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YURI RADCHENKO
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ALEXANDRU VOLACU
MYROSLAV VOLOSHCHUK
MICHAŁ WASIUCIONEK

Editor: Andreea Eșanu

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania
www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10

ADRIAN SCHIFFBECK

***Ștefan Odobleja* Fellow**

Born in 1976 in Romania

PhD, Faculty of Humanities, University of Passau (2021)
Thesis: "The Influence of Religious Motivations on Young People`s Civic Engagement"

Fellowships and grants
UEFISCDI Research results award (PRECISI program), 2021
- Teaching grant (West University of Timișoara), 2020
- Student research award (Society for the Scientific Study of Religion), 2018-2019
- Doctoral Scholarship (Renovabis e.V.), 2014-2017
- DAAD Scholarship (STIBET doctoral program), 2014-2016
Fellow of the R. Bosch Foundation and the German Council of Foreign Relations, 2010-2011

Participation to conferences in Austria, UK, Poland, Sweden, USA, Canada, Hungary, Germany

Articles published in peer reviewed journals in the fields of Political science, Public administration, Religious studies

THE STRANGERS TO THE WORLD: ATTITUDES ON SOLITUDE AND COMPASSION IN ORTHODOX AND BUDDHIST MONASTERIES*

Adrian Schiffbeck

Abstract

In the last decades, research has focused increasingly upon differences and similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. The geographical distance and different views on tradition, culture, spirituality and philosophy are often understood as dissociative elements. However, there are various characteristics bringing them closer. We explore these similarities with a particular focus on monasticism. By means of a qualitative analysis, we look at an Eastern Orthodox convent in Romania and a Buddhist monastery in Scotland. The research is meant to reveal the manner in which nuns and monks perceive solitude and compassion, and how these concepts are transposed in their daily lives.

Keywords: Buddhist, Christian, Compassion, Monasticism, Orthodox, Religion, Solitude

1. Introduction

Previous research has compared Buddhist and Christian life perspectives from a cultural point of view (Tang, 2015), from a socio-psychological and behavioral one (Perera 2015, Wallace 2014, Tsai Miao, & Seppala 2007), and from a theological and historical one (e.g., Thelle 2021). The dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism was also considered (Schmidt-Leukel 2005, Valea 2015). Less research has investigated Eastern Orthodox and Buddhist lifestyles in terms of monasticism. Where such studies were performed, the methods included the ethnographic approach (Choe &

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McNally 2013; Hardin & Kaell 2016) and interviews with practicing monks (Underwood 2005, Jenkins 1999) – but not in a comparative manner. Focusing on similarities, rather than differences between Buddhist and Christian Orthodox views on solitude and compassion, we attempt to understand how these concepts are perceived and lived by monastics belonging to both traditions. The topic is vast and a generalization of findings is hard to achieve. This limitation will be compensated by the quality and profoundness of the results: according to the data saturation principle, the research process is not to be extended when no more relevant information is to be obtained (Struebing 2013: 115).

Scholars have identified several elements binding Buddhism and Christianity in terms of monastic lifestyle and vision upon life and death. For instance, there is the detachment from the world, in Christianity, where the practitioner leaves the place he or she had been used to live and decides to "die" to the world, to become a stranger to everything he or she had been surrounded by. The goal may be to gain a new perspective on life (Monod 1936). The idea finds itself in conjunction with solitude – the isolation in prayer and meditation, becoming free from desire and distractions. Neither in Christianity, nor in Buddhism, are celibacy, retirement or joining a restrained community seen as sufficient conditions for following the difficult path of spiritual development. While, in this manner, one can be freed from disturbing thoughts and is able to focus on a transcendent life-style, he or she has to pay attention to an ethical way of thinking and behavior, too. Buddha addressed his disciples with the words: "Oh monks, I say that a robe-wearer is a [true] monk not simply by the virtue of wearing a robe, nor by being naked, nor by covering his body with dust and dirt, nor by performing ablution, nor by living at the foot of a tree" (Boisvert 1992: 136, Nanamoli & Bodhi 1995). Expressed otherwise, *habitus non facit monachum*. Virtues would rely on kindness, friendliness, compassion and generosity – included by *Bodhicitta* – which implies looking for enlightenment, but also for the welfare of others. Scholars have looked at the term in comparison to the Christian *Charity* (e.g., Perera 2015). Basically, solitude implies a state of mind, different from loneliness – pursuing silence, lack of distractions and concentrating on being conscious, on the essential. To this extent, studies on prayer and meditation conclude that they are more similar than different in nature: Buddhists venerating the founder of their religion know that he has passed away, and even without the conviction that he might hear their prayers, they do express them, as a form of aspiration towards positive ideals;

intense prayer can, thus, manifest itself in a genuine non-theistic manner (Gross 1992). Besides solitude, celibacy, prayer, meditation and ethical behavior – *memento mori* (remembrance that death is imminent) is also to be found in Buddhist and Christian monastic life-styles: focus on life as non-eternal results in an attitude of detachment from the ego (Boisvert 1992: 131, Nanamoli & Bodhi 1995).

