

## Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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### European Monasticism and Zen Meditation

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from [Bulletin 75, October 2005](#)

Early in 2005 Thomas Kirchner traveled to Belgium and Holland to help prepare for the Tenth Spiritual Exchange Program of DIM/MID. In this abridged account of his trip he offers an insightful assessment of challenges facing contemporary Catholic monasticism, both in terms of its survival and its mission to society.

One of my clearest memories from a family camping trip through Europe in 1963 was the perfectly flat landscape of the Netherlands. I found the open scenery of the Netherlands, so different from the hilly landscapes of my home in New England, to have its own kind of beauty. The level terrain seemed to have influenced the Dutch temperament—I heard no harshness in the language, and the people were good-humored and tolerant.

After arriving at Schiphol (Amsterdam) Airport on the morning of February 7, I took the train toward the city of Roosendaal, just north of the border with Belgium. From Roosendaal station I called Fr. Jef Boeckmans at Abbey Maria Toevlucht, a Trappist monastery near the small town of Zundert. Soon Fr. Boeckmans—a bearded, bespectacled monk who, like many monastics, manages to combine cheerfulness and gravity in a seamless whole—arrived in a small white van. As we drove through the city, Fr. Boeckmans commented that it was the time of the local festival, and indeed many young people walked around in strange costumes, of which bizarre nuns' habits seemed a favorite.

Fr. Boeckmans, a monk for about forty years and also a recognized Zen teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan lineage, is one of the many “Zen Catholics” who discovered Zen meditation through an encounter with the German Jesuit Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle (1898-1990), one of the pioneers in the twentieth-century Christian encounter with Buddhism.

MID advisor Fr. Leo D. Lefebure provides an account of Fr. Lassalle's involvement with Zen in an article he published in *The Christian Century* in 1996 entitled “Divergence, convergence: Buddhist-Christian encounters.” In 1943 Lassalle, who was later a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima, decided to study Zen so that he could understand Japanese culture more deeply and evangelize it more effectively. He went through rigorous training and was eventually sanctioned by his Zen master to teach. Lassalle became convinced that Christians could experience satori (enlightenment) and integrate that experience into Christian life and practice. After the publication of his first book, *Zen: Way to Enlightenment*, Lassalle was ordered by Rome not to publish any more on this topic. Although his Jesuit superiors acknowledged that he had to obey the order, they also encouraged him to be faithful to the values he had discovered on his spiritual path and “just go on quietly sitting”. With the Second Vatican Council a new atmosphere of openness and dialogue arose in the Catholic Church. Lassalle wrote additional books and journeyed across the world, leading Christians in intense Zen retreats called sesshins. Toward the end of his long life, when Catholic authorities again expressed concern about the use of Eastern techniques of meditation in Christian prayer, Lassalle recalled his earlier experience of being silenced and advised: “Just go on quietly sitting”. (The complete article is available on line at

<http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/leo.htm>)

Fr. Lassalle gave Fr. Boeckmans important direction in his spiritual practice. Fr. Boeckmans later practiced meditation under Kubota Jiun, the present leader of the Sanbo Kyodan, and presently leads Zen retreats for monastics and lay followers both at Maria Toevlucht Abbey and at outside meditation centers.

Maria Toevlucht presently has a community of about 25 monks, though the large brick buildings once housed many more. Behind the monastery are several brick barns and outbuildings, sheltering a small herd of organically raised cattle and facilities for bread-making and other work. The monastery has many impressive farm machines, including tractors twice the size of anything I've ever seen in Japan. Further back on the grounds is a hardwood forest, surrounded by a circular dirt road. Several paths lead to the center, where a shrine for meditation is located. Broad fields and pastures lie around the main monastic complex.

The abbey's liturgical services were often attended by the laity. A few pious believers were there every time, even for the 4:30 a.m. service, and at Sunday Mass the church was filled with the faithful. I think the laypeople feel, and appreciate, the sense of quiet sanctity that informs the monastic liturgy—a sense often missing in the ritual of ordinary churches. This is, no doubt, one of the many reasons that the contemplative monasteries have always been regarded as constituting the “heart” of the Catholic Church.

On the morning of February 10 I traveled to the French part of Belgium with Br. Andrew, one of the abbey monks. Changing trains in Brussels, we continued on to Ottignies, a small town in southern Belgium where the land gets hillier and the forests thicker. At the station we were met by Fr. Pierre de Béthune, superior of the monastery Saint-André de Clerlande and head of the European branch of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue.

