

ISABELLA TREE

Robes to Enlightenment

The Saffron Road: A Journey with Buddha's Daughters

By Christine Toomey

(Portobello Books 367pp £14.99)

Two headlines caught my attention recently: one, that an increasing number of women in Britain are becoming Catholic nuns; the other, that female clergy in the Anglican Church are demanding the right to refer to God as 'She'. Perhaps, at last, there are signs that the patriarchal hegemony of the Christian world-view is breaking down. Certainly, it seems that women continue to be attracted, perhaps more than ever, to a life of spiritual devotion.

The Saffron Road follows the path of women taking Buddhist orders, not just in the East, where Buddhism began 2,500 years ago, but in America and Europe too, including the UK, where the Buddhist movement is growing fast. The reasons for the women's calling and their renunciation of material comforts, marriage and children, and sometimes lucrative careers lie at the heart of this beguiling and often very moving book. There are, of course, stories of tragedy and loss: bleak and dark experiences that have compelled them, often at a very young age, to seek consolation and a deeper meaning to life. But to label all women who choose this spiritual path as victims is to belittle not just their choice, but also the nature of their calling. Christine Toomey encounters women of extraordinary courage and conviction who are motivated by something far more positive and uplifting: a longing to achieve their own enlightenment and a compassionate determination to help others achieve it as well.

There are hints of this in the origins of Toomey's own journey. As a foreign correspondent for the *Sunday Times* (she twice won Amnesty International's Magazine Story of the Year award) Toomey had reported on horrors that would render the most battle-hardened sleepless, most of them involving women: the mass rape of women and girls in Bosnia and Kosovo, the torture and mass murder of women in Guatemala, atrocities in the West Bank,

the suffocating restrictions endured by women in Iran. As she explains, 'It took more than two decades of covering the aftermath of war in hotspots around the world, looking outward rather than inward, for me to appreciate that any true understanding of conflict can only come from facing up to our own inner battles.'

Losing both her parents, sinking into 'a deeper sorrow than I have ever known', was the final catalyst. But there is no self-indul-

in her own right in Dharamshala – she has spent twelve years alone in a remote Himalayan cave, sleeping on her feet in a meditation box one metre square?

Many of the nuns, having travelled so far down the road to dispassion, are unaccustomed to speaking about themselves, and journalistic probing finds no traction. Instead, Toomey attunes herself to 'a different kind of listening', at the same time acknowledging that her way of asking questions of the world is also changing. It's a delicate process, enquiring into the world of the spirit, and one that Toomey performs with enormous sensitivity.

Strung together like prayer beads along the thread of her 60,000-mile odyssey is a cast of surprising renunciates: a Japanese bestselling author of erotic fiction, a



Kung Fu nuns at the Druk Amitabha Mountain nunnery

gence in the writing here. Toomey deals gently with her own experiences, elegantly weaving them into the narratives of others and pausing for reflection. Like the nuns she encounters, she leaves her ego at the nunnery door. She clearly finds it refreshing to spend time in places of healing and calm, among women who have found peace, but she is also aware of her own limitations. How can you begin to understand the realms of realisation a nun has reached after a lifetime's meditation, especially if, like Tenzin Palmo – the legendary English nun now living as a reluctant spiritual attraction

former Washington political aide, a Paris catwalk model, a one-time advertising executive in New York, Switzerland's first female airline pilot, a former banker in the City of London and an ex-*Top Gear* presenter. Their individual stories, compellingly told, reflect the universal need that ultimately defines us as human: to source loving kindness within ourselves.

Like other faiths, including Christianity and Islam, born essentially out of a principle of egalitarianism, Buddhism has, through the centuries, fallen prey to patriarchal domination. So it is heartening