



# The Golden String

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BULLETIN OF THE BEDE GRIFFITHS TRUST

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## BEDE'S PROPHETIC EDGE

(Part III) Robert Hale

### 4) Women and the Feminine Dimension

Bede's mother had an emphatically strong influence on him. Whereas his father had collapsed morally and psychologically with the loss of his career and savings his mother had courageously kept things going. Bede knew from his early years that the feminine dimension could mean not only nurture and love but strength and support. He sought to fulfill, throughout his life, her high ideals. On the other hand, it is the case that through his Oxford years "women hardly featured" in his life.<sup>1</sup> Bede felt later that the heavily intellectual demands of school and college further cut himself off from the feminine, the anima dimension within. However, he wrote: "My awakening to the beauty of nature and my feeling for poetry had come as a merciful release for this repression, but it had still left me unbalanced."<sup>2</sup> His early decision to enter the monastery meant the continuation and indeed intensification of a male context. Things changed significantly at Farnborough, when, as prior and guestmaster, he welcomed women as guests, and among these "there were some whose devotion became embarrassing."<sup>3</sup> A particularly positive influence was exercised by the Jungian analyst Toni Sussman, who had been a disciple of Jung himself. She witnessed to the importance not just of Jung, whom Bede came to deeply admire, but also of exploring Eastern religions. And this connection between Jungian thought and the East enabled him to intuit and even experience within the power of the feminine dimension, the anima as expressed in India and as necessary balance to the masculine, the West.<sup>4</sup>

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## BEDE GRIFFITHS' TEACHING ON MEDITATION

Meath Conlan

*In meditation the mind keeps wandering. We keep bringing it back, and it wanders again, and we bring it back again; and so it goes on, maybe for months or for years, until at last the mind becomes stabilised ... Thoughts go roving about in the head, but if we bring them down into the heart, that is, the centre of the person, there they come to rest.*

Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*

In the lush green mountain valleys of Victoria, not far from Melbourne, medical doctor Ian Gawler and his wife have built a beautiful rural retreat centre for people suffering from cancer. Here in an atmosphere of great beauty, patients learn meditation under Ian's guidance. He himself suffered cancer, which resulted in the amputation of his leg many years ago. It was, in part, through meditation that he battled his way back to health. Father Bede and Ian had met each other at *Shantivanam*, in 1988. Father Bede had read and liked Ian's books. He asked me to take him to visit the Gawlers, where he was asked to address patients and staff on the subject of meditation.

Father Bede divulged how essential meditation is in the lives of the community at *Shantivanam*. Before he described the techniques of meditation in any depth, he stressed the importance of becoming people of inner and outer peace. He described the process of helping the body to relax; bringing the body to a point of complete stillness and peace. He emphasized too that breathing is important. Breath is the mediator between the body and the mind. He described, for example, that when the mind becomes disturbed the breathing also becomes agitated. Father Bede spoke of his late friend Swami Amaldas whom he recalled as a great teacher of yoga at the *ashram*. He presented how Amaldas taught visitors to breathe in with the sacred word '*Jesu*' and breathe out with the sacred word '*Abba*.' The use of a sacred word or sound is an ancient practice in India. Bede pointed out to his listeners, that it goes back at least as far as Patanjali, who said in his *yoga sutras*, that yoga, the way of union with God, is "the cessation of the movements of the mind." He spoke of sitting and quietly repeating the mantra or sacred word. He said that of course the mind will wander off. When one realises this, one gently comes back to the sacred

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## ZEN REFLECTIONS ON A CHRISTIAN CONVERSION Julian Collette

*"Before mother and father were born, what is your Original Face?"* -Zen Koan

My circuitous journey of return to my native Catholicism, and to professing monastic vows as a Catholic monk, was largely influenced by the training I received as a Zen student. I had discovered Zen by accident; an acquaintance invited me to attend 'beginner's night' at a local Zen sitting group. The regimen was three fifteen-minute sitting periods, broken by ten-minute periods of walking meditation. I was instructed to count each exhalation to ten, and then return to one, starting over whenever I noticed that my attention had drifted. I was startled to discover that I could not even count ten consecutive breaths in all three sittings! Not only that, but the experience was excruciating, physically and mentally, as my mind seethed with all manner of uninvited thoughts and emotions.

Why did I stick with it? In large measure, it began with simple curiosity. As my practice began to stabilize, there was a sense of being on the threshold of discovery. What am I? What is this life? Zen practice offered a means of living these questions in a deeply intentional way, of remaining on that threshold without demanding adherence to predetermined 'answers'. With time, this curiosity grew more urgent, became a kind of mysterious homesickness, a gravitational pull that drew me irresistibly to sitting in silence. Aspiration arose in the tension between recognizing that my ordinary experiential consciousness was dominated by an endless round of mental-emotional habit patterns, and the emergence of an obscure intuition of a deeper reality or identity, what I might now call the awakening of faith. Several years after my humbling beginnings in the practice, invited by a Zen teacher who guided a weekend retreat I attended, I pulled up my tent stakes and moved into a residential urban Zen center in another state.