We reached Saint-André de Clerlande after a drive of several kilometers along winding roads into the wooded hills. The monastery is set close amongst the trees, with buildings of an open, modern design. Large glass windows in most of the rooms lent an added brightness. A large forest surrounds the abbey, giving it an atmosphere much different from that of Maria Toevlucht.

Saint-André de Clerlande seems to have greater lay involvement than other monasteries I have visited—many more laymen and laywomen attended the liturgical services, and there was a large lay presence at the monastic meals. This involvement may owe in part to the abbey's location in a French community with a strong Catholic tradition. The monastery also appears to have made a particularly determined effort to open itself to the surrounding community (though no Catholic monasteries I have seen are as isolated from “the world” as their critics present them as being).

After settling down at Clerlande I had several discussions with Fr. de Béthune on the East-West Spiritual Exchange. Fr. de Béthune, in addition to his work with the intermonastic dialogue, practices Zen meditation himself and sees it as having much to contribute to the Christian contemplative life.

Fr. de Bethune is representative in many ways of the numerous Catholic monastics who have taken up Buddhist meditation. “I am not a Zen master,” he says, “nor do I have any illusions of becoming one. I practice zazen because it has deeply enriched my own inner life, and I continue with the intermonastic dialogue because I think it provides one of the best opportunities to explore, within the framework of the Church, the ways in which the various religious traditions may contribute to each other. Particularly in view of the challenges presently facing Catholic contemplatives, we can only benefit from an openness to new ideas. And many of these “new

ideas” are simply different approaches to ideas that have always been part of the Christian contemplative tradition.”

Fr. de Béthune mentioned some of his hopes for the dialogue:

1) Continuation of monastic exchanges between Buddhists and Christians. The exchanges, in which monks of one tradition live for a period of time in the monasteries of the other, provide an opportunity for a simple, genuine experience of each other’s monastic life and spiritual practice. What is surprising to most participants is not the differences in the respective traditions, but the very basic similarities. Ordinary monks and nuns need a place for exchange and dialogue, and this is usually best supplied by the monasteries themselves.

2) Deepening of the meditative experience. Although any level of contemplative experience is to be valued, with depth of meditative experience comes understanding and insight that no amount of reading and study can give. With such experience it becomes possible to re-interpret and re-express the truths of a religious tradition in ways more accessible to those of different religious cultures. The influence of even one person with the depth of realization to do this is incalculable.

In the years since Fr. Lassalle the Church has been generally supportive of the dialogue movement. The path has not always been smooth, however, for the pioneers who have attempted to use Eastern meditative techniques in Christian spiritual praxis. The Church’s attitude appears determined, in part, by the respective approaches of the pioneers themselves. Some, like Fr. Willigis Jaeger in Germany, have been perceived as confrontational and found themselves silenced. Others continue to work more closely within the Church structure and have retained a good measure of support. Within this environment the movement for interreligious dialogue seems to have had a valuable moderating influence, providing a Vatican-sanctioned forum for openness to Asian spirituality.

Br. Andrew and I stayed at Clerlande that evening, and went with Fr. de Béthune the next morning to Louvain-la-Neuve, a “new town” on the other side of the forest from the monastery. A new university is being constructed in Louvain-la-Neuve for Belgium’s Francophone residents. A shallow valley separating two ridges was, in effect, bridged by a vast ferro-concrete platform; on this and the nearby hills the university and surrounding town are being built. Under the platform surface are large areas for shopping, parking, access roads, and a railroad (cars are not allowed in the town itself during the day).

Br. Andrew and I then returned to Zundert. After spending another day and a half there, I took the train to Amsterdam for a meeting with Ina Buitendijk, the Dutch woman whose letters to Zen organizations resulted in those organizations issuing several important statements apologizing for Zen’s support of Japanese militarism before and during the Second World War. I met Ina, her husband, and her daughter Ingrid at the Krasnapolski, one of Amsterdam’s grand old hotels. There we enjoyed an excellent dinner, after which we headed for Ina’s home in Zeewolde, one of the new communities built on land reclaimed from the Netherlands’ inland sea during the mid-twentieth century

After a restful sleep in the Buitendijk’s guestroom (which doubles as Ina’s place of meditation, featuring a wonderful Southeast Asian Buddha image made of wood), I rose early for a trip with Ina to Germany to visit her Zen teacher, Fr. Johannes Kopp. Breakfast brought back memories of my childhood visit to the Netherlands, particularly when I noticed Ina using the Dutch chocolate sprinkles that I had enjoyed so much at that time. I couldn’t resist spreading a generous layer on my toast.