These common conceptions show that monastic life-images and -styles in Buddhism and Christianity are not as different as a superficial analysis might reveal. There are philosophical beliefs and practical traditions in both attitudes, which deserve a closer attention. The research questions in this study do not take all elements described above into consideration, but, as mentioned in the beginning, they focus on solitude and compassion. Both elements have been investigated jointly with respect to the religious traditions we are interested in (e.g., Salazar 2014, Gordon 2014, Christie 2006), but not with reference to monasticism. We explore this under-investigated research topic and focus on solitude, in connection to compassion, among Christian and Buddhist monastics: What does *to "die" to the world* mean – is it a physical detachment from the environment, or rather an isolation in terms of mental renunciation? What is compassion about in Buddhism and in Orthodox Christianity, and how can it be achieved in conditions of solitude? These questions form the fundament of this research, and they will be addressed through interviews and by a narrative interpretation of the obtained data. The analysis attempts to reveal the way nuns in the Eastern Orthodox cultural context of a Romanian convent (Șag-Timișeni monastery, Timiș county), and Buddhist practitioners from a settlement in the UK (Samye Ling Buddhist monastery and Tibetan center, Eskdalemuir, Scotland) - understand their way of thinking and living, with respect to solitude and compassion. Comparing the collected opinions will allow for a better understanding of a phenomenon which received too little attention, and thus contribute to the scientific knowledge on this subject.

Fig. 1 Samye Ling Buddhist monastery and Tibetan center, Eskdalemuir, Scotland (photo)

The structure of the paper is as follows: we start with a theoretical perspective on the concepts of solitude and compassion, with focus on the last one and the way it is described in the literature. The theoretical chapter is followed by a description of the case studies and methods, and then by the results extracted from the visits we made to the Eastern Orthodox convent and the Buddhist monastery. Conclusions resume the findings, connect them to the theoretical concepts and tackle the limitations, suggesting future paths of investigation.

2. Theoretical considerations

First, with respect to **solitude** – it is a state of mind to be differentiated from loneliness: the person embraces detachment, seeks silence, avoids distractions, and pursues concentration on being conscious, on the essential part of reality. The individual contemplates higher levels of

existence, where stability and tranquility play the most important part and where exile is not measured in time and space, but in the search for an inner revelation – of the seemingly intangible God, and/or the self. By renouncing the noise of the world and practicing silence, by giving up personal relationships, family, friends, jobs, acquaintances and belongings, day to day habits – nuns and monks transcend the world and change their objectives and dedication. Solitude and renunciation are central to both Christian and Buddhist monasticism; they are to be understood as an "internally solitary state of mind rather than an external change of location" (Boisvert 1992: 130). It is not as much about moving to another place, as about deciding to think differently: "If you cannot control your tongue, you will not be in exile anywhere. Therefore, control your tongue here, and you will be in exile" (Ward 1984: 122, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*). It is about the mental conviction of not belonging to the world, about retirement and dedication to prayer and meditation. The Buddhist monastic life-style is mostly perceived in terms of detachment from obstacles potentially standing in the way of the seeker on their road to enlightenment / to Nirvana (Nyanatiloka 1956: 32, Boisvert 1992: 133). Solitude regards leaving sensual pleasures, family and acquaintances behind, in order to pursue genuine spiritual awakening (Boisvert 1992).

The main question we are interested in is the manner in which **compassion** can be achieved and put into practice when the person lives in a solitary environment, such as a monastery. There are multiple ways in which the concept has been interpreted and understood in the literature. For instance, scholars have made a comparison between two notions belonging to the Buddhist and Christian philosophies: *Bodhicitta* and *Charity*. The first one, meaning to look for enlightenment and for the welfare of others – with *Citta* referring to mind, intelligence, thought or will, and *Bodhi* (awakening) meaning knowledge and freedom from limitations, possessed by the buddhas; Bodhicitta comprises "the mind or thought that takes the supreme bodhi of the buddhas as its aim" (Perera 2015: 121). To this extent, it comes to support the idea that solitude does not contradict compassion or generosity: "The best way to help beings is to become an awakened buddha, capable of teaching them the way to deliverance" (Perera 2015: 122). As we will see later, the element of *teaching* appears several times in the context of becoming compassionate – discussions with our interviewees, especially from the Buddhist environment, reveal the importance of the mentor / the teacher. *Charity*, on the other hand, is a word derived from *charité* / the Latin *caritas*, and put into connection

with *agâpê* – a relatively uncommon Greek word for "love", used in the New Testament and usually contrasted with friendship (*philia*) or sexual love (*eros*); it stands rather for selfless love, for consideration for one another – the love that God showed by giving his Son for the world's salvation (John 4:9-12). Charity is understood as a form of compassion, of love that is not conditioned in any way by personal relationships. The two love commandments from the New Testament illustrate this vision of the manner in which one is supposed to understand and put compassionate love into practice: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength… You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31). Focus lies on God and on the human ability and obligation to visualize and apply charity through the divinity: "God *is charity*, and those who abide in charity abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16). The Christian doctrine suggests the reference to the divine source of love as a primary action. Becoming an awakened buddha and developing compassion for all sentient beings are to be cultivated in the spirit of the *Anattā* doctrine (of non-self) (Flescher & Worthen, 2007, 202); with non-self not regarded as nihilism, but as the aspiration towards non-attachment – with focus on impermanence and on the unchanging essence. Bodhicitta and Charity thus imply a common focus on compassion and a fundamental distinction in terms of the source of love. They both "(…) involve a firm intention, which should become a habitual disposition, to show active love and compassion to other beings" (Perera 2015: 124). *Habitual disposition* relates to compassion as *moral responsibility*, which we will detail later. Scholars who have approached religious philosophies in a comparative manner concur that "all world religions encourage sacrifice of one's own interest for those of another – a stranger, an outsider. Each religious tradition frames altruism in its own context, however" (Neusner & Chilton 2005: 1).