In part, to learn Zen is to learn a skill, one that involves the whole person, body, mind and spirit. It is a preparation for receiving insight into our original wholeness, our "original face before mother and father were born", and incarnating that insight. What does this mean in practice? To sit (as to live) attentive to the present moment, emptied of self-concern, without a conceived goal or thought of gain, letting go of all resistance, relaxing any constriction around particular points of reference; to "only don't-know", and to live and act in faith in the spontaneity that arises in that not-knowing. Zen practice is often best described in negative terms: as a not-doing, an unknowing, enlightenment itself being a non-attainment. But as one teacher put it, commenting on a verse of the Heart Sutra; "Ah! But you must *attain* this 'no attainment with nothing to attain!'" And that takes

great faith and determination. It is simplicity itself, but it is by no means easy, as all of our habit-patterns, all centered upon the delusional *idea* of a separate self, will forcefully rebel against the withdrawal of our attention and investment.

In spite of my strong affinity, however, the Zen Buddhist milieu remained somehow foreign to me, incomplete. There seemed to be a clear limit to my capacity to commit to this spiritual tradition. Sensing that limitation, after a little more than a year I left the Zen center, and with it any further ongoing connection with a Zen community, although I continued regular sitting practice on my own.

Neither did I have any explicit connection with the Catholic faith of my upbringing at that time. With few exceptions, I had never experienced a convincing, vital, transformational Christianity. I had found books such as Thomas Merton's *Contemplation in a World of Action*, and Kathleen Norris's *A Cloister Walk* inspiring, but their vision of Christianity was so far removed from the Catholicism I had been taught and raised with that it seemed altogether inaccessible. Ironically, despite its foreignness, Zen was far more accessible to me than was the Christian contemplative tradition. At its essence, Zen simply pointed to the immediacy of the present moment and said, "Pay attention!" And, it bore fruit. Zen practice was clearly bringing more joy, clarity and stability of mind into my life. So it was with some skepticism and ambivalence that I followed an intuitive hunch to turn into the driveway of New Camaldoli Hermitage as I happened upon it on a bicycle tour down the California coast. Running out of traveling money, I took a job that was offered me on the maintenance crew. Hesitantly at first, I began to attend some of the liturgical celebrations.

*"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you."*

Jeremiah 1:5

I was immediately surprised by how much resonance there was between what I had learned from my Zen training, and the living Christian contemplative tradition that I was experiencing for the first time. The most obvious point of meeting was with the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer. Since such contemporary teachers as Thomas Keating and Laurence Freeman were themselves influenced by Buddhist and Hindu sources in their re-articulation of Christian contemplation, I found in their writings a universal touchstone of entry that could embrace my prior experience and learning. Whether in a zendo or a Christian chapel, I could sit in silence, inwardly reciting a mantra, in self-surrender to the Infinite. I felt right at home sitting with the monks and lay people during the period of meditation after Vespers.

In Zen Buddhism, the student is identified with the Buddha; the awakened-nature of the Buddha and our own awakened-nature are 'not-two'. While the thought that there might be an analogous insight within the Christian tradition would have never occurred to me previous to my arrival at New Camaldoli, after my immersion in Zen it seemed so

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**Zen Reflections on Conversion** (Continued from page 2)

obvious: we are baptized into the dying and rising of Christ; we participate in the Divine nature; we are the Body of Christ; we have the mind of Christ; He breathes forth His Spirit within us and we are created anew, restored to our original wholeness in the image and likeness of God. We feed upon Christ in the Eucharist, and we become what we eat. "Now not I, but Christ lives in me."

Christ and I are 'not-two.' This became a kind of hermeneutical key that opened me to the profound mysticism that underlies the ordinary life of prayer and worship of the Catholic Church. Holy Scripture no longer merely spoke of events that happened centuries earlier, or of a Divine Person 'up there' in some distant heaven, but communicated a deeper meaning and truth underlying the historical facts of my own personal history and identity. My life's story is itself a participation in the history of salvation, my personhood a participation in the Divine Person of Christ. To read Scripture and participate in the Liturgy in the light of this unitive insight was to experience a whole new world of meaning and depth. While this world may have first been glimpsed through Zen as an obscure intuition, it was the Catholic monastic tradition that now unfolded this insight before me, through the sacramental language of sense, symbol, story, and ritual, as a rich pageant that could be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelt.

Zen's emphasis on the inter-relationship of all created reality further enriched my experience of the Catholic tradition. To see the whole unfolding universe, from the Big Bang to the formation of nebulae, galaxies, solar systems, planets; the emergence of life on our Earth; the births, lives and deaths of innumerable beings; sun and wind and rain; the lives and toil of countless generations of humans; the fertile soil with its plethora of microorganisms; to see all of this in a piece of bread, and this bread become the Incarnation of God. In self-surrender, we receive this totality, this Divine-cosmic unity, into our bodies. This cosmic Body of Christ, the inter-penetration of all that is, becomes conscious of itself in the human, in the Church, and that consciousness -Christ-consciousness- becomes the leaven that divinizes the whole. My personal body, the body of my most immediate relations, the ecclesial body of the Church, of humanity, of the planet and cosmos, are one Body, rippling out in ever-widening concentric circles of Divine embrace.

