



The Golden String

Vol. 8 No. 1

BULLETIN OF THE BEDE GRIFFITHS TRUST

Summer 2001

THE CHURCH AS MATRIX Wayne Teasdale

The New Context

Since the Second Vatican Council the religions have been coming out of their self-imposed isolation, and in situations of encounter, have discovered common ground. This common ground is primarily a matter of those serious, practical issues that face us all: injustice, abuse of human rights, economic exploitation and inequity, the pursuit of peace, promoting educational and employment opportunities, the desperate plight of refugees, women and children in certain areas of the world.

Through interfaith organizations like the Parliament of the World's Religions, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the Temple of Understanding, the World Congress of Faiths, and the United Religions Organization, the members of the various religions are discovering bonds of community. This profound and growing sense of community is the basis of the new relationship evolving between and among the religions themselves. It is the impetus for them to pursue collaboration together on the above critical issues.

This experience of community among the traditions leads to an enthusiastic openness to the spirituality present in each one of them, and an eagerness to explore spiritual life and practice across traditions, a unique phenomenon of our time, a phenomenon we can call *interspirituality*. *Interspirituality* is not a new form of spirituality, nor an overarching synthesis of what exists, but reflects a willingness and determination to taste the depth of mystical

(Continued on page 3)

WHERE THE STRING WINDS THROUGH THE OUTBACK Douglas Conlan

In his autobiography, *The Golden String*, the late Bede Griffiths spoke movingly of an experience when he was in his final year at school. It was while walking along in the evening, as the sun was setting over the playing fields: "I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and...I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before." It was as though he had unexpectedly entered the Garden of Paradise and in that moment he recalled, "A lark rose suddenly from the ground...poured out its song above my head, and then sank, still singing to rest." At this point he remembered the "feeling of awe" that overcame him, such that even the sky seemed "but a veil before the face of God."

For many years Bede Griffiths tried to recapture and express that experience, yet he realised that at best he could only suggest what this decisive event meant to him. It was from this point on that he began to see what Wordsworth indicated when he described the world with "the freshness of a dream." Even the smallest details of nature drew him beyond himself and helped him become aware that "We are no longer isolated individuals in conflict with our surroundings; we are parts of a whole, elements in a universal harmony."

Years later, he created a small garden in front of his small single room mud hut at Shantivanam ashram in South India. The yellows, reds, whites and mauves of the myriad flowers and their bright green stems and leaves threw sutras of colour against the dull ochres of his hut. They led the eye up to the glassless window, from which Bede would gaze in contemplation, appreciating the beauty of his garden plot and perhaps waiting for his next visitor. Or he might be writing a letter to one of his many friends. He told me that he created this colourful space because it reminded of the way the natural entanglements and riots of colour in a garden constantly surprised him with the sense of unity to be found there. For him a garden provided opportunities for breaking the daily routine and of adjusting to some new experience, and anything that can do that, he said, is "a message bearer" to the soul, allowing us to see "as though a veil has been lifted, [seeing] for the first time behind the façade, which the world has built around us." My memory of Father Bede was that he spent every part of each day

(Continued on page 2)

Inside This Issue

Bede Griffiths and the Shape of Wholeness <i>Bruno Barnhart</i>	5
Judson Trapnell, <i>Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue</i> <i>reviewed by Bruno Barnhart</i>	5
News	8
Coming Publications	8
Our Third Pilgrimage to South India <i>Russill and Asha D'Silva</i>	9

The Golden String

String in the Outback (Continued from page 1)

cultivating an inner environment for deeper experience of the human mystery of that sense of “belonging to another world [and that] there is another dimension to existence.” Yet this that was being revealed to him was always just beyond words.

Over twenty years ago I was posted as pastor to a remote region of Western Australia. This happened at a time in my life when I was enjoying what I judged to be some success and popularity in my work. I was still in my twenties and energetic. I moved around — even nationally — had sizeable congregations, thought my work and myself important. I laughed a lot and I liked skimming along on the surface of life. As the reality of my new appointment sank in, I became disconcerted in contemplating the looming prospect of isolation and loneliness along the Rabbit Proof Fence! It was then, thanks to the interest and support of friends, that I discovered Dom Bede Griffiths’ books, and started to write to him at his ashram in India. I was surprised that he took my lack of ease at being sent to the bush seriously and addressed my concerns with sympathy, grace and intelligence.

