

waiting for two monks
 to drag a log up the hill
 he removed his hat.

Monks Pond, Old Hermit, Hai! is a beautiful book. It is beautiful to read. Slowly. One haiku at a time over many days. It is also, as book lovers have come to expect from Larkspur Press, beautiful to look at and beautiful to touch.

Patrick G. Henry & Donald K. Swearer

FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD:

The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism

Minneapolis: Fortress Press / Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989

256 pages — \$10.95 paperback

Reviewed by **William H. Slavick**

With the richness of the Christian contemplative tradition still so largely unexplored in our time, the growing interest of Christians in Eastern spiritual experience may suggest, in some quarters anyway, curiosity, in others a departure from Christian prayer life. Concern about the latter occasioned Cardinal Ratzinger's letter in October 1989 on aspects of Christian meditation, reminding Christians of the personal and communitarian nature of Christian prayer — focused on God as revealed in the Scriptures as against impersonal techniques and preoccupation with self, and of the Christian's prayer as participating in the Church at prayer.

Ratzinger's concern about efforts to overcome the distinction between creature and Creator as if the gap is inappropriate and to reduce pure grace to the level of natural psychology suggest that Eastern methods are not always being used "solely as a psychophysical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation" but put the "absolute without images or concepts" of Buddhism "on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ" — or obscure the divinity. The letter identifies the Christian way to Christ as doing His will, not dissolving the personal self in the absolute, so

that Christian prayer “always leads to love of neighbor, to action, to the acceptance of trials.” His obvious fear is that resort to Eastern techniques may lead to syncretism.

Cardinal Ratzinger’s letter provides one useful context for Patrick G. Henry and Donald K. Swearer’s *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism*: whatever the parallels, Buddhist monasticism is of limited value to Christian prayer and life. The need for a spirituality that can weather the pressures of the modern world and transform it, and the Western Church’s estrangement from its own tradition of meditation and from monasticism as its prime resource in meeting this challenge — for laity and religious alike — offers another challenge. The patient reader will find Henry and Swearer carrying forward both discussions in the process of offering a comparison of the two monastic traditions and an assessment of their present usefulness.

This discussion falls into no vacuum, of course — long preceded by Dom Bede Griffith’s writings about what the East has to offer Western Christianity and by Dom Aelred Graham’s *Zen Catholicism*, which identified, in the 1960s, the shortcomings of Zen to Christians and its usefulness in bringing the soul to a peaceful reconciliation with the painfulness of the human situation through an attitude of simplicity and surrender of self, docility regarding things as they are, and development of an ability to live in the present — a usefulness that justifies exploring more extensively the likenesses and differences in Buddhist and Christian monasticism. Understanding of both monastic traditions has been enriched immensely in the past three decades. In fact, except for classical texts, all of Henry and Swearer’s suggested readings are from these decades. Thomas Merton’s interest in Zen would, alone, constitute a radical growth in interest.

For the Sake of the World is rewarding in what a “side by side” study highlights and in its discussion of what monasticism has to offer modern folk. That the authors are close observers of monasticism rather than monks defines their perspective — sometimes too remote, at other times helpfully objective for the newcomer to either or both institutions.

The initial chapter, “Contemplation and Action,” illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of their stance. To the uninitiated, focusing on Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh as exemplars of the two traditions and of the basic paradox of withdrawal and engagement in monastic life, is helpful and attractive. Merton saw the necessity of interior solitude and monasticism as the vocation in which one is most “poured out into the world” in love of all and he was the most articulate of modern monastic

voices in discussing both — and the common aim of Buddhist and Christian monasticism — a radical personal transformation. The Vietnamese Nhat Hanh's writings likewise relate meditation and action, wisdom and compassion, and develop the Zen understanding that truth is awakening to things as they are, "the heart of reality." For both, true community "develops from transformed persons rather than from political ideologies and manipulation of political structures." As Parker J. Palmer observes, "the world is within us," and, in contemplation, one lives "for the sake of the world." Merton and Nhat Hanh ideally serve the authors' purpose, as articulate monks, and the thesis of this book. But how representative are these two gifted poets of contemporary — and historical — monasticism?

Each chapter explores one area of comparison. Both traditions share in an essential but moderate asceticism in overcoming the "limitations of the mundane world in order to actualize another kind of being or reality, or to transform the mundane." For Buddhism, the Eightfold Path of moral virtue, constant attentiveness, and transcendent wisdom takes one beyond the limitations of his *karma* — if pursued variously, as a wandering or cenobitic monk. Henry and Swearer point to parallel Matthew and Luke references to Jesus as a drunkard, but Jesus who goes apart to pray, who fasts, who exemplifies humility, also is, like Buddha, a model of ascetical practice. Diversity in Christian asceticism is reflected in the eremitic and community traditions, the Manichaean departure, Luther's rejection of asceticism in his affirmation of the created world, Calvin's restoration of renunciation, and such a decline in asceticism in our time that Christians now look to the East to rediscover it. The difference in the Buddhist and Christian traditions is fundamental: Christian asceticism leads to Jesus.