But what ultimately swept me off my feet in returning to Catholicism was a dimension that had no clear parallel in Zen; that is the dimension of an I-Thou relationship with the Divine Person. If there is one central piece that was missing for me in Zen, it was this relational dimension. It was my experience of encounter with this Divine Person, and the deeply intimate sense of being personally called into this relationship, that was the vital substance of my conversion. ■

**Teaching on Meditation** (Continued from page 1)

word. He assured the gathering that this is: "a process that may last for hours, though at the *ashram* our meditation periods are usually much shorter." He said this last with humour and a twinkle in his eye. Father Bede never made a show of great achievements in the spiritual life. He was modest and regarded the ashram as a place where ordinary people tried their best to do what they could. He was careful not to have people become worried if they did not measure up to this or that standard they may have heard or read about.

Late afternoon sun gleamed through the large windows. It seemed to me that every one of his listeners was deeply interested. He spoke about becoming still and calm, so as to be "more aware of the deeper levels of consciousness." Raising his hand to make the emphasis, he said:

Otherwise, one remains imprisoned in the merely rational mind. Look at the way we educate children today. They begin, so early, to develop their rational minds. Indeed, I learnt French when I was four, and Latin when I was seven, and Greek when I was nine, until I almost had a breakdown. Of course, it was then that something deeper had the possibility of emerging.

Without becoming too technical, Bede made reference to the three-fold nature of the human being as body, soul, and spirit. He asserted that to get beyond the mind is the great problem. In a way, he said, it is the mind that controls the body. Many diseases of the body are the product of the mind in stress and anxiety. His audience could understand this. Many shook their heads in agreement as he continued: "Healing takes place in the deeper self, beyond the mind. It is here that one becomes aware of a healing power, the spirit, the divine healer that is within everybody." To explain this more deeply and clearly he sat closer to the edge of his seat and went on:

The body is the physical organism, and our link with the whole of nature. The *psyche*, or soul, is the psychological organism with its hopes and thoughts, feelings, anxieties and disturbances. But beyond this is the *pneuma* - in India called the *atman*, the deep Self where one transcends the ego. It is the 'place,' if you like, of union with the transcendent, the spirit, the higher self.

After thirty years in the ashram, Bede understood and had personally integrated the finer points of Indian mysticism. He felt it desirable to share some elements of this with his Australian listeners. He said, "This deep peace, beyond name or form that is aimed at and experienced in profound meditation, is called '*saccidananda*,' being, consciousness, and bliss." Once again, he acknowledged that each person is at a different stage on the path. He reminded us that it is a matter of taking small steps first. But eventually those steps will lead to that deep centre beyond the mind. Once that happens, he pointed out, once we get beyond the separate ego, we have the chance of "coming to that place of deep

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## The Golden String

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### *Teaching on Meditation* (Continued from page 3)

happiness, wisdom and rest, called the deep Self.” Facing up to the reality of the human condition, he declared that from birth, of course, everyone is self-centred. It is natural and necessary. “But eventually,” he stressed, “one has to get beyond that separate self to Love, to the transcendent whole. It is divine Love that breaks through the ego. Let go of the ego, and your life is transformed. But it requires letting go, surrender; a kind of death really.”

Presuming that most of his audience was Christian, Bede spoke of the many Westerners who visit the ashram seeking peace of mind, yet they are often overwhelmed by mental turmoil. With deep concern he asserted that they had been taught to suppress ‘bad thoughts’ such as anger, fear, hatred, and desire, which from the advice of others they believe have to be pushed down. He sounded a cautionary note that the more one represses these feelings the more powerful and negative they become. He made the point strongly: “Feelings should never be repressed, but allowed into the consciousness. In my experience many Christians are plagued by feelings of sin, guilt and fear because of the training they have received. No feeling is so bad that it can’t be changed to a positive direction if allowed into the open consciousness.” Having given spiritual direction to ashram visitors for decades he was clear when he made the point that it is vital for someone on the spiritual journey to open up the ordinary personal consciousness to the deep self, the transcendent spirit, the higher self where, as he said: “Love may be found, and where Love may heal.” Drawing the gathering to a close he shared something quite powerful of his personal experience in the recent past.

Let me explain what I mean. I had the experience of a stroke in 1989. I was completely laid out and couldn’t speak or walk for over a week. But as I came round, I found my ego, my mental consciousness, had been knocked down. It was as though I had a blow on the head. It was an extraordinary experience. My ego consciousness was eradicated and, as the deeper self began to emerge, I saw everything embraced as a unity, as a harmony, instead of disunity and divided. I feel it was the opening of the deep Self, of Love. I was completely overwhelmed by this Love.

Bede then laughingly shared with his listeners: “I am advising people to have a stroke! Though of course there is a gentler way of doing it than that.” As if to reinforce the point he had just made, his voice softened, he leaned forward, and he said with great sensitivity to the particular audience he was addressing:

But quite honestly I believe that any serious accident, disease, or loss in life can be a means of breakthrough. One lives in one’s world in the family and at work in personal consciousness. Everything seems happy enough. But then, suddenly one is overtaken by tragedy, which can be a means of transformation. Everything seems appalling and fearful at the time. But if one ac-

cepts it as Providence and surrenders to the process, one finds the emerging of the deep Self. One looks back on the event, and sees that at such a time there seems to be a spiritual power entering one, a kind of enlightenment and healing . . . It takes different forms for different people, but underneath the seeming tragedy that befalls one, there is always the spirit of Love operating in and through it all for the good of the individual.

