick, etc.).

4. Do you have a contemplative meditation practice? If so, could you describe it for me? What is your training for contemplation or meditation? Do you teach meditation?

5. Thinking back to the last day when you meditated, how much time did you meditate? When was that? Was this a usual or unusual day?

6. What challenges do you feel stand in the way of your practice?

7. Thinking back over the last few years, has your meditation practice changed in any significant way? If so, how?

8. What is your experience with the relation between contemplation/meditation and action in the world? (Follow-up questions: How have you thought about this distinction? How have you sought to balance these things? Do you see yourself doing these things in ways that are unique to your tradition?)

Nuns in Different Faith Traditions

We are also interested in how you are connected to and involved with your faith tradition.

9. To clarify, what tradition would that be?

10. How would you describe your connection to your tradition. Is it through a lineage, a set of organizations, or formal "ordination?" Would you describe this connection as loose or tight?

11. Do these connections establish guidelines or rules for your life?

12. How do you feel about this connection? (If ambivalent, why so?)

13. Are there ways in which you see yourself as a nun adapting your faith tradition?

14. Has your experience in interfaith dialogue influenced your thinking about your own tradition?

Faith/Life Experience

We also wanted to learn a bit more about your faith and life experiences.

15. How did you decide to become a nun? When did you become a nun? (how, where, with whom)

16. Where were you born? When? (If born outside the U.S.), when did you come to the U.S.? Why?

17. Were you raised in a specific religious tradition? Which?

18. Where do you live now? (with other nuns?)

19. Do you regularly dress in ways that signify to others that you are a nun?

20. What are your primary duties and responsibilities, day to day? (i.e. your work: teaching/prayer/administrative/etc. How do you support yourself?)

21. Do you regularly write or do public presentations? Whom do you consider to be your most important or primary audience(s)?

Concluding Thoughts

22. Before our hour is up, I wanted to ask if there are issues and topics that are important to you that we have not talked about so far.

23. Would you like to add anything to what we have talked about so far?

24. What are the biggest challenges you face as a nun?

If needed, we can schedule another time to continue this conversation.

Thank you for your time, and for helping us in this research.

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