Before advancing to a detailed description of compassion in the literature, let us briefly mention some fundamental elements in Buddhism and Christianity, related to our subject and derived from the previous analysis, which should provide a more comprehensive view upon both religious and philosophical traditions. First, compassion, altruism and love, although central to both traditions, are seen as *potentials* to be cultivated, on one hand, and as *commandments*, on the other: love appearing in a rather horizontal plan in Buddhism, and in a triangular form in Christianity – humans and God, as givers *and* receivers (Flescher & Worthen 2007:

206-207). Second, *monasticism* is a central element in Buddhism, and less significant in Christianity. Third, Christians hold to the orientation towards *God as creator and protector*, whereas Buddhists focus on *human capabilities* to be trained and developed. Last, but not least, the element of *revelation* is seen as an understanding originating from God, on one side, and as deriving from practice, on the other.

What is compassion (about)?

If we attempted to define the concept, there would be a sum of elements to be taken into account, in connection to which the word has been used over time – among them, acceptance, allowance, awareness, care, connection, kindness, openness, patience, peace, resonance, respect, sensitivity, tolerance, understanding etc. Basically, it was defined as "a sensitivity to *suffering* of self and others, with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it" (Gilbert 2017: 73). A central part is played here by compassion's unconditional nature – as "(...) it responds to the needs of the one suffering, without regard for what, prudentially, is a 'just' or 'fair' response on the part of the giver" (Flescher & Worthen 2007: 207). Then again, compassion flows in multiple ways: from the self to the other, from the one next to you with yourself as a receiver, and towards oneself. With respect to the phases of developing this feeling – following some of the categorizations found in the literature (e.g., Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 177) – we speak about emotional recognition, resonance, empathy, compassion, altruism, and, finally, love. The elements are interrelated and the phases do not necessarily occur separately. According to the Buddhist teachings, suffering is placed on a fundamental basis in The Four Noble Truths – stating its existence, the fact that it always has a cause, that there is a possibility to cease it, as well as a path leading to cessation, respectively to enlightenment. In the Bible, compassion and love arise from God and are given to humans as commandments; they emerge as means for salvation. In the New Testament, Jesus is the model of compassion, His words and behavior are to be followed by believers striving for eternal life. Compassion remains a key element for spiritual development to be ascertained and put forward in both philosophies.

Compassion and wisdom

Literature puts compassion in close connection to wisdom, seen as more than knowledge or intelligence. It is about *discerning awareness* –

first, not letting oneself overwhelmed by the other's suffering, which can lead to *exhaustion* (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 173-174): "The needs of the suffering always exceed the resources of those trying to attend (...)" (Flescher & Worthen 2007: 208). Discerning awareness refers to developing a balancing wisdom, to *knowing* what can be offered, when and under which circumstances, with regard to what the receiver needs. In this way, opposite effects can be avoided and resources can be used in a wise and effective manner. Second, "the potential to become enlightened can generate (…) deep *pride*" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 175). The seeker can see his or her development as superior, due to the perception of advancing on the chosen path. Therefore, "you need to cultivate strong courage to work for the benefit of other sentient beings. These two states – humility and courage – may seem contradictory, but it is the application of *wisdom* that reconciles the two" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 174). Courage refers to the balance we were talking about when avoiding exhaustion, whereas humility – in the Christian Orthodox view more present as *humbleness* – is needed for avoiding pride. Both attitudes, of courage and humbleness, contribute to a growing wisdom. Otherwise, "you can be very intelligent and unwise" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 176) – not being able to apply the information you have in an effective and efficient manner. After all, the goal of compassion is, more than anything, mental hygiene for the one offering it (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 222). In the end, wisdom needs compassion and compassion needs wisdom – the two elements are interdependent and their relationship can be resumed in a scheme like the following:

Knowledge → Intelligence → Awareness → Wisdom → Compassion

- where proper information (in opposition to ignorance) is supposed to be at the fundament of the process, with intelligence and discerning awareness coming to complete an efficient attitude and action, and with wisdom to be achieved in an interconnected manner with compassion. The goal is to alleviate suffering, on one hand, and to improve, or develop the qualities of your own mind, on the other.

Compassion and moral responsibility

One question we should ask when it comes to being compassionate is if this attitude is indeed necessary. Do we really want to be compassionate,

or is our nature focused primarily on ourselves (self-centeredness)? In this context, there is a certain degree of moral responsibility to be considered: "If you see millions of people suffer, remember that you cannot be happy (...). You have the *moral responsibility* to help as much as you can, in order to find one's own happiness" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 197). Responsibility does not refer here to an obligation, but rather to a process whereby one performs a good deed and gains his own advantages; happiness, as a consequence of being compassionate, comes from positive feeling generated by the act itself. A comprehensive study conducted in the 1990s on motivations for altruistic acts (Monroe 1998) reveals that some people are *instinctually* helpful and express their desire to respond in a natural manner, while others need a motivation for doing good; there is place for more research revealing the reasons for these differences (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 198). "What made you choose to do it? I didn't choose. They needed help! I did it. I *had to* do it" – was one of the reasons expressed by participants in this study (Monroe 1998); these people were not invoking a motivation, but compassion came as an *instinctual* moral responsibility. When refusing to take action, or avoiding to resonate with the one in need, one pretext generally invoked is that there is a *lack of opportunities* to do good, that people in difficulty are hard to find: it is, however, clear, that conditions for offering compassion are always there, as expressed in the Bible itself: "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want" (Mark 14:7). Literature speaks, in this context, about balance when it comes to moral responsibility – between an ideal, supreme dedication towards the other, and ego-centricity, carelessness, or ignorance: "There are only a few who can love everyone in the same measure, but everyone has the capacity to turn his or her heart towards the stranger in need" (Flescher & Worthen 2007: 207-209).