Aware of the number of caregivers and staff members who were accompanying some of the patients at his talk, and out of genuine compassion for each person there, he concluded his words,

Finally I want to say that I have found unselfish love to be one of the keys. If anyone is giving their life in unselfish love, it can open up this deep centre, this deep Self, and spiritual power enters one’s life. It is in everyone. This is the great journey of meditation: to surrender the ego, the ordinary personal consciousness with all its programs, fears and automatic reactions to the circumstances of life, and open in love to the deep Self, the transcendent. It is Love that will lead one to happiness and peace. This is my prayer for you all today.

*This narrative, recalling Father Bede’s teaching on meditation during his visit to Australia in autumn 1992, is a chapter from a book by Meath Conlan, entitled “The Wisdom of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Bede Griffiths.” The work is to be brought out by Templegate Publishers in October, 2006. ■*

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## CENTENARY EVENTS ABROAD

Since this year marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Bede Griffiths (December 17, 1904), a number of major commemorative events are being held around the world: in California (see page 5), in England, in Italy and in South India.

- **UK: *A Vision for the Twenty-First Century***, presented by the Bede Griffiths Sangha, July 20-23. Featured talks: Rev. Keith Ward, *The Perennial Philosophy*; Caitlin Matthews, *The Call of Double-Belief*; Timothy Freke, *Lucid Living*; Br. John Martin (Camaldolese of Shantivanam), *Father Bede’s Legacy*. Indian Music and Dance.
- **Italy: *The Journey of Faith Toward the Other***, Nov. 3-5, at the Monastery of Camaldoli. Talks by Fr. Bernardino Cozzarini (Camaldolese Prior General), Joseph Wong, Robert Hale and A. Tronti.
- **India, *Celebration of Bede’s Birthday*** (December 17), by monastic community and friends at Shantivanam Ashram in Tamil Nadu, South India, where Bede lived and taught for twenty five years. ■

**BEDE GRIFFITHS CENTENARY  
CONFERENCE IN CALIFORNIA  
Bruno Barnhart**

One of the several major events around the world commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Bede Griffiths' birth was the Conference organized by The Camaldolese Institute for East-West Dialogue in California: *Carrying Forward the Contemplative and Prophetic Vision of Bede Griffiths*. The first part of the Conference was a gathering of monastic men and women and of academic scholars at New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, from June 24-28. The Conference opened on Saturday evening (6.24) with words of welcome from Fr. Raniero Hoffman, Prior of New Camaldoli. The monastic community would continue to provide a context of prayer and of personal warmth through the following days. Then Fr. Bernardino Cozzarini, the new Camaldolese Prior General, spoke on "The Contemplative Experience of Fr. Bede." Fr. Bernardino had spent two years at Shantivanam with Father Bede in the 1980's.

The series of presentations and discussions began on Sunday morning with Dr. Bradley Malkovsky, from Notre Dame, speaking on Bede Griffiths' distinction between Cosmic and Historical Revelation. The distinction is of great theological and spiritual importance, since in Bede's view it corresponds roughly to the boundary line between Hindu (or, more generally, Asian) traditions and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The next paper presented was that of Br. John Martin Kuvarapu, Camaldolese monk of Shantivanam, "Bede Griffiths' Marriage of Wisdom and Prophetic Traditions." Since John Martin was not able to be present, his paper was read by Fr. George Nelliyanil, Prior of Shantivanam. These first two topics, it may be noted, are closely related: 'Cosmic Revelation' corresponds approximately to John Martin's 'Wisdom Tradition,' and 'Historical Revelation' to his 'Prophetic Tradition.' In the afternoon a 'round table' exchange of personal views of Fr. Bede included Fr. Bernardino, Sr. Pascaline Coff, Laurence Freeman and Cyprian Consiglio, who moderated the exchange.

Monday was a full day, with two presentations in the morning and two in the afternoon; each followed, as usual, by a prepared response and a discussion. Francis Clooney, S. J., spoke on "Bede Griffiths on the Vedanta," and Joseph Wong spoke on "Christ and Christian Advaita: Christology and Mysticism in Bede Griffiths." The afternoon began with Thomas Matus on "Bede Griffiths and Thomas Aquinas," followed by Beatrice Bruteau's presentation, "Circumambulating Arunachala: Transcendent Ground and Wonderful World." Since Dr. Bruteau was not able to be present, her talk was communicated by video. Evening prayer was in the style of Shantivanam.

On Tuesday morning, Bruno Barnhart presented "Hidden Noonday: Science, Mysticism and Christ in Bede Griffiths' *New Vision of Reality*." This was followed by Michael von Brück, "From Inclusivism to Pluralism: A Spirit-

ual and Theological Journey in the Footsteps of Bede Griffiths." In the afternoon, Dr. Joseph Prabhu presented "Trinity: Unity and Pluralism in the Thought of Griffiths and Panikkar." In the evening Fr. George presided at a Shantivanam Eucharist which was permeated and followed, participants observed, by an extraordinary quality of silence.