The train to Germany took us through country that gradually shifted from flat plains to rolling hills. The trip went quickly as Ina and I talked about some of the issues brought up by the entire “Zen and war” question. After perhaps an hour and a half we arrived at a station not far from the city of Essen, where we were picked up by Fr. Kopp, a vigorous man in his late seventies. Fr. Kopp was an actor in his youth, and still retains the broad gestures and clear, animated speech of that profession.

The story of his priestly vocation is unusual. One of the passages he had to memorize as an actor was from the Gospel of St. John. As he repeated it and tried to “get into” its essence, he had a realization that inspired him to join the Catholic clergy.

His career as a priest was fairly ordinary until his forties, when he heard Fr. Lassalle speak about Zen meditation. Zen practice immediately appealed to him; he obtained permission from his superior to travel to Japan, where he studied under Yamada Koun Roshi of the Sanbo Kyodan. Following sanction as a teacher he returned to Germany and founded his Zen group. He presently conducts frequent retreats in a modern zendo—large enough to seat 80 retreatants—that was built over the swimming pool of a now-defunct Catholic seminary. As Fr. Kopp showed me around the zendo he asked me to strike the wooden *han* in the Rinzai monastic manner, and later to show him how the bells and clappers are used in Rinzai Zen. He, Ina, and I then sat a period of meditation. This was followed by an animated discussion on ecumenical issues, continued during lunch at Fr. Kopp’s residence.

On the train back to the Netherlands, Ina left at Utrecht for her home while I continued on to Amsterdam. After checking into my hotel I telephoned, on a whim, some Zen-practicing Dutch friends I had known in Tokyo during the 1970s. I ended up invited to their home, where we spent a very pleasant evening talking about old times and recent developments. It was a particularly enjoyable way to end my stay in the Netherlands. The next morning, well supplied with memories and gifts of Belgian chocolate, I departed from Schiphol Airport.

### Challenges Facing Christian Contemplative Life

I was especially impressed this time by the enormous interest in Buddhist meditation among European Christians who want a more experiential approach to the spiritual life but do not wish to leave the Christian faith. Jef Boeckmans holds fifteen sesshins (Zen retreats) a year at Maria Toevlucht Abbey, each one with thirty participants and each one wait-listed. Because of the demand, participants are limited to one sesshin a year; to provide his students with more opportunities for *sanzen* (meetings with him as their teacher), Jef goes outside the monastery to hold a further fifteen sesshins, all also fully booked.

On the other hand, the traditional contemplative life of the monasteries appears to hold little of interest for the younger generations in Western Europe, and as a result the monasteries seem to be slowly withering. It is sad to see communities that are composed almost entirely of monks in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, and to realize that in another ten or twenty years they will probably have no choice but to close. (One monastery in the Netherlands did in fact close recently, the aging community—increasingly unable to care for itself—having voted to move en masse to an assisted living facility.) The overall situation is symbolized by a recent renovation conducted at Zundert: part of the renovation involved construction of a new building to house the retreatants thronging to the monastery’s Zen retreats; the other part involved construction of a new wing of rooms designed especially for the elderly monks.

The contrast could not be greater between the enormous, vital demand for Buddhist meditation on the one hand, and the sad decline of interest in traditional Christian contemplation on the other. The first trend, in some form, would seem a logical part of the solution to the second trend, but

what to do is the question. One traditional response in the Church when such forces are at work has been to form a new order, but in this particular case, where meditative techniques from different religions are involved, the issues are especially complex. The tension is unfortunate, given the consistent testimony of those involved in the interreligious “dialogue of praxis,” from at least the time of Fr. Lassalle, that the Christian contemplative traditions have much to gain from the apophatic traditions of the East, with their highly developed techniques for emptying, opening, and “un-thinking.”

During a long walk through the nature preserve near the abbey, Fr. Boeckmans suggested that one thing necessary to ease this tension is the development of a new language for contemplation—a “common language of experience,” to use Thomas Keating’s phrase, based on the “unknowing” of apophatic meditation. As a vocabulary for this language the use of Sanskrit spiritual terminology—appropriate though it may be for Western Buddhism—would probably complicate the situation in Christianity, tending to make the Eastern meditation practices seem unusually foreign. An alternative approach, Jef feels, is a “resurrection” of Greek spiritual vocabulary, which in many ways is conceptually similar to the Sanskrit terminology.

Eastern forms of meditation are certainly not the total answer to the challenges facing the Christian contemplative life. Still, they do appear to fulfill a need felt by many people in the complex societies of the modern world, providing a deepened, experiential dimension to the life of prayer, and doing so in ways not all that different from those used in traditional Christian contemplation. We can only hope that the Church does not miss this opportunity for a genuine renewal in its spiritual life.