Compassion is also to be regarded as a source and, at the same time, as a consequence of *gratitude*: being thanked to offers the giver a positive feeling and increases the chances of repeating the gesture; witnessing signs of compassion between others also offers a sense of rejoice – inspiring one's own generous acts (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 213-215). Although humans tend to focus on hardship and difficulties, and forget about gratitude – as "there is always some dissatisfaction with the nature of life" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 192) – manifesting thankfulness overcomes this negative perspective. In the Christian theology, gratitude is placed in close connection to *grace,* as a gift from God to believers – sometimes,

a determinant of one's own degree of religious faith, "measured in terms of surrender to the divine presence that inspires moral conduct" (Flescher and Worthen 2007: 209).

Compassion and solitude / retreat

To what extent can compassion be achieved under conditions of solitude, or retreat? Teachings and practices in Buddhism and Christianity alike show that positive feelings and the willingness to help may develop when distractions are avoided and when the mind can focus on understanding the true nature of reality. "(…) Many problems that we are facing today are due to the one-sidedness, *We* and *Them (…)* They do not consider themselves as part of We" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 187). Solitude as detachment from people and concentration on the self is denied in both philosophies - which emphasize spiritual development in the monastic context not as isolation, but on the contrary, as *communion*. Being able to focus on accumulating knowledge, on learning, on understanding, on discerning awareness, on developing wisdom, enhances the wish to alleviate suffering *on a relative,* or on an *ultimate level* – respectively by performing a concrete generous act, or by *teaching* people how to come to the sources of their suffering and overcome their problems on their own. To this extent, an analogy can be made with the psychological approach to the sources of personal difficulties known as cognitive behavioral therapy – where, generally, people are being taught that "it is your view that is making you miserable" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 193**)**.

Fig. 2 Prayer rituals in the Buddhist temple, Samye Ling monastery (photo)

Practice in solitude (meditation, prayers, rituals) comes to develop the awareness that suffering may be caused by one's own mistakes, ignorance and bad habits, rather than blaming others for one's difficulties. In the Buddhist view, there are three main causes of suffering (Second Noble Truth): *anger*, *desire* (in the sense of greed) and *ignorance*. First, avoiding to become *angry* "is the hardest thing of all – letting the spark go out without catching on fire: (…) guarding the gateway of the senses" (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 169, 207); prevention plays an important part in learning how to deal with this obstacle. Second, *ignorance*, in terms of lack of information and understanding, or "wrong intelligence – brings wrong views, an unrestful state of mind"; it should be counterbalanced by education and developing the calmness of mind (Ekman & Dalai Lama, 2008: 170-172). Again, solitude comes to support this process: "It is through exterminating fundamental ignorance that we can be freed of all forms of suffering, the third truth"; misinformation and misconception (ignorance) leads to lack of understanding reality as emptiness of the

independent existence (Ekman & Dalai Lama 2008: 206). Third, *desire* causes suffering: greed and afflictive attachment prevent humans from cultivating positive attitudes and finding their emotional balance. Mind training in solitude, often under the guidance of a teacher – the Lama, or the Father confessor – leads to wisdom and, consequently, to being capable of offering more compassion, beyond close human connections: "Religious traditions (…) stand, in their own particular ways, to improve upon and *extend* the limited biological capacities for other-regard with which most human beings are born" (Flescher & Worthen 2007: 205).

3. Case studies and methods

The Buddhist monastery we have visited for this research is located in Southern Scotland and was founded in 1967 by Dr. Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche as the first Tibetan Buddhist Centre in the West. The name Samye comes from the first monastery to have been established in Tibet. Samye Ling is also an international center of Buddhist training, offering instruction in philosophy and meditation – in accordance to the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. A residential community of more than 40 people – monastic and lay volunteers, lives at Samye Ling (https://www.samyeling.org/about/). We have spent several days at this settlement, observing the way nuns and monks were carrying out their daily lives, respecting the Buddhist rules and traditions.

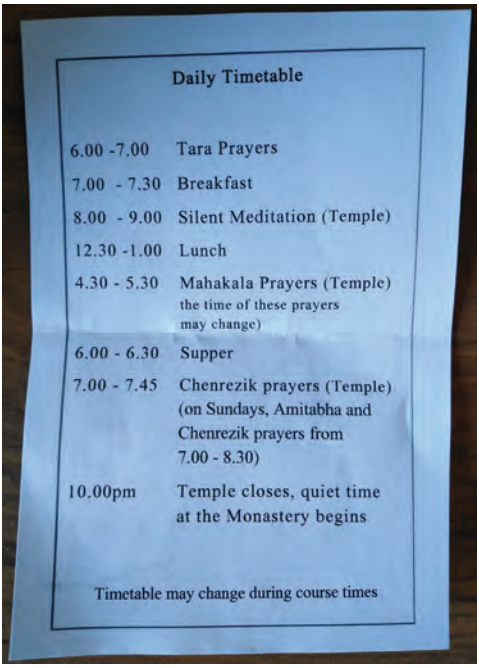

Fig. 3 Daily timetable at Samye Ling monastery (photo)

The daily program includes three sessions of prayers and one of meditation, which take place at the temple and where everybody is invited to take part. During the week, there are usually not many people present, but, at times (on weekends and when different courses are held here), the monastery, holding several accommodation facilities, "can become very crowded" (Interview Samye Ling monastery). Volunteers living here have different assignments and help the community to support itself – some of them embracing the Buddhist philosophy and dedicating themselves to study and practice and practice. Several nuns and monks are active and take part every day in the prayer and meditation sessions, others do this on their own and are, in their turn, assigned to specific activities. We took part in the rituals at the temple and spoke to three persons – the deputy abbot, the oldest monk living here, and one monk who also came here for a long time and who conducted several periods of retreat in Tibet and in other dedicated places, building on his capacities to understand more about Buddhist philosophy.