On Thursday morning Fr. Robert Hale presented "The Prophetic Dimension of Fr. Bede's Teaching and life," and then Sr. Donald Corcoran spoke on "India, Inwardness, and a Renewed Theology of the Holy Spirit." The Conference terminated with a general discussion in the afternoon and some brief concluding remarks by Fr. Bruno.

The Conference was remarkable, I think, for the level of objectivity that was reached during the talks and discussions: a more rounded picture of Fr. Bede resulted. This was largely due to the contributions of the 'outside' scholars, some of whom had encountered Bede Griffiths' work in depth for the first time as they prepared their presentations. The papers presented at Big Sur, after some final revision by their authors, will be published as a book under the editorial direction of Thomas Matus and Joseph Wong. Further information on this publication will appear in *The Golden String* when it is available.

On the following weekend, June 30 through July 2, the monastic participants presented their work to a larger audience (over one hundred persons) at Mercy Center, in Burlingame, California. This event began, once again, with a talk by Fr. Bernardino, followed by Fr. Thomas Matus, who spoke on "The Ashram as a Concept, an Ideal, An Experience." The talks were followed by question periods, rather than by formal responses and discussion. The round table and the Shantivanam Eucharist and Morning Prayer were celebrated once again for this group. The audience was remarkable for its warm interest in Father Bede and his thought, and for the intense and sympathetic attention that it gave to the presentations. Cyprian Consiglio wove bright threads of Indian music through both events — at Big Sur and at Burlingame — and led the participants in singing a number of the simple, repetitive chants of Shantivanam. Along with the ashram liturgies, these musical interludes brought both variety and much vitality to the gatherings.

If the Big Sur conference has made a substantial contribution to the progress of Bede Griffiths scholarship, the larger Burlingame event has, I believe, widened public appreciation of Fr. Bede and his work. Video CD's of the Mercy Center presentations will be available.

During these two conferences I have been struck again and again by the boldness of Bede's ideas, of those great intuitive leaps with which he bridged the distance between widely different spiritual and intellectual continents. While neither Father Bede nor anyone else has it all figured out, he has given us a vital new confidence in the ultimate unity in Christ of these antipodes: East and West, Wisdom and Science, History and Wisdom. He has brought us one precious step closer to an understanding — of the other, of the relationship, of the Whole. ■

**THE GOLDEN STRING**  
by Pamela Cranston

*I give you the end of a golden string;  
Only wind it into a ball.  
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,  
Built in Jerusalem's wall.*

William Blake

It takes some people a lifetime  
to find the golden string,  
to hold the slender thread of light  
in your open hand, gently  
as a baby bird, feeling  
the pulse of life deftly  
pulling you forward.

Some people, of course, have never heard  
of the golden string, or if heard,  
have not believed it  
and shut their ears  
to the nonsense of the unknown.  
Some have longed and hoped for it  
but have so clogged the halls  
of their heart, they never see clear  
to find it.

No one can give you the golden string.  
You must search it out yourself.  
You must learn to let go, to free fall  
into that circle of solitude  
called waiting.  
Even your mastery and your prayer  
will burden you.

Ambition  
snaps the thread instantly.

When you die, if you want  
you can catch the end  
of the golden string  
when it passes by, over and over,  
and you will discover  
it is the Golden River  
you've been walking on  
all along. ■

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**online** rather than also receiving it by mail?

If so, please let us know at [brn2@earthlink.net](mailto:brn2@earthlink.net) ■

**Bede's Prophetic Edge**

(Continued from page 1)

When Bede began planning for his trip to India, he wrote to a friend: "I want to discover the other half of my soul."<sup>5</sup> And in reflecting back on this yearning later he wrote:

I had begun to find that there was something lacking not only in the Western world but in the Western Church. We were living from one half of our soul, from the conscious, rational level and we needed to discover the other half, the unconscious, intuitive dimension. I wanted to experience in my life the marriage of these two dimensions of human experience . . . the masculine and feminine. I wanted to find the way to the marriage of East and West . . . [Indians] live from the unconscious, but it is the human unconscious, what Jung has called the anima as opposed to the animus. Every human being is both masculine and feminine.<sup>6</sup>

Not everyone is enthused by these Jungian categories, nor by Bede's way of easily lining up the East with a set of 'feminine' characteristics and West with 'masculine.' Trapnell notes this, but argues that "such categories functioned for Griffiths more as symbols, in the sense of 'events' . . . than as the ciphers of objective theory."<sup>7</sup> Trapnell goes on to argue, significantly for our thesis, that Bede used these categories to bring dimensions together "in a pro-

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**THE GOLDEN STRING ONLINE!**

We are happy to announce that each issue of **The Golden String** is now being posted — complete — on the Bede Griffiths website: [www.bede.griffiths.org](http://www.bede.griffiths.org) Back issues, from the beginning of the Bulletin in 1994, will also be found on the website. The format of the posted issues is .pdf, which requires that Adobe Reader be installed on your computer. Many of you will already have this program installed. Those who do not can download it free of charge from [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com) — a link to this site will be found on the Bede Griffiths website.