The historical chapter wisely focuses on the early traditions. From the outset, Buddhists left ordinary life — some came naked — and gathered around a proven teacher. The degree of austerity varied. The purpose was discovery of truth about suffering, its cause, the way to cessation of suffering in absolute freedom: "walking through the world and leaving no imprint." Only in time did Buddhism develop rules, building complexes, and a hierarchy. Christian monasticism grew out of the example of the early community of the Apostles — but slowly, from the *Life of St. Anthony* to Pachomius and Basil in the fourth century when it became, arguably, the best practical realization of Jesus' "disengagement from conventional structures" and Paul's account of "a new age."

A chapter on the Benedictine Rule emphasizes the very unmodern view that freedom and self-direction come through discipline. Buddhism

involved a three-stage ordination ceremony that included hundreds of rules. *The Book of Discipline* regulated community life — if variously from place to place, abbot to abbot. The rules recognize the centrality of study — and allow for female monks, though Buddha saw them as an eventual weakening force.

Discussion of the rule in Christian monasticism recognizes Benedict as choosing from ten generations of monastic lore and the gradual acceptance of his rule over two centuries, a rule marked by covenants with God and the community and establishing a family, authority, and a school of the Lord's service in which obedience to an abbot as holding the place of God is the ordering principle of one's ascent of the ladder of humility. *Ora et labora* replace study as the focus of community life. Where Buddhists generated prayers, Christian monks chanted the Psalms and readings come from the Scriptures, the Fathers, and lives of the saints. Henry and Swearer use this chapter to identify several anomalies of Western monasticism — the monastery as an often gigantic economic enterprise in the Middle Ages, the increasing proportion of ordained priests, the Eastern Church tradition of consecrating only abbots as bishops, the Russian Staretz tradition, the all male Mount Athos. Final emphasis is on the common tradition everywhere: hospitality.

As a social institution, Buddhist monasteries were centers for learning — spiritual, moral, literary, and technical. Western monasticism served as the great transmitter of medieval culture for a millenium, and the monasteries developed strong schools of classical learning. But another tradition develops in seventeenth century Trappist houses — teaching by example alone: "Monks have not been appointed for study, but for doing penance . . . to weep and not to teach," a controversy prefigured in St. Bernard's criticism of Abbe Suger's pomp and patronage of art and architecture. Such differences, however, are secondary to Benedict's sustaining vision of the monastery as a place of spiritual wisdom, transitory though it may be in a violent world — a tradition that included such prominent and diverse figures as Hildegarde of Bingen, mystic and musician; the Staretz Amrosy who is the source for Dostoyevsky's Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*; and St. Francis of Assisi who took his asceticism and humility among the poor.

Ironically, as interest in Buddhism has spread westward, Buddhism in Asia is seriously threatened by the influence of the West, political change, secularism, and materialism. After surveying monasteries in Japan and Thailand, the authors ask how a tradition of compassion and non-egoism

can survive in today's competitive world. But Buddhist meditation is spreading to the laity and new institutions are being established, such as Bhikku Buddhadasa, which includes meditation and political and social involvement.

Modern Christian monasticism, attentive to early tradition but with much higher educational standards, is adjusting, shifting from slavish obedience to authority and uniformity to a developmental model with authenticity rather than a traditional view of holiness as its goal — with a strong emphasis on formation of candidates.

Henry and Swearer make their strongest contribution in the short final chapter which looks at what monasticism has to offer in the modern culture described in *Habits of the Heart* and *After Virtue*. In a society where community is disappearing and the past is a void, monasticism offers rules for harmony, a community of memory, and an ordered rhythm of community life. Important habits of the heart are found in the monastery. Monks know “things take time,” a response to today's dismissal of the past and demand for instant results. “Things must be done together” answers the American individualism the authors see as now being elevated to a world wide crisis, the obsession with the new, and readiness to abandon one course for another. As Joan Chittister, O.S.B., observes: “Community leads to conversion.” “Habit breaks habit” is monasticism's answer to the slavery of undisciplined freedom. “Things are seldom what they seem”: the monk's renunciation of wealth allows for the perception of reality within a world of illusions, of forces we do not recognize. Monastic asceticism, Henry and Swearer argue, establishes an ascetical attitude toward the world that challenges the “assumptions of a getting and spending world,” one “where competition leaves little room for compassion.”

Can such habits survive today? They have survived other “modern world” challenges, and Merton's own story is illustrative of retreat from and engagement with the world. Certainly, Henry and Swearer conclude, the monastery has something to offer: “For it is a real home where real people dwell.” My particular delight in a spectatorial study that does not always engage me is the authors' repeated reference to Father Zossima, who observes, modestly but accurately, that “a monk is simply what every person ought to be.”