The Christian Orthodox convent of Șag-Timișeni lies in the Western part of Romania, in Timiș county, not far away from the city of Timișoara. It was founded in 1944 by the metropolitan Vasile Lăzărescu. 15 years later, the communist regime closes the convent and transforms it into living spaces for workers. The second Orthodox metropolitan / bishop of the Banat region, Nicolea Corneanu, insists for reopening the monastery, which the authorities agree upon in 1968. A number of 35 nuns live here and, due to the growing number of people visiting the convent, it was extended with a new church, as well as different facilities, spaces for accommodating pilgrims and so on (https://mitropolia-banatului.ro/hram-la-manastirea-timiseni-sag/). Nuns living here take part in two religious services daily, lasting more than two hours each. They are also involved in individual praying sessions and in administrative chores. The monastery receives many visitors especially during holidays and on Sundays – the fact that it is easily accessible from Timișoara making the place less isolated and, in a way, incorporated in the life of the region. From the discussions we had with one priest living here for several years, with the oldest nun in the convent, and with the mother prioress, there are few charitable activities involving the convent; the assistance offered by the nuns focuses on dialogues with visitors and pilgrims, and on prayers / moral support.

Fig. 4 Șag-Timișeni Christian Orthodox convent, Timis county, Romania (photo)

For collecting the data, we used qualitative methods, partially based on personal observations and mainly on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Whereas in quantitative research scholars pursue generalizable findings, qualitative analyses focus on the principle of saturation, obtaining meaningful, in-depth information on a social practice and setting the limit of the sample at the point where no more substantive data is to be gained anymore (Miles & Huberman 1994). We used purposive sampling – a selective or subjective research method applied in accordance to the subject to be explored and relying "on the judgment of the researcher when it comes to selecting the units" (Sharma 2017: 751). The number of interviewees (six persons) can be interpreted as a limitation – to be compensated by the meaningful data. The (recorded) conversations that lasted between one and two hours were conducted in the respective monasteries and focused on the way interlocutors understand, interpret and live solitude and compassion. Going on the field, talking to people and observing their lifestyles, rituals and traditions (observations are illustrated in this paper mainly by photographs taken on site), was, for us, not about setting hypotheses and formulating questions to test them, respectively studying a natural phenomenon. It was about exploring particular, individual perceptions of reality. These perceptions are then connected to a meaning, which, according to Keller (2012: 4), can have different levels of objectivity, depending either on a specific situational context, or on general social conditions. Following the *grounded theory* research style, theories are generated from obtained data based on an analytical interpretation and without losing the connections to the existing literature.

Qualitative interviews are, basically, divided into four separate, but often interconnected categories – guided, expert, narrative and ethnographic interviews (Struebing 2013). We conducted discussions with experts capable of looking into decisional processes, showing experience in that particular field, as well as knowledge to develop the process (Struebing 2013: 95). The narrative element was also present, as interlocutors talked about themselves and their personal stories, too. The in-depth character was provided by the same *meaning* to be pursued when developing the information – asking additional relevant questions and attempting to understand the way dialogue partners perceive and interpret the subject. Kvale (1996), for instance, describes in-depth interviews with two metaphors – first, with knowledge "waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by

any leading questions" (Kvale 1996: 3); second, with the interviewer positioning himself on the same journey with the dialogue partner: "The traveler (…) asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as 'wandering together with'." (Kvale 1996: 4; see also Legard, Keegan, & Ward 2003: 139). In both metaphors, the significance of words and stories should come to the surface without interferences from the researcher, but with focus on extracting relevant information and accompanying the respondent on the journey towards explaining their way of understanding the social practice.

4. Results

Let us advance to presenting the outcomes of this study, based on the ideas extracted from the interviews we conducted with nuns and monks living in the Christian Orthodox convent from Romania, and in the Buddhist monastery in Scotland. The focus in this section is on the concept of compassion and (according to the way it was depicted in the theoretical chapter) its relation to wisdom, moral responsibility, and solitude, or retreat.

Compassion and wisdom

With respect to developing discerning awareness, related to wisdom, that would allow the person to overcome potential obstacles (like exhaustion and pride) on his or her road to becoming compassionate, respondents from both settlements (especially from the Christian Orthodox convent) spoke about monastic life more or less related to solitude in its general understanding. That is, "I am seeing a lot of difficulties here, so does the priest, the Father confessor", says one of the nuns. "Families with different problems come to us, they turn to the priest for prayers, buy different religious objects, take part in rituals, but most of them feel the need to talk to somebody" – tells another interlocutor from the same settlement. In other words, the priests and the 35 nuns living here are often approached by people asking for advice, and they respond to their needs – mostly by praying and offering them guidance; some nuns remain in contact with visitors and later receive messages on their phones from persons searching for solutions to difficulties: "We are here to help them with our prayers".

Fig. 5 Religious service at Șag-Timișeni Greek Orthodox convent (photo)

Compassion needs to be treated with wisdom, in order for *exhaustion* not to incline the balance towards incapacity: "When so many people turn to us with tremendous difficulties – dramatic, tragic life stories – sometimes it's a lot for us, too. But, by praying, you seek to free yourself, too, a little, from the burden". In the Buddhist monastery, the veteran monk living here since 1984 tells us he never deviates from his daily praying schedule: "During Covid, I prayed very strongly that people in our monastery are not affected. No one got sick. For me, this is a proof that prayers work. I have total confidence in this. I don't know what others think: if you have 30 people, you will have 30 different ways of thinking". Buddhists believe exhaustion can be avoided and wisdom can be achieved, in relation to compassion, when the ego is left aside and focus is set on the other: "Exhaustion is very much related to me being important", tells us one monk. He emphasizes that balance between one's own capacities and

the needs of the other can be achieved by appreciating your limits at their real value: "It is natural to be tired. But I can do a little bit. I can do what I can do. I always try and do my best" (Interview Samye Ling monastery).

