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# Response

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This invitation to respond to Professor Cornille’s paper is coming as I am deciding to ask for formal entrance into the American Buddhist community of SokukoJi in southern Michigan. This decision to go “Buddhist” marks a point in a two-year discernment process and has not been made lightly. I appreciate this opportunity to speak among my teachers and colleagues from my seminary training at Catholic Theological Union, where I graduated six years ago.

Put simply and directly: It feels to me as if the Buddhist practice I have learned is a deepening of the spirituality developed through my life by fifty years of Christian religious and spiritual practices. Frankly, and I say with some sorrow for the Christian communities I know, if the richness I am finding in the Buddhist community was available in the Christian community, I don’t think I would be seeking formal entrance to SokukoJi. If the study of the unconscious wasn’t so helpful in refining my awareness and deepening my generosity to clients, I don’t think I would be here.

Clearly, my multiple religious belonging did not start with walking into a Buddhist meditation three years ago but has been consistent and abiding truth throughout my life.

The first dual belonging was my childhood, where I was raised with one leg in the Catholic Church and the other in the Protestant Church. I attended Catholic grade school and completed Catholic initiation rites while attending Sunday services with my Lutheran Dad. I was raised in a religious but not spiritual family. However, I was very much religious and spiritual. My Dad thought it quite odd that I would read the Bible. He would even say, “Something is wrong with you.” As a young adult, I was religiously and spiritually engaged in both a vibrant Reformed Christian community and Contemplative Outreach, a ministry founded by Father Thomas Keating O.C.S.O., perhaps best known for developing “Centering Prayer,” among Trappist monks who brought contemplative practice to lay people.

I practiced Christian contemplative prayer for eighteen years: meditating three to ten hours a week, attending weekly prayer meetings, attending annual ten day silent retreats, completing spiritual direction training, participating in weekly spiritual direction small group meetings and coordinating Western Michigan Contemplative Outreach Chapters, all while attending weekly Sunday services, serving as a deacon and “Children in Worship” leader. My formal Christian training culminated in

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obtaining a Master of Divinity degree six years ago.

My meditation and *Lectio Divina* practices led me to eventually leave an engaging career in corporate finance/IT/marketing so I could serve others more directly. Contemplative practices helped heal childhood emotional wounds as well as to be a present–open–and accompanying presence to the diverse communities I served in Chicago, including a homeless shelter, a south-side hospital, and CTU’s international seminary housing. After finishing my M.Div. and an accompanying social work degree, I found a job where I could serve low-income people struggling with substance use and mental health issues in a Catholic Behavioral Health agency in northern Michigan.

When I landed in Northern Michigan five years ago, the local Contemplative Outreach group was no longer active, the few monasteries/religious communities were quite conservative and the Catholic parishes felt vacuous of community and spirituality. This experience was in distressing stark contrast to the Catholic community of faith I had attended in Chicago as well as the Reformed Christian community of most of my adulthood, and illustrates one aspect of the pastoral crisis of declining vocations and aging religious.

There was however an active spiritual and religious Buddhist community (or Sangha), which is a branch of a vibrant Japanese Zen Buddhist monastery in Battle Creek, Michigan. After about a year of weekly Sangha meetings that start with forms before meditation followed by book study and monthly retreats with the teacher from Battle Creek, I continued my long and varied meditative practice, but I stopped trying to find meaning in my attendance at a local Catholic church.

These past two years I have been working at Catholic Human Services and practicing Buddhism. I value how the Sangha and

dharma provide moral and spiritual motivation for my daily life as well as how the practice of meditation and study of the unconscious continues to increase my efficacy with my clients.

I have come to view and value Buddhism as my primary religious practice for several reasons: 1) lack of a vibrant Christian community, 2) strong identification with the person and practice of Jesus, rather than Christian doctrine, 3) the compelling availability of quality teachers in the Buddhist path, 4) a clear path to a lifetime goal of overcoming ego, 5) as my stand *with* a community *against* regional conservative expressions and against international teachings that are anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-abortion, and which favor clericalism.

My training is quite traditional. I see Buddhism as a call to “vicariously suffer” through overcoming ego to “help all beings.” At the points where I do see tension between Buddhism and Christianity, for example in the idea of “Creator God,” I am reminded that my Contemplative Outreach mentor, Father Thomas Keating, referred to God as “is” and “issing” and saw all humans as “divine” so I believe contemplative Christian theology has built bridges to perspectives that are also accessible by Buddhism.

In Buddhism as I have experienced it, the direction is to neither believe nor disbelieve but to see for yourself by meditation, study, and example in the Buddha. Because I saw and experienced encouragement for openness in contemplative Christianity, I continue to prioritize community where rigorous dialog may challenge the validity of my insights.

My current path is taking me to participation in American Buddhism as practiced at Sokukoji. It meets most of the criteria of religion: it is clearly grounded in centuries old truth, there is community guidance/participation with a genuine teacher and sangha, and there are strong teaching forms that actively foster personal transformation. It may appear unusual to some, but to me this decision appears choiceless in that this so fully expresses

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a life-long direction.

Did I search hard enough within the Christian tradition? I feel I did through my participation in Contemplative Outreach, search for local monastic traditions, and participation within several parishes. Should I have created a Christian Contemplative Community? All I can say is that my primary calling of counseling takes all my energy and requires refreshment to avoid burnout, and that I have found refreshment and depth within the Sangha.

When you are a serious practitioner of meditation it is easy to get confused and end up strengthening a distorted ego-centric version of spirituality. The corrective for this in both Christian and Buddhist communities is to pursue close engagement with a mentor and community to cut through the confusion.

I feel that I will always be Christian in that it was the milieu I was born into, it is warp and weft of northern Michigan culture and it is the lens that supported my journey to personal transformation for the majority of my life. I have always been on the low end of need for doctrine and high end of pragmatic application of Jesus’ call to repent. I have appreciated Fr. Thomas Keating’s definition of repentance as changing the direction in which you are looking for happiness. In my faithful search, I have chosen to step away from a specific Christian community and to set aside the Christian contemplative tools for now.