

**Report:**  
**Interviews with Participants of “Nuns of the West”**  
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*Introduction*

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 in 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 in 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 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.

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.

## *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 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.

## *Theme One: Commonalities and Differences in Monastic Traditions*

### 1. Inter-religious dialogue facilitates “intra-religious” dialogue and thoughts on the meaning and usefulness of the term “nun”

“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.”

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" Snd 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.)

#### 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 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 path 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.

### 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.

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 herself several times a day, "kind of being observant about where my consciousness is."

Several Buddhist 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 than 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 conscious 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 Buddhists 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 Buddhist 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 diocesan 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.

### *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 story-tellers. 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 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 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. (What does “engaged in the world” mean to each tradition?)

- 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.