While he said I should plan to one day “come and spend a year with [him] at the ashram,” he also said that in the meantime I should seek “ways of discovering a sense of unity and meaning in the day-to-day experiences” of nature’s wildness in my part of the world. He exhorted me to go and listen to crows cawing and blowflies droning; and the sounds of silence. He urged me to stop and watch intently the heat hazes shimmering on the vast horizon, ancient land-forms that host surprising flora and fauna, sun-baked soil that becomes unfriendly for seeds to take root in, floods that wash away hopes and dreams. And to get a sense of the farm families who long to find their own sense of meaning in the intense isolation of the Australian Outback. He recalled the “golden string” of William Blake’s poem, and he reminded me to follow up the daily visions and sounds of silence that I had seen and inwardly heard in the “wilderness” of my parish. He urged me to keep this subtle presence in mind when thrown back again into self-doubt and confusion, “to live its light and shape [my] life by its law, [for this] is to wind the string into a ball, and find [your] way out of the labyrinth of life.”

The down-to-earth practicality of the vision imparted through his letters and books struck and moved me. But I don’t think I did so well at putting his exhortations into practice. I was far too focused on myself — on what I deemed I’d lost in another life and another place — to be really present to the wilderness around me or to its people. At this time I was still groping toward the light and still inwardly unfree. Yet, here and there, there were signs that Bede’s vision was having an effect.

In those days I discovered a new and exciting author — Annie Dillard, and her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In it she seemed to address an aspect of the cosmos

in ways that were only to make sense many years later — when I appreciated my own freedom to be truly present to the mystery of who I am, and who others are. I pondered Dillard’s words:

The point of the dragonfly’s terrible lip, the giant water bug, birdsong, or the beautiful dazzle and flash of sun-lighted minnows, is not that it all fits together like clockwork — for it doesn’t particularly, not even inside the goldfish bowl — but that it all flows so freely wild, like the creek, that it surges in such a free, fringed tangle. Freedom is the world’s water and weather, the world’s nourishment freely given, its soil and sap ...

Soon after reading this book I took myself off on a lone trek through the great Fitzgerald River National Park on the south coast fringes of my parish, facing the Southern Ocean. So barren of natural nutrients is this part of the world, that the plants that had adapted themselves to survival did so in a way that would not be possible outside this bleak and harsh environment. Trekkers like me would, for instance, chance upon great, fire coloured, fourteen foot high *Hakea Victoriae*, and countless varieties of exquisite *Verticordiae*, so prolific, so rare and newly discovered that many of them were registered merely as numbers.

I found, here and there, little outcrops of *verticordiae oxilepsis*, which, due to their reliance upon only the most utterly depleted soils, might be found after gruelling hikes through rough, breakaway country, torn trousers and scratched, bleeding legs. These tenacious little survivors looked more ancient, more wizened, more distinguished and wise than any Japanese bonsai I have ever laid eyes on! I was fascinated and they drew me back again and again in forays of discovery that had as much to do with my inner search as it did with merely observation and delighting in the many natural aspects of this unique wilderness. To have just one glimpse of these small ecosystems, these tiny colonies of witness to the wild, wind-eddied, sun-hardened, hopelessly depleted, marvellously free, fringed tangle of that world was worth all the effort of the journey.

In a way, those Lilliputian trees became a metaphor for myself: then, in my situation as pastor of a strange, remote and fragile part of the world, and now, as one who is able to look back on those days with affection and thanks for the lessons learned. The mellowing of the years and the acceptance of the present moment, and of who I am and what I have — and don’t have — intimate that I have also survived by some free grace of the tangled cosmos in my favour. As Annie Dillard wrote, “Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.”

