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***Buddhist Monasticism***  
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What is all the fuss about concerning celibacy, and why does the Catholic Church insist on maintaining this practice that seems so much an artifact of a previous era? These are questions now being asked of the US Catholic Church by people who are seeking to understand this phenomenon. One way to examine the role of celibacy in the professional religious life is to observe how it is handled by other religions. Classical (Theravada) Buddhism offers up a useful parallel to Christian monastic and religious practices, not least in its demand of celibacy for its own religious professionals. Is celibacy merely an anachronism, or does it carry some deeper meaning that religious professionals continue to value?

Celibacy is one of the core concepts of classical Buddhism since it is one of ways that religious professionals are distinguished from the laity. According to the Theravada tradition, attaining enlightenment, the ultimate goal of the follower of the Buddha, was only available to monks and nuns, professionals who dedicate their lives to the "path." One can attain religious merit by becoming a lay follower, defined by five essential vows: to not take life; not steal; not commit unchastity; not lie; not imbibe intoxicants. But enlightenment requires a full-time vocation, and this was the attraction that drew people to join a Buddhist monastery.

In order to gain admission to a Buddhist monastery as a novice, one must subscribe to 10 essential vows: to not take life; not take what was not given; not engage in any sexual activity; not lie; not use intoxicants; not eat after midday; not attend public entertainments; not use perfumes, jewelry, etc.; not use a comfortable bed; and not handle money, gold, or silver. As an outward sign of admission to the monastic order, the novice's head is shaved and monastic robes are worn. The novice receives full ordination only after some years as a novice in training, and with the support of at least five ordained professionals with at least 10 years standing in the community. Over time the various schools of Buddhism all developed their own set of rules that extended the basic vows, but these 10 vows of the novice continue to inform all subsequent activities of the Buddhist professional life.

Enlightenment, defined as the attaining of non-attachment to anything, is only possible by cutting all ties with ordinary social life. Buddhists, just like professionals of other religions, have understood that refraining from all sexual relations was a critical component in cutting off all such ties to ordinary life. If the purpose of the highly structured life of the religious professional is to provide a protected environment where he/she can devote full time to seeking the "path" apart from the concerns of ordinary life, then celibacy makes perfect sense. Celibacy also makes sense as a part of Buddhist doctrine. Enlightenment, or the attainment of non-attachment to anything, depends on extinguishing the function of the ego; any sexual relationship entails ego and some sort of attachment or longing. If the goal of the Buddhist is total non-attachment, an ego-less existence, then celibacy is critical. The Theravada tradition has maintained its emphasis on limiting enlightenment to the monk or nun, and on the restrictions that define the religious professional, including celibacy. In this sense, there may be some useful parallels between Buddhist and Christian understandings and practices of celibacy.

In both cases, a person enters the religious profession to dedicate his/her life to attaining a form of ultimate enlightenment (whether that is called ego-less non-attachment or salvation), and a critical part of that experience involves cutting one's ties with the outside world. In both cases, celibacy is critical to cutting those ties or attachments. Abuses to the spirit and letter of these monastic rules have also occurred in both religions, but this does not mean that the injunction for separation from wider society as an integral part of life for the religious professional is without merit. Celibacy, especially for the religious professional, is thus more than an anachronism that doesn't fit into the modern world.

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