



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>  
*Scholarly journals online*

Henry and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism* (Fortress and Liturgical, 1989); Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, eds., *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (Continuum, 1997); and Bruno Barnhart and Yuese Huang, eds., *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (Continuum, 2001).

BEING A BUDDHIST NUN: THE STRUGGLE FOR ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE HIMALAYAS. *By Kim Gutschow.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. 333 pp.

HIMALAYAN HERMITESS: THE LIFE OF A TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUN. *By Kurtis R. Schaeffer.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 220 pp.

Because these two wonderful new books are about Buddhist nuns, the topic of gender looms prominently in them, in a way that it never would in books about Buddhist monks. Such is the unavoidable heritage of the androcentrism that has dominated both religious institutions and scholarship about religion for centuries. It will probably be a long time before books that include a great deal of information about women are the normal course of events rather than a special event. Fortunately, at least books about religion that include almost no information about women are no longer acceptable to most scholars.

In both books, the Tibetan Buddhist (and general Buddhist) preference for men and monks comes through loudly and clearly. The difficulties women and nuns face in negotiating Buddhist institutions are accented in both accounts. The view that female rebirth is definitely inferior to and much less desirable than male rebirth is emphasized by all the women whose voices are heard in both books. Yet neither book is polemical in the least. They simply present a straightforward account of how things are for women, and to a lesser extent, for men, in these Himalayan societies.

Of the two books, *Being a Buddhist Nun* is the more heartbreaking because the nuns studied in this account face such unrelieved difficulties in their pursuit of the religious life. This book is based on fourteen years of fieldwork in Zangskar, which is in the western Himalayas near Kashmir and Ladakh. The author lived in local nunneries while doing her fieldwork. Thus, this account narrates the contemporary condition in which some Buddhist women live. Beginning with the absolute preference for a male body, everything conspires against nuns and women, and there are no success stories of women who somehow transcend all these barriers in this book.

Regarding the desirability of a male rebirth, Gutschow writes, "The bottom line is clear. No Buddhist in her right mind desires a female body" (p. 17). As we read of the nuns' lives and of women's lives in general, the reasons for this conclusion quickly become clear. If a girl or woman becomes a nun, she receives little recognition or

celebration of her status from either her village or her family. Donations to nunneries are meager and as a result, it takes nuns many more years to build their cells and assembly halls than it takes monks. Donations given to a monk are considered to produce more merit for the donor than a similar donation to a nun. Rituals performed by monks are considered more efficacious and meritorious than those performed by nuns. Hence, when villagers require ritual services, for which a donation will be made, they are much less likely to ask the nuns to perform the rituals. Education for nuns is quite limited. Because nuns often have to take employment doing manual labor or housework to earn enough money for their supplies or to build their cells, opportunities for them to perform their meditation practices are also limited. For many of the nuns, the female *yidam* Vajrayogini is their main meditation deity. Nevertheless, they cannot transmit this practice or initiate other nuns to do the meditation. Even if they have completed the required number of mantra recitations, they cannot perform the fire *puja* (called burnt offering in the book) themselves, but must have a monk perform it on their behalf. The final liability faced by the nuns is that it is generally believed that enlightenment is not possible in a female body anyway. So, in vicious circular reasoning, why educate or support the nuns anyway? The list of liabilities seems endless.

Nevertheless, modern methods of communication and travel are bringing new ideas to the region. In 1995, Sakyadhita's fourth international congress was held in Ladakh. Local audiences were impressed by the nuns and laypeople from all over the Buddhist world who came to this conference, and, as a result, more nunneries were founded and opportunities for nuns began to increase, especially owing to the leadership of energetic younger local nuns. The Dalai Lama and other Tibetan religious leaders have stated locally and publicly that men and women have an equal capacity for enlightenment, thus casting doubt on the traditional belief that one must be reborn as a man before enlightenment is possible. As is the case all over Asia, the number of Buddhist nuns is steadily increasing while the number of monks is declining. However, many local monks and laypeople also oppose these new ideas and practices, perhaps because, with increased opportunities, nuns are proving that they can accomplish more than was thought possible according to traditional norms.

Despite its dismal content, this book is highly recommended for all libraries, for classes in Buddhist studies, and for classes in women's studies. It is very well written and makes a fascinating read. Its analyses are thorough and provocative. The book also provides a much-needed reality check for enthusiastic Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism who do not like to hear about the darker sides of traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice and those who think that the mere presence of divine females or a "feminine principle" always works to benefit women.

*Himalayan Hermitess* is less depressing. This book is a spiritual autobiography of the type so common in Tibetan Buddhism. The life story narrated is that of Orgyan Chokyi, a woman who lived in Dolpo, which is in northwestern Nepal, from 1675 to 1729. She was apparently regarded, by the end of her life, as a spiritual practitioner who had attained high levels of understanding. Her story was still known regionally

in the 1960s when a local informant suggested to a visiting anthropologist that he should investigate her life, which indicates that she did make an impression on her fellow practitioners. Manuscripts of her life story came to light after the 1960s, and this book is a translation of her autobiography, with a lengthy and informative introduction. (The introduction is far longer than the actual text of her life story.)

This book is less depressing only because of the eventual success of its protagonist. The translator, who is also the author of the introduction, indicates that the existence and preservation of the life story of a woman is extremely rare. Usually, women's stories were not thought worth recording, and the heroine of this autobiography also initially encountered her teacher's resistance to the idea that she should record her story. The autobiography narrates that her teacher rejected the notion that she should record her "joys and sorrows" because she was a mere woman, and she acquiesced because she did not know how to write. Later, the narrative indicates that "the impediment of not being able to write was removed" (pp. 131–132).