Nature — or God, if you prefer — has a way of trimming here, denying soil-nutrients there, presenting sometimes a boulder in just the “wrong” place, economising or encouraging growth — in due season and not before — and all this is unfolding mysteriously, consciously unaware though I be. I look back and feel grateful for the “training”

(Continued on page 3)



The Golden String

String in the Outback (Continued from page 2)

days on the breakaway ridge, the country on both sides of the Rabbit Proof Fence. And, though it has been not without finding myself suddenly awake in Dante's "dark wood and wholly lost," there have been freedoms granted — or won — in the tangled scheme of things. I have a sense that it has been better to have faced and entered the darkness and chaos rather than to have stood back and denied that it is or should be there. I recall hearing a wise saying from a Montagnard elder in Vietnam: "It is not so much the mountains, rocks and rivers that impede our progress, but rather our attending to those mountains, rocks and rivers."

Father Bede assured me that the individual inner, journey of discovering one's own spirituality is, as he put it, "Something that calls for all our energies, and involves both labour and sacrifice,...each one approaches it from a different angle and has to work out his own particular problem. Each alike is given a golden string and has to find his own way through the labyrinth." If, while walking down the path near his hut from around 2:30 in the pre-dawn, I glanced into his room, I would see him sitting deep in contemplation as part of his several hours of preparation for the morning Eucharist. Father Bede lived, for twenty five years, his simple life at Shantivanam ashram, all the while trying to break through the rational mind, to the Beyond. It was his spirituality, and it was only through the "golden string" of suffering a stroke in the last couple of years of his life that he "won through" the labyrinth. As a result, one day only a few months before he died, Father Bede said to his listeners, "I have learnt more in the last two years than in all of the rest of my life to this point."

My appreciation of the metaphorical dimension of the kingdom of *verticordiae* has grown over the years. They are among the symbolic cornerstones of my spirituality. They retain their "freshness of a dream," they are a "golden string" that helps me find my way through the labyrinth of my life, especially when crises occur. They teach me, as Father Bede's experience of the lark rising from near the hawthorn bush taught him that "We are no longer isolated individuals in conflict with our surroundings: we are parts of a whole, elements in a universal harmony." ■

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The Church as Matrix (Continued from page 1)

life in other traditions.

This phenomenon is one of the definitive characteristics of our age. We see it in the work of Robert Kennedy, SJ, Willigis Jäger, OSB, Ruben Habito, and Susan Postal, who though devout Christians — the former three Catholics, the latter, an Anglican — are also Zen *roshis*, or spiritual masters of Zen meditation practice. In relation to Hinduism, there are the examples of Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, OSB, Bede Griffiths, OSB., the Cistercian Francis Mahieu, and the cross-cultural theologian, Raimon Panikkar, himself the product of a Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother. There are countless others as well who are immersed in this fascinating development in these and the other traditions.

Interfaith encounter, interreligious dialogue, the emergence of interspirituality, and collaborations of the religions, whether through interfaith organizations, or more directly in bilateral relationships, are coming into greater and greater prominence, becoming a permanent pattern of a new global culture.

The New Context and the Role of the Church as Matrix

This is the context that the Church faces at the dawn of the third millennium, a movement in history the Spirit is inspiring, opening doors hitherto closed, forging relationships at one time forbidden, leading us to a horizon of a new universal civilization in which the Church has a central place as the matrix. As the matrix the Church would be a welcoming place for all the religions, an ecclesial vision of the nature of the Church *ad extra*. As a matrix the Church is a mother who offers her womb for the development of this new form of cultural and spiritual life to take shape in ways that are beneficial to the whole of humankind and the Church herself.

The Church as the matrix becomes the generatrix of a civilization of love, as Paul VI put it, a civilization with a heart, one motivated and governed by considerations of kindness, mercy, compassion, love, and nonviolence, a civilization in which political, economic, and military power have given way to the power of love itself as we see it portrayed so powerfully and cogently in the Gospel. The wisdom of the Church is the wisdom of the Gospel, a living source of insight that emphasizes charity as the key not only to life, but to the mystery of the Incarnation itself. It can be observed that the Gospel itself, like Our Lord's parables, cannot be understood unless one first realizes, and awakens to this depth of love, or charity that Christ embodies and teaches us. It is equally a theological, existential and practical wisdom that must be experienced within, and not simply grasped intellectually.