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Teresa Matyniak, our very competent webmaster, has taken the website in hand once again, and is making other significant improvements. We urge you to look at the website again, if you have not done so recently. Current and back issues of the newsletter of the Bede Griffiths Sangha (UK) are available there, and a number of new articles are being added to the Wisdom Christianity section. ■

*Bede's s Prophetic Edge* (Continued from page 6)

phetic fashion”<sup>8</sup> In any case, we can note that Bede’s commitment to women’s rights and to the importance of the feminine, in society and in the Church, was very deeply rooted indeed, in what he felt to be the collective unconsciousness of all of humanity.

In India he was again surrounded by disciples, among whom women played a particular importance, such as Judy Walter, Eusebia, Asha Paul, etc.<sup>9</sup> And when he journeyed abroad, and through his correspondence, he entered into deep friendship with profound women such as Sr. Pascaline Coff.<sup>10</sup> For someone who had lived most all his life in the context of male communities, the extent to which Bede could relate to women as teacher but also as friend and learner was remarkable. They undoubtedly helped him in his “vision of the church as ‘woman,’” and his identification of the Holy Spirit as the ‘feminine expression of God’” as well as his prophecy of the inevitable emergence in Western church and society of the feminine<sup>11</sup> And it should be noted that this enthusiasm of women for Bede has continued after his death; symptomatic of this is the fact that the two biographies of Bede have been written by women, Kathryn Spink and Shirley Du Boulay. In any case, Bede not only critiqued a past and present clerical and social paternalism and indeed misogyny, but prophetically proposed for women a new heaven and a new earth. He wrote for instance:

One of the characteristics of this new culture would be its feminine aspects. For three thousand years the world has been dominated by patriarchal cultures. . . We have now reached the limit of this masculine culture, with its aggressive, competitive, rational analytic character. We are moving now into an age where the feminine principle will be valued. . . The Christian religion has developed an entirely masculine concept of God. We always speak of God as Father, and of the incarnation of the Son. . . even the Holy Spirit. . . we have conceived normally in masculine terms. . . . In the Tantric tradition, which derives from the ancient matriarchal culture, the mother aspect of God is dominant. In that tradition the whole universe is seen to derive from the Mother and all worship is offered to the mother. That is precisely the opposite of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. We may expect therefore a corresponding development in Christian theology recognizing the feminine aspect of God and the place of women in the ministry of the church.”<sup>12</sup>

That last line evidences how freely Bede moves from the speculative and theological to specific implications for Catholic practice. In fact Bede “welcomed married clergy and ministries for women.”<sup>13</sup>

But it was just three years before his death that Bede experienced his most profound, mystical “breakthrough to the feminine.”<sup>14</sup> It came through an “inspiration,” and then an overwhelming “experience.” It reminds us, in terms of

our topic, that the prophet is one *called* from above, even *lifted* beyond the ordinary to a transcendent level that puts everything in a radically new perspective. One recalls the experience of the prophet Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him . . . and one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.’”<sup>15</sup>

Bede had a kind of analogous experience, except that his was not of the enthroned Lord but rather of the divine Mother. And, consequently, the overwhelming sense of the experience was not that of divine holiness, but of divine love:

I had some breakfast and then felt sort of restless, disturbed, not knowing quite what was happening. The inspiration came suddenly again to surrender to the Mother. It was quite unexpected: ‘Surrender to the Mother.’ And so I somehow made a surrender to the Mother. Then I had an experience of overwhelming love. Waves of love sort of flowed into me. Judy Walter, my great friend, was watching. Friends were beside me all the time. I called out to her, ‘I’m being overwhelmed by love.’”<sup>16</sup>

Bede continued,

It was an overwhelming love, so strong that I could not contain myself. I did not know whether I would survive. I knew ‘I’ had to die, but whether it would be in this world or another, I did not know. At first I thought I would die and just be engulfed in this love. It was the ‘unconditional love’ of which I had often spoken, utterly mysterious, beyond words.<sup>17</sup>

Bede, like Isaiah, was now established ‘from above’ in a radically new, mystically experiential way, a way though illumining the divine Feminine. From this new transcendent perspective all misogyny, all clerical and social paternalism appeared the more ridiculous and illusory. Bede’s prophetic witness on behalf of women and the feminine became the more emphatic,<sup>18</sup> in his words and writings and very being, because rooted from above, in a God who was Lord, but for Bede more profoundly divine Mother.

### 5) Gays

In his early home life “sex was never mentioned . . . This reserve was not unusual in those days. Young people were brought up never to discuss sex, religion, or any matters that might lead to controversy . . .”<sup>19</sup> Later, when Bede had become much more forthcoming about the topic, also through the influence of Jungian and Tantric teachings, as well as the writings of D.H. Lawrence etc., “he said thoughtfully to a homosexual man asking for his advice, ‘When I was young I might have been a homosexual’”<sup>20</sup> Did he wish to imply by this enigmatic comment that he had once had some gay inclinations but had become emphatically heterosexual?