Second, in relation to *pride* as an obstacle, literature proposed humility and courage as counterparts: "The path is to let your pride be destroyed, to not react. Humbleness, yes. Give up a bit – otherwise, where will you end up? Two hard stones. Abandonment is not cowardice. With Jesus on your side, you will prevail. He said: 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world'", tells us one of the Orthodox nuns. She underlines humbleness – different from humility, but still, opposed to pride, and not in contrast with courage. Renouncing a conflict would not be a sign of cowardice, but would imply *the courage to be humble*, to let go of the ego and, thus, develop compassion. For Christians, God is the one to relate to when striving towards such a difficult attitude, the one helping on this path: "Before Christ, the line of thinking was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus came with love, with forgiveness, with turning the other cheek. If someone hits you, it's difficult to do that – but, with a strong faith, you can reach this measure" (Interview Șag-Timișeni convent). Along the same line, the nun states that, for achieving a way of thinking and a behavior orientated towards genuine compassion, solitude can help – offering peace and quietness for prayer and meditation. But, on the other hand, "when you come to the monastery, the devil comes after you. It's a continuous fight with yourself here, too. The whole life is a spiritual struggle". One of the Buddhist monks also refers to pride; in his opinion, humans are inclined to feel good about themselves when achieving something positive: "It is natural to have a little pride or self-content for what you do, as long as you are not looking for it and it doesn't become a goal". It is, again, about the balancing wisdom – being intelligent and wise at the same time, discerning with knowledge and awareness (overcoming ignorance) between what one can offer and the needs of the potential receiver; so as compassion can manifest in a benefitting manner for both actors involved.

Compassion and moral responsibility

In the theoretical subsection dedicated to compassion in relation to moral responsibility, focus was set, first, on *own advantages* (in terms of positive feelings) following beneficial gestures; second – on the *instinctual*, unmotivated inclination to help; third – on the implicit presence of

conditions for being compassionate; and last, but equally important, on *gratitude* as a central element encouraging compassion. With respect to *advantages* / a certain satisfaction, this research showed that, for monks and nuns attempting to expand compassion, self-content would need to come naturally, without being the goal of their action: "We stay in in a monastery not to be happy. This isn't our goal, it is to try and free beings from suffering", tells us one monk at Samye Ling. Another partner of discussion from the Buddhist settlement speaks about a natural way of trying to expand the positive feelings for the family to people he or she has never met – as a form of moral responsibility: "Basically, not that you love your son or that I love my mother is wrong; it's a starting point: use that love, use its example to try and develop and expand it to everybody else. Everybody could have been my mother. Then why do I love her in this life more than I love you?". The monk expresses a metaphor related to this action of sharing: lighting candles of others, without losing the light of your own; compassion would thus be looked upon as the natural feeling for close ones to be expanded without losing the love that is already there.

Second, in relation to *instinctual* responsibility – "the whole motivation, the whole essence of practices is to help and benefit others. My happiness doesn't become important, others' happiness becomes more and more important. Once you really develop that mind state, you will sort of automatically be of benefit to people", says one of the monks living at Samye Ling. He continues by underlining that "you can't make somebody love you. But, then, if you're not important, it doesn't matter if they love you. You love them. You don't force yourself. You *just do it*". This reminds us of the study presented in the theoretical subsection where we spoke about doing a good deed from a natural impulse, without constraints or commandments from outside, or without expecting certain benefits. The gesture connects to what we have mentioned in the literature review earlier with reference to compassion's *unconditional* nature – responding "(...) to the needs of the one suffering, without regard for what, prudentially, is a 'just' or 'fair' response" (Flescher & Worthen 2007: 207). Instinct, unconditionality and naturalness overlap determining an ideal understanding of responsibility – to be trained and cultivated by the seeker for spiritual development in both traditions, with the focus on God as a point of reference / a supporter, in Christianity: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37-39). One of the nuns at Șag-Timișeni Christian Orthodox convent

explains this vision: "God is your priority – respect others, but no more than you love and respect God; it's His commandment", and clarifies that God as a priority should not mean that positive feelings towards others would have to decrease. In the end, the instinct, or the potential to be compassionate is present in every single being: "We are like a diamond that needs to be polished and cleaned" (Interview Samye Ling monastery). So, moral responsibility can be a predetermined feature of character, but it can also be trained and developed towards perfection: "One should consider becoming a monk out of conception, not out of deception", tells us the priest living at Șag-Timișeni convent for several years. Spiritual development, improvement of your mind, of your being, of your natural born moral skills, of the inclination towards compassion, polishing the raw diamond within ourselves (on the way to Nirvana, or to Salvation) are thus key elements in both monastic traditions – although ideologies, scriptures and teachings present them in different manners.

Third, compassion as moral responsibility came in connection to acknowledging that *conditions* are always there for the intention to alleviate suffering. Interlocutors from the Buddhist monastery point, once again, towards the necessity to expand existing compassion for close ones – considering the fact that strangers in need of support are always there: "To be kind with all beings – it's difficult. Start by thinking which one is closer or kinder to you. It's easier this way. Then, gradually – community, human beings. Then, all beings. Try to develop it this way". Nuns at Șag-Timișeni convent express the idea in a similar manner, emphasizing that, in a solitary/socially restricted environment, there are sufficient conditions for developing and offering compassion, too: "Who is inclined towards having a family embraces some responsibilities, raising their children with the fear of God and leading a Christian, moral life. With us, the target is the same – we have our responsibilities, too". Again, views in both traditions differ in terms of the point of reference (the teachings of Buddha on one side and the Bible on the other), but approaches towards becoming compassionate as a moral responsibility, taking available conditions into consideration, are similar.

