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Breaking New Ground in Bellagio: Professor French's Rockefeller Grant Helped Pave the Way for Buddhist Law

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A 2004 article by Professor Rebecca R. French in the Buffalo Law Review lamented: “There are no established classic texts in Buddhist law, no substantial literature, no body of students in M.A. or Ph.D. departments, no conferences, no chairs.”

Well, not at that point. But in March of 2005, French organized and hosted the first-ever international Law and Buddhism Conference. The week-long event was presented under the auspices of the Law and Buddhism Project at UB Law School, a Baldy Center working group.

French applied for and received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to pay expenses for the conference, including travel expenses for scholars and other attendees coming to the Bellagio, Italy, site from underdeveloped countries. (The Baldy Center underwrote travel expenses for other participants.) The foundation grant also covered accommodations, food, supplies and services at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, near Milan, a castle-like building on the shores of Lake Como.

French has been in the forefront of efforts to establish Buddhist law as an academic discipline, and says that it was thrilling to be among so many scholars dedicated to this emerging field. “What was most inspiring,” she said, “is that every person there was not only sure that the subject of law and Buddhism exists, but excited about it and ready to get going on it. It was nice to be among people who do not have to be convinced that law and Buddhism exists.”

French’s 1995 book The Golden Yoke was the first substantial treatment of this discipline. She said that even though thousands of books have been written about the legal influences of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, debate continues even now over whether there is an identifiable Buddhist influence on legal doctrine.

Pamphlets from the conference, which attracted about 17 scholars, will result in several publications. It was organized around the topic of theft and how the crime is viewed in different traditions. “I said, ‘Let’s go super-simple and super-law,’” French said. “Theft is an issue in every legal and religious tradition everywhere.”

And so, she said, participants presented on such diverse topics as stories of theft in a monastery, Buddhist scriptures, called sutras, dealing with theft in Burma; the concept of karma in considering punishment for thieves in Thailand; and, in French’s presentation, the historical law codes of the Dalai Lama in Tibet regarding theft. The academic disciplines of the presenters included law, religious studies and Asian studies.

Buddhism, French notes, is very different in different areas of the world, with three main traditions: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. This diversity complicates the intellectual inquiry into the religion’s effect on legal systems, but, she said, such anthropological study is “one of the fundamental aspects of legal training today. This is an investigation into the religious and ethical foundations of legal systems.”

Students who become skilled at such analysis, French said, have a “heightened ability to have a conversation about the ethical and moral underpinnings of our legal system.” She hopes eventually to establish a center for law and Buddhism at UB.

The Bellagio setting, French said, only heightened the excitement of the conference. The restored friary has been redone in the Italian modern style, with much marble and beautiful stone work. And as in all of Italy, she said, “the food was wonderful.”

Rebecca R. French, Roger and Karen Jones Faculty Scholar and Professor, is reunited with the Dalai Lama.

Dalai Lama converses with scholars in the Law Library, above and below left.

At right: Makau Mutua, Floyd H. and Hilda L. Hurst Faculty Scholar and Professor; and David M. Engel, Director of International Programs and SUNY Distinguished Service Professor.
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