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Or did he mean that there was a time he might have become actively gay, but through his spiritual practice he had sublimated his sexual urgings into the spiritual? In any case, du Boulay writes: "his sexual feelings, which caused him great anguish and which he was eventually to speak about quite freely, were never to find physical expression: all his energy was directed towards his search for God."<sup>21</sup>

Some psychological theories trace a gay orientation to an early family context involving a dominant mother and a psychologically absent father; that certainly obtained for Bede. From the family context he went into a virtually male-only world that perdured for years. Christ's Hospital was a school for boys only; one boy of his class later recalled him as "beautiful to look at, very tall, very charming."<sup>22</sup> His housemaster dismissed him as "one of those useless Grecians."<sup>23</sup> English writers such as Evelyn Waugh have lamented the "hot house" atmosphere of English all-male public schools, but there is no evidence that Bede got caught up in problematic relationships. In Oxford he did very intentionally avoid the "athletes" and joined instead the "aesthetes." Oscar Wilde became one of his "patron saints"<sup>24</sup> . . . . Women students, as noted above, were virtually absent from Bede's circle, but studies and intense male friendships seemed to compensate. Not that it was easy for Bede. Du Boulay writes: "The transformation of passionate feelings, especially those of a sexual nature, was something with which Alan had already been struggling during his time at Oxford."<sup>25</sup> His older brother Dudley endeavored to "further his sexual education and together they went to Paris, visiting the cabarets and music halls of Montmartre, in the . . . company of a . . . friend of Dudley's who lived with a prostitute . . . nor did the situation give [Bede] any particular *frisson*, but it did satisfy his curiosity."<sup>26</sup> He came to realize that he had been repressing the instinctual and sexual and focusing intensely on studies. He later commented: "My awakening to the beauty of nature and my feeling for poetry had come as merciful release for this repression, but it had still left me unbalanced."<sup>27</sup> He added later, in a conversation with his first biographer Kathryn Spink, that intense friendship was one relationship in which the sexual could be implicitly present but controlled, albeit with struggle and suffering, in a larger, intellectual and spiritual context.<sup>28</sup>

When he was 24 he and two of his closest Oxford friends undertook what they referred to as their "Great Experiment," the "Adventure of Living" in a small Cotswold cottage near Eastington, sharing the one bedroom in an intense fellowship that marked "a stage so important that all three referred to it continually until the end of their long lives."<sup>29</sup> The experiment lasted the better part of a year, but concluded when divisions seemed to be arising. Bede just a couple of years later acknowledged the intensity of his own emotions when he wrote to one of the two: "Oh Martyn, what torments I must have inflicted on you and Hugh . . .

you don't know what a diabolical spirit there is within me, and it is intolerably hard to fight because it constantly appears in the form of an angel of light. But I am beginning to know it better and to order my life accordingly."<sup>30</sup> Later their memories had mellowed, and Bede wrote of the experience in *The Golden String* as "the decisive event in all our lives."<sup>31</sup> Du Boulay notes that the experience was, over the subsequent years, "to bind them together with hoops of steel."<sup>32</sup> Bede acknowledged later to Spink "I would have a very deep friendship with somebody. It was really an immensely deep love. It always started in the spirit, then it became emotional and always the sex element came into it and how to deal with that was the problem for years and years and years."<sup>33</sup> Spink herself adds: "The struggle created a tension and through tension, Father Bede would assert, one grows, but the gulf between intellectually grasped theory and integrated practice was a wide one and at Eastington, it is probably true to suggest, Alan Griffiths suffered for it."<sup>34</sup>

Such intense friendships were to bloom again in Bede's later years. Towards the end of his life he wrote to a young Indian man for whom he felt a particularly deep bond, "One thing I realize. I need your presence very much. It is not only the thought of you, but your presence, which is somehow always with me, as it is part of the presence of God to me."<sup>35</sup> He saw this bond as mystical, and wrote to the same person later: "The Holy Spirit, Christ in us, pierces through every level of our being & makes us one in this ultimate ground. I feel it with you as something quite definite, there is a hidden bond beyond our conscious selves to which we have always to return, & this is true in measure of all of us. This is what it means to love with the totality of one's being."<sup>36</sup> Du Boulay comments that Bede "eventually realized that the hours he and Russill spent together could indeed lead to suspicions of a homosexual relationship between them . . . he wrote of this possibility with a transparent honesty . . ."<sup>37</sup> Bede himself did write to Russill: "There is no doubt that it is a human love involving one's whole being—body, soul and spirit—and I have no doubt that there is a sexual element in it, as there is certainly a deep human affection. But the source of this love is in the 'spirit', the point at which we are both open to the love of God, and this is the controlling force in our relationship."<sup>38</sup> Du Boulay comments: "through loving one person totally and uniquely, Bede had learned about love itself in a new and more personal way,"<sup>39</sup> and she notes that that love extended to include others.

