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We need some 'rising great compassion' ourselves

Joan Chittister | Jun. 30, 2006 From Where I Stand

While Sunnis were fighting Shi'as and Arab Palestinians were fighting Jewish Israelis and U.S. Christians were fighting Iraqi Muslims, I was sitting in a Buddhist monastery on the top of a mountain in Taiwan. From the mountain top, the city in the distant valley below was barely a memory, a phantom of another kind of life. Noise and tumult, smoke and car horns had yet to touch this place.

Sounds idyllic, doesn't it? Shades of Shangri-la. A refuge. A hiding place from life. A moment out of time.

Think again.

Here, on the top of this mountain, I heard something that made me think. "Nowadays," I heard a young woman say, "People take on religion just to hurt one another."

Clearly, here on the top of this mountain something new was happening that was, in its own way, completely in touch with Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews everywhere. If anything, it was a sliver of the world to come, not a retreat to the past.

All over the world, armies, militias, insurgents, terrorists were fighting guerilla religious wars. But here, on the other hand, the intention was to be part of a worldwide movement among religious leaders in order to stop them.

When Thomas Merton went to Bangkok in 1968, he went to discover what Eastern and Western monasticism had in common. Now, almost 50 years later, the connections are becoming clearer and clearer.

Ecumenical gatherings have been a feature of the ecclesiastical landscape for over 40 years now, ever since Vatican II ushered Catholicism into the 20th century. At the same time, most of the groups formed were either highly theological or blandly communal, meaning affable, amiable, cordial, and genial -- but not really serious about it.

The first group concentrated on the search for common theological understandings. The second type devoted itself to creating social

get-togethers designed to bring into contact various denominational groups that had previously lived their lives on opposite sides of longstanding historical barriers.

Both types of gatherings were tentative, at best. Or, as the old joke put it: "How do porcupines make love? Very carefully."

Both tasks -- the creation of interpersonal bonds and the pursuit of theological commonalities -- made important inroads into religious rivalries. But in a world where religion has become one of the deadliest weapons of them all, academic discussions and interfaith clubbiness are clearly not enough. Now, perhaps, we are on the verge of a new kind of more global religious conversation.

The one in Taipei last week, for instance, was both fresh in content and new in composition.

The Woman's Global Peace Initiative, a U.N. Partnership Organization, at the invitation of style="FONT-WEIGHT: bold; FONT-SIZE: 10pt; COLOR: #000099; FONT-FAMILY: Arial"
href="http://www.dharmadrum.org/index.asp">Dharma Drum Mountain and its charismatic abbot, Master Sheng Yen, launched, for the first time, an interfaith conversation among Buddhist, Hindu and Catholic nuns. More than that, the conversations included adult lay practitioners and members of the local youth group, as well. Most important of all, perhaps, is that all the participants this time were women.

The theme of
the meeting, " style="FONT-WEIGHT: bold; FONT-SIZE: 10pt; COLOR: #000099; FONT-FAMILY: Arial"
href="http://www.dharmadrum.org/news/NewsDetail.asp?PKey={B7BFC28E-4D3B-4623-9F9E-4C79180A069C}">The
Rising Great Compassion," aimed at determining the role of women's monastic communities in the world today -- no small topic for groups identified, at least in recent history, with walls and grills, with hermitages and seclusion, with withdrawal and silence.

Three days of joint discussion dealt with the problems facing women monastics in relation to their own formation, the balance between tradition and contemporary needs, the value of monastic-lay integration, and the challenge of balancing contemplation and compassion in action in a world full of pain, awash in injustice, and starved for equality.

And all of this was going on in Taiwan. On a mountaintop. In one of the largest Buddhist monasteries in the world.

These were anything but refugees from life.

More striking even than the particular topics of the conference,

however, were the reports of the individual groups.

First, the group called clearly for international outreach programs for their young people. Unlike the tendency in the United States to think of ourselves as the center of the world by which every other culture measures itself, these young people assumed that getting to know young people in the rest of the world was the key to the future. I got the distinct impression that their view of the world will be decidedly more global than the view most of us took into public life.

Second,
the monastics, rather than being devoted to converting the rest of the world to their own spiritual practices, values and traditions, called for interfaith dialogue for monastics themselves. They are seeking to understand how God works with the rest of the world and to link hands to bring the Great Compassion that is needed now.

Third, whatever the Western notions that monastic life is of diminishing value in the modern world, lay practitioners begged women monastics to devote themselves to providing spiritual development in contemplations and action for adults.

Religion, the women said, is not just about rules. "You don't give people direction," they said. "You give people light so they can find their own path."

And then they said what struck me most deeply. "Nowadays," they said, "People take on religion just to hurt one another."

It
was clear to see that the young people, even in a culture where people go to monasteries as children, are really confused about the role of religion in society. It was clear what they are not seeing in us, despite all our posturing, despite all our rituals, despite all our declarations -- or maybe because of them, and what they are looking for: the Rising Great Compassion.

From where I stand, the question is: Would they see it in us as we make the bombs now dropping in the Middle East? Would they see it in the way we've run Guantanamo Bay? Would they see it in our minimum wage legislation? Would they see it in our churches when we define other religions as spiritually lesser, theologically inferior? And maybe, therefore, the God who made them, too?

Maybe we should have one of these conferences -- for religious, lay

practitioners and the young. All at once. Listening to each other. Most of all, learning from one another.

But that would be impossible, right? After all, we -- whoever we are -- already know all the answers.

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