In her narrative, the woes of female rebirth are more than apparent, and the heroine of this narrative repeatedly laments her female rebirth and female rebirth in general, frequently praying that no beings ever again be subject to female rebirth. Much of her lament is biological and concerns her observations of animals. Mother animals experience tremendous grief when their young offspring are killed or taken away from them, while the male animals—their fathers—simply trot around in indifference. But her narrative also indicates that Orgyan Chokyi herself encountered many difficulties in her path of practice. She was born to parents who mistreated her because they wanted a son instead. Even local monks and nuns reprimanded her parents for their cruelty to her. As an eleven-year-old, she herded goats and experienced great sorrow over the suffering of mother animals. One of monks who observed her weeping predicted that if she studied the Dharma she would develop great compassion because of her innate mercy. Soon after, she "entered the religious life." As was common for nuns and novices, she was required to do many years of manual labor in the monastery kitchen before she received any significant religious instruction. During these years, she often lamented her female birth and prayed that neither she nor any other being ever be reborn as a female.

Her autobiography then narrates how she received meditation instruction from both the meditation master of the monastery and from a senior nun to whom he assigned her as a student. The narrative of the instructions given to her and how she practiced them is detailed and very delightful, especially to those who know the Tibetan oral traditions about which she is speaking. However, despite her eventual success in her meditation practice and despite being able to make several pilgrimages to sites sacred to Tibetan Buddhism, more years of kitchen work remained her lot. Eventually, after making many requests to him, her meditation master allowed her move into a small, isolated cave where she could spend all her time alone in meditation practice. These later chapters are filled with songs about the joy her practice brought her. Apparently, she even changed her attitude about female rebirth. In a prayer concerning what she hopes for in a future life, in addition to being able to

keep her vows and live in an “empty valley with no people,” she asks for “women friends with a similar religion” (p. 178). Nevertheless, in that same prayer, she still writes that a woman’s body is a ground for *samsara*.

The final chapter narrates her death and cremation. Before her death, her meditation master told her that she did not need to do more meditation practices because she had fully protected her vows and commitments, thus contradicting the common belief that enlightenment in a female body was impossible. She died when a wooden beam broke and struck her in the head during a religious ritual. After her death, the kinds of signs of accomplishment familiar to readers of Tibetan Buddhist narratives occur. Her body remained in meditation posture for seven days and her cremation fire ignited spontaneously, producing rainbow colored flames. When the crematory was later opened, she had left relics behind. These are the same signs of accomplishment that often end the life narrative of a male saint.

Why the difference between these two narratives? The folk culture is the same in both cases; everyone agrees that female rebirth is unenviable and people like Orgyan Chokyi are quite rare in any case. In Orgyan Chokyi’s case, everything depends on her own persistence and the presence of a senior monk who will instruct her. How many other women may have had similar motivation but lacked a sympathetic teacher? We will never know. For a long time, Tibetans in particular and Buddhists in general have claimed both that female rebirth is unfortunate and that a few exceptional women have overcome the woes of female rebirth.

Reading these books side by side is an especially useful exercise for those interested in women and Tibetan Buddhism. We see very clearly both the usual cultural norm about women and the rare exception to that norm. These books are also enjoyable to those who know Tibetan Buddhist practices from the inside.

Rita M. Gross  
*University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire*

BUDDHISTS AND CHRISTIANS THROUGH COMPARATIVE  
THEOLOGY AND SOLIDARITY. *By James L. Fredericks.* Maryknoll, NY:  
Orbis Books, 2004. xiv + 134 pp.

This elegantly written book is not only a call to Christians to act in solidarity with persons of other faith traditions as well as persons professing no religious identity in matters of social, economic, and ecological injustice. It is also a challenge posed directly to Christians to create new forms of interreligious solidarity that can empower political and social solidarity with other religious communities. Of course, interreligious solidarity requires interreligious dialogue, but Fredericks seeks to

By Kim Gutschow. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. Pp. xi+xix+333, 20 plates. \$29.95. Hanna Havnevik. University of Oslo. <https://doi.org/10.1086/503728>. First Page. "We Are Guaranteed Freedom": Pueblo Indians and the Category of Religion in the 1920s. Wenger. More than Meets the Eye: Incongruity and Observation in Josephus's Account of the Triumph of Vespasian and Titus. Frilingos. Off the Beaten Track: Animal Sacrifice and Christian Traditions. Hutt. Being a Buddhist Nun. The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas. Kim Gutschow. Gutschow depicts a gender hierarchy where nuns serve and monks direct, where monks bless the fields and kitchens while nuns toil in them. Monasteries may retain historical endowments and significant political and social power, yet global flows of capitalism, tourism, and feminism have begun to erode the balance of power between monks and nuns. Despite the obstacles of being considered impure and inferior, nuns engage in everyday forms of resistance to pursue their ascetic and personal goals. Honorable Mention, 2004 Elli K ngas-Maranda Prize, Women's Section of the American Folklore Society. Recent News. By Kim Gutschow. Harvard University Press, 2004. 333 pages. \$29.95. | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. This is a chapter on South Africa for a forthcoming book that will provide a comparative perspective on the role of domestic courts in enforcing treaties. The book will be published by Cambridge University Press. Read more. Article. Being a Buddhist Nun by Kim Gutschow, July 15, 2004, Harvard University Press edition, Hardcover in English. Kim Gutschow. Being a Buddhist Nun. —Close. Not in Library. Being a Buddhist Nun. The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas. by Kim Gutschow. There are no reviews yet. Be the first one to write a review. 16 Views. 2 Favorites.