In the context of all this, we possibly will not be surprised that Bede was not inclined to be homophobic. He had had gay friends from the time of Oxford; one, Richard Rumbold, also Catholic, suggested to him in his Pluscarden period that he write an autobiography—which he did, *The Golden String*.<sup>40</sup> It was particularly Bede's later spiritual integration of his own sexuality that helped other gay men who came to him for help.<sup>41</sup> Andrew Harvey, author of several books in-

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cluding *Essential Gay Mystics*, was a close friend of Bede's, there with him toward the very end. Du Boulay notes that "Andrew Harvey was another person who felt that the most profound things he ever heard about sexuality came from Bede, partly because he never felt he was in the presence of someone who had done 'a horrible act of repression upon himself.'"<sup>42</sup> And Harvey himself affirmed regarding Bede: "I think he had a very great capacity for love, which took up a great deal of that sexual energy."<sup>43</sup> And of the end period of Bede's life Harvey noted the "totally tender love, which is what he was giving to everyone."<sup>44</sup>

Given all this, it is not entirely surprising that Bede took positions that are even today quite advanced indeed regarding homosexuality. As du Boulay notes, "He wanted a church . . . that had a positive attitude to the body and to sex and that felt, as he did, that homosexual love was as normal and natural as love between people of the opposite sex."<sup>45</sup>

Many knew Bede as the gentle, loving Christian guru. But there was another side to him which, when provoked, could engage in heated debate, even have recourse to English irony and sarcasm. Laurence Freeman mentions once being concerned when a hostile evangelical fundamentalist attacked Bede. "Thinking to spare Father Bede the upset of the conflict, I intervened to lead him away. But he stood his ground and began to engage the hostile invective with his own fervent and reasoned arguments. As I saw the reaction, I soon realized it was not Father Bede but his opponent I should be protecting."<sup>46</sup>

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published in 1992 a statement on a particular aspect of the gay issue: "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-discrimination of Homosexual Persons." The document argued that though it is well and good to defend the basic human rights even of homosexuals, full equality cannot be claimed for them when it comes to key public services. Bede sent a response to the *National Catholic Reporter* which they happily featured, full page, with a large photo of Bede. His piece is entitled significantly "For Those without Sin," but he begins by seemingly affirming the Vatican position entirely:

I am sure that all those who believe that the church should uphold a strict Christian morality will rejoice at the publication of the new document on homosexuality, which calls for a ban on all those who make profession of this vice and for action against them in regard to admission to the public services, especially schools and the military.<sup>47</sup>

But then he throws his curve ball:

But why stop at homosexuality? Should not the church be equally severe against all those who offend against public morality, particularly, for instance, against those who frequent brothels. But then there are

the innumerable people today who are known to be living in sin, that is, couples living together without the bond of marriage. But then there are those married people who are known to be unfaithful to their marriage vows.<sup>48</sup>

And he continues, urging church severity in all such cases. Exclude all such people from public service!! And then he concludes abruptly with the decisive brief paragraph, that carries everything from the level of condemnation and moralism to a higher plane of Christ's Gospel. Bede is offering prophetic criticism of the given, but also proposing a new horizon of grace and reconciliation:

There is a danger, however, that this [exclusion of so many] would seriously affect recruitment for the armed services and also schools and hospitals. This could lead to a severe crisis, which might force the church to attend to the saying of the gospel: 'Let one who is without sin among you cast the first stone.' This would change the whole situation. Instead of upholding a legal morality like that of the scribes and Pharisees, the church might then be seen to be preaching the gospel of Christ.<sup>49</sup>

### Notes:

1. Shirley Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, p. 18
2. *Golden String*, p. 45.
3. Du Boulay, 92.
4. *Ibid.*, 90.
5. *Golden String*, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*, 9.
7. J. B. Trapnell, Bede Griffiths: *A Life in Dialogue*, p. 199
8. *Ibid.*, 199.
9. See Du Boulay, p. 219 and *passim*. See the video, "A Human Search," which records the testimonies of several women in India regarding Bede.
10. Du Boulay, p. 200 and *passim*.
11. *The One Light*, p. 433.
12. *A New Vision of Reality*, pp. 294-95.
13. Du Boulay, p. 254.
14. Du Boulay, title of her chapter 18, pp. 227ff.
15. Isaiah 6:1ff.
16. Bede, quoted in the book *A Human Search*, ed. John Swindells, p. 89, and in du Boulay, p. 230.
17. Bede, quoted in Judy Walter, *Journal*, and in du Boulay, p. 230.
18. See for instance the subsequent chapter of Du Boulay, "You Cannot Put a Prophet in a Cage," p. 239ff. It is interesting that the two biographies of Bede published so far were written by women, Kathryn Spink and Shirley Du Boulay.
19. Du Boulay, p. 5.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. 12
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 35f.
27. *Golden String*, p. 45.
28. K. Spink, *A Sense of the Sacred*, p. 74.
29. Du Boulay, pp. 40f.
30. See *Ibid.*, p. 52.
31. *Golden String*, p. 92.
32. Du Boulay, p. 54.

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33. Spink, p. 74.
34. Ibid.
35. Du Boulay, p. 236.
36. Ibid., p. 237.
37. Ibid., p. 223.
38. Quoted in Du Boulay, Ibid.
39. Ibid., p. 237.
40. Cf. Spink, pp. 106-107; cf. also Du Boulay, p. 100.
41. Cf. Du Boulay, p. 192.
42. Ibid., p. 193.
43. Ibid.
44. Quoted in Du Boulay, p. 262.
45. Du Boulay, p. 254. Du Boulay refers, on p. 287 note 40, to an unpublished manuscript by Bede entitled *On Homosexual Love*.
46. Laurence Freeman, *Christian Meditation Newsletter*, Dec. 1993.
47. Bede Griffiths, "For Those Without Sin," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 14, 1992, p. 20.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid. ■

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