Finally, *gratitude* was an element in the literature connected to compassion as a morally responsible attitude – in terms of feeling stimulated by thankfulness from the receiver, on one hand, and of the own gratitude as a motivator for becoming more compassionate, on the other. "In the Buddhist way of thinking, all sentient beings are our parents, they are equal to our mother and father. Just as we want to benefit them

in this life, try to have that feeling for every single sentient being – that is the essence of compassion", are the words of a Buddhist monk, who, again, refers to expanding a natural attitude and developing it based on the gratitude one has for his or her parents: "If you can help someone, help them now. I don't remember the previous life of my parents. I remember this life with them. But, possibly, you are my previous father or mother. This is the reason I should try to develop compassion"; "my mother was kind, helping me day by day. I need to repay her kindness in some way". Feeling grateful, appreciating the efforts of the other, *repaying* kindness are leitmotivs for feeling morally responsible and developing compassion. In the Christian Orthodox monastery, it is also about the inspirational grateful attitude of *others* – people who come here for advice (like we mentioned earlier) and who, in turn, are thankful for receiving support from the nuns. This (external) thankfulness inspires nuns to continue with their support: "After they leave, it depends on their faith. But many come back with a shining face, thanking us" (Interview Șag-Timișeni convent). God is at the center of the scale of values this time, too, with the conviction that He is the one to be related to – in terms of the grace we were talking about earlier: "If you have no love for God, it's hard to have compassion for people. Everything relates to the love for God and to his compassion for us" (Interview Șag-Timișeni convent).

Compassion and solitude / retreat

Coming to the most relevant part of the analysis, in terms of connecting compassion to solitude – first, there was the element of *communion*, as opposed to one-sidedness – emphasized in the literature in an apparently paradoxical sense (as being connected to solitude): People who make the choice of living in a monastery are not supposed to detach themselves entirely from society; on the contrary, the goal is to develop communion and positive feelings towards others "The Christian, in his essence, cannot live without love for others. The nun or monk embraces solitude and ties it to compassion. In the end, the monastery is a family, too", tells us the priest living at Șag-Timișeni convent. In his turn, one Buddhist monk explains the apparent paradox of being more generous in a solitary environment along the same line: "If I just carry on engaging in the world, I'm never going to *truly* be able to develop the qualities of my mind that will allow me to *really* help other people" (Interview Samye Ling monastery / respondent's own accentuations). Our dialogue partner further refers to

the already mentioned metaphor of the diamond being polished under conditions of solitude – when one would be "freed from distractions and focus on developing his or her mind, uncovering his potential, cleaning away the mud from the diamond" and discovering his true nature. The Christian Orthodox view can be summarized in a similar approach – again, with the difference that God is the one to relate to in every action, and with the specification that prayers are the main instrument for showing compassion. The Orthodox priest resumes it: "Staying in a monastery cannot be regarded as separate from compassion. Because it's about the path towards spiritual fruition. You are close to everybody, first of all by praying for them"; one of the nuns underlines the difference between solitude and isolation, stating that "in the monastery, you are not quite as detached from the world – we have people coming here all the time, asking for advice. We have different activities, go to the nearby town – it's not isolation". Again, the fundamental differences between loneliness / isolation, and solitude are to be ascertained here to the extent to which, as the Orthodox priest puts it, "we go to the monastery and become solitary not out of hate, but out of love for the world. Monks rediscover communion in the frame of an accepted solitude" (Interview Șag-Timișeni convent).

Second, in relation to compassion and solitude, there was the theoretical element of *relative* and *ultimate help* to be put forward; in this context, one Buddhist monk explains that, in the Tibetan tradition, there are long periods of retreat, of almost complete silence, inside a closed and restricted environment, to be undertaken by the one pursuing the state of Buddhahood. These periods are marked by study, meditation, self-analysis and understanding emptiness – the true nature of self and reality: "You do not need to be solitary in order to practice compassion, but retreat (although it may seem selfish) allows you to do it totally" (Interview, Samye Ling monastery). *Totally* would be associated with the *ultimate* kind of help, beyond the relative, concrete one – in terms of supporting the person to understand, process, interpret and learn from the particular causes that lead to his or her suffering. To this extent, the analogy with the cognitive behavioral therapy, mentioned in the corresponding literature subsection, is relevant in terms of focusing on the self as the main tool to be looked at when approaching the causes of suffering: "We are our own protectors and enemies" (Interview Samye Ling monastery). The ultimate help one can offer, after reaching a higher level of understanding reality in solitude, would lead to the receiver acknowledging his or her determinant role in relieving their own suffering. The psychological, scientific (experimental)

approach is, thus, completed by the spiritual (experiential) one – in the sense of recognizing (instead of ignoring) the real causes of suffering and approaching them correspondingly; according to the guiding principles of the Four Noble Truths. With Orthodox Christianity, God is the creator, protector and main relational point for believers; this vision of the supernatural force does not diminish the person's own responsibility towards reaching the ability to help people on an ultimate level – that is to teach and guide them towards becoming capable of overcoming suffering on their own.

Fig. 6 Monastics and lay volunteers take part in a training session at Samye Ling (photo)

In the same context, literature emphasized the importance of the *teacher* – Lama or Father confessor – for a nun or monk to gain the necessary knowledge and wisdom needed for expanding compassion: "Living in solitude is not enough for improving yourself; receiving teaching from someone who is experienced is very important", says one monk from Samye Ling – whereas another interlocutor from the same settlement

emphasizes this path in the sense of making solitude fruitful: "You need to spend time with your teacher, your Lama, to develop your practice, to get to a stage where *true* isolation becomes beneficial" (respondent's own accentuation). In the Eastern Orthodox environment, the Father confessor has a significant role, whereas, again, the relation to God is considered the most important one and is to be taken into account under these instructive circumstances, too; the priest from Șag-Timișeni indicates that going to the monastery is "like an exercise, a practice which cleans the mirror of your heart and by means of which you rediscover God. It's like a healing therapy for your soul".

