

## Religious rebels

Contributed by Mimi Hanaoka  
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Cultural practices and social mores often color or depending on your perspective, intrude upon religious practice, leaving some Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka in a bind.

One such nun, Bhikuni Kusuma, has taken on the title of *Bhikuni* which is the appellation accorded to an ordained Buddhist nun. While Buddhist nuns abound in the world, the controversy in Sri Lanka is that the dominant form of Buddhist thought in the country is Theravada Buddhism. These nuns were ordained in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. The two schools diverge on matters of both belief and practice, and the fact that the nuns have been ordained in the Mahayana tradition has resulted in friction and outright criticism.

The nuns find themselves in a catch-22: To be ordained as a nun in the Theravada tradition, a woman must be ordained by ten senior nuns. However, there are currently no nuns in the Theravada tradition.

Personal piety is clearly not the central issue in this controversy. It seems doubtful that the approximately 400 ordained nuns in Sri Lanka could pose a threat to the established clerical hierarchy, yet the moneyed religious establishment is wary of conferring legitimacy to a movement that has any potential of destabilizing its monopoly on religious authority. Unlike the Catholic tradition, Buddhism has no living individual, like the Pope, who wields ultimate religious authority. Given the inherent fragmentation of authority and the diversity of schools and modes of thought within the Buddhist tradition, to deny these women the right to ordination is to stunt the growth of a dynamic religious movement.

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