The ability to become more compassionate during solitude was related to preventing and diminishing *anger*, *desire (greed)* and *ignorance*, too: "I have developed the idea that this is *my* watch and it's important. I will suffer a lot if it breaks" (Interview, Samye Ling monastery / respondent's own accentuation). The dialogue partner refers here to afflictive attachment to persons, as well as to objects – when we perceive them as possessions. This attitude can cause anger, too, which has to be avoided and prevented, in order for the mind to focus on the essential. For giving up desire or greed, he reinforces the Buddhist conduct of no harm and the view of no self. The last one, again, by looking at the empty environment with an "intermediate vision between nihilism and eternalism" (Interview, Samye Ling monastery). The particular view of no self, and the conduct of no harm, accompanying the solitary seeker towards less desire and anger / towards becoming compassionate, are related to avoiding or overcoming ignorance, too – as they involve not only knowledge and intelligence, but, primarily, the pursuance of wisdom.

5. Conclusions

This research aimed at studying solitude and compassion with focus on how they are understood, interpreted and lived in monastic environments. We used qualitative methods, conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nuns and monks from a Christian Orthodox convent in Romania and from a Buddhist monastery in Scotland. The goal was to reveal common elements and differences with reference to becoming compassionate while living in solitude.

First, in relation to compassion and *wisdom*, we focused on exhaustion and pride as obstacles on the road to becoming compassionate. According

to the literature, wisdom is necessary for exhaustion to not intervene in a disturbing manner. Preventing fatigue is perceived by nuns and monks from both settlements in connection to *prayer*. Regardless of whether we speak about God or about deities as the addressees, asking for support helps the monastic to avoid becoming exhausted. The potential obstacle of pride is also to be treated with discerning awareness and with a balancing wisdom, taking, as described in the literature, courage and humility into account. The main nuance to be considered here in terms of conceptualization is the focus on *humbleness* in Eastern Orthodoxy – slightly different from humility and implying dignity, courage and modesty. Statements extracted from the interviews stress knowledge and awareness (by overcoming ignorance) accumulated in a wise manner, as well as distancing oneself from ego-centricity, in order to avoid pride. Buddhist respondents also emphasized the allowance of becoming tired and feeling self-contended to a certain degree, as human natural tendencies.

Second, compassion was put into relation to *moral responsibility*, considering own satisfaction, instinctual generous acts, conditions for manifesting compassion, and gratitude. As mentioned above, own satisfaction is seen by respondents, especially from the Buddhist environment, as a natural thing to a certain degree, as long as it does not become a goal for somebody`s actions. As for the instinctual inclination to help, Buddhist dialogue partners perceive it mainly in terms of repaying kindness coming from persons who might have been our parents in previous lives, whereas Christian Orthodox interlocutors see it as a commandment from God, to be put into practice. Becoming compassionate by acknowledging that conditions to help are always available was another element emphasized in the scientific literature. Similarities appear here in terms of the focus on the *family* – expressed by the Orthodox nuns as a form of responsibility, alongside the one assumed in the monastery; by the Buddhist discussion partners – as the starting point towards expanding compassion. The perception of gratitude was slightly different – in terms of 1. the reference to God and His inspirational grace in the Christian context, and 2. gratitude *from us* as a form of repaying kindness (Buddhism), respectively *from others* as a motivation for us to perform further generous gestures (Eastern Orthodoxy).

Third, with respect to compassion and *solitude*, we emphasized communion, the relative and ultimate help, as well as the element of teaching. Results showed that – again, with the main difference in terms of the point of reference – Buddhist and Christian Orthodox nuns and

monks perceive solitude not as detachment, but as communion: going to the monastery "not out of hate, but out of love to the world". Avoiding distractions, focusing on developing your mind, your relationship to God or to Buddha, to others, and in the end to yourself means a "detachment from attachment" (Interview Samye Ling monastery), rather than from people; it is stepping beyond afflictive emotions. The ultimate help – at the superior level of the relative, concrete one – offered to the receiver, contributes to his or her understanding of the own role in alleviating suffering. Last, but not least, the teacher (perceived as more important by Buddhists) accompanies the solitary seeker on the difficult road towards achieving compassion and wisdom.

Resuming, results reveal factual similarities between the two philosophies, despite ideological differences – primarily in terms of the vertical vs. horizontal relation to the source of compassion (divine - human dichotomy): solitude does not make the seeker lonely, but contributes to increasing communion (to God and/or the others). "If nothing else, Christianity, Buddhism and the other religious traditions of the world are similarly functional human derivations, which have historically been enormously influential in helping large numbers of people to alleviate suffering everywhere" (Flescher & Worthen 2007: 203). Limitations of this study are mainly related to restricted samples and the choice of research fields according to existing conditions. However, the work was a qualitative, exploratory (rather than explanatory) one, and it was not constructed statistically, but pursued to extract and develop meanings on the topic of interest. Further approaches may take mixed methods into account and use larger samples, to investigate the topic more thoroughly and pursue generalizable findings. A focus can be put, for instance, on *balance* in relation to compassion in different religious traditions: carrying for everybody to the same, elevated extent vs. perceiving this goal as unachievable or unnecessary ("I cannot do it" and "I do not have to do it"); respectively, pursuing a total, unconditional type of compassion vs. self-centeredness.

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