Although it is certainly true the Church has a preeminent position regarding the means of salvation, that she possesses the fullness of those means by virtue of her intimate relationship with Christ, she also has a

(Continued on page 4)

The Church as Matrix

(Continued from page 3)

responsibility in our age to be a bridge for the reconciliation of the human family. As the matrix, the Church becomes a container for all the noble aspirations of humanity. The matrix contains, defines and protects what dwells within her domain. The Church is the matrix of interfaith encounter, interreligious dialogue, spirituality, interspirituality, justice, peace, sacred culture, ecological responsibility and economic sustainability. Just as the Church since Vatican II has made room for the Jewish People, in a manner of speaking, within her life, the Spirit is inspiring her, and instructing her through the signs of the times, to make room for Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Taoists, Confucians, and indigenous, within her understanding of the Church ad extra. Similarly, the Church is also the matrix, the guardian, of the primary concerns of the human family. Nourishing, cherishing, inspiring and clarifying these concerns, these critical issues, she makes an inestimable contribution to us all.

As the Church becomes comfortable with her role as the matrix, and as her influence begins to grow everywhere, there will be a natural, organic development towards creating a permanent forum for the religions by the religions themselves under the watchful guidance of the Church. The interfaith organizations can assist in shaping this forum, but the religions themselves should be the conveners. For millennia the religions have lived in mutual isolation, ignorance of one another and hostility, often breaking out into terrible wars and persecutions. This condition has weakened their enormous moral influence; because divided, they were not in a position to challenge the countless abuses of kingdoms and states. Once the great traditions have a permanent structure in which to communicate their concerns, insights and methods, they will collectively become a potent force to check the often irresponsible actions of governments. In this way, a significant element in the equation for global stability and well-being will be added. In time, it will move the planet towards a lasting peace and a just economic order in which capitalism has found a moral and spiritual heart, serving rather than oppressing humanity.

A civilization based on love, on the depth and efficacy of charity and compassion, is a real possibility. It can only bear fruit in actuality, however, if all the religions are participants in this great enterprise, this huge process of human transformation. It requires of the Church an acceptance of her larger role and identity as the matrix, and to embrace this role and identity requires acceptance of a universal responsibility that the Spirit has given her. It will also require the reform of capitalism, the promotion of ecological justice, a commitment to the full development of all people, with special attention to their educational, economic, moral and spiritual needs. It will teach the importance of nonviolence in all relationships, and the abandonment of war as a practice. It will be a human order in which spirituality and interspirituality will be the highest

pursuits. Economics and power will be the servants and resources of this new civilization, rather than its masters.

Dialogue, Evangelization, and Contemplation

Vatican II, particularly with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, initiated this great age of dialogue, and this has inspired the growth of the interfaith movement and interreligious dialogue. This dialogue has assumed three forms. There is the dialogue of the head, or academic and theological dimension; then there is the dialogue of the heart, or the level of prayer, meditation, and other forms of spiritual practice, including liturgical celebration. Finally there is the dialogue of the hands, or the common collaboration on projects for justice and peace, and the other critical issues.

The development of dialogue between and among the religions has steadily raised expectations. The view of dialogue of members and experts of other traditions often does not approximate the understanding of the Church reflected in so many of her documents, especially *Redemptoris Hominis* and the more recent, *Dominus Iesus*. The notion that dialogue is subordinate to evangelization is not acceptable to the other traditions, and the Church's insistence on it too much can complicate her relationships with these traditions. The Church's twin values of evangelization and dialogue might be seen in a new way, that is, in terms of the value of sensitivity and discipline in the use of our language and how we speak of the other religions. This approach would also leave the door open for further study and exploration of the deeper experience and teachings of the religions, and their incomparably rich spiritualities and mystical insights.

This approach is consonant with the nature of the *Logos* as infinite and inexhaustible in its possibilities for manifestation. Though the Godhead is fully present in Jesus bodily, the *Logos* is not exhausted in the Incarnation. We must keep in mind that the *Logos* has the whole universe, heaven, and beyond for its range. It takes into account the divine plan for the cosmos, and the possibility of other worlds and other beings who are similarly called to intimacy with God. Just as we need to be open to the larger vision of the *Logos* and its activity in the universe, in other worlds, we should be open to its activity in other religions. The Church, at this juncture in history, lacks sufficient knowledge of the other traditions, with the exception of Judaism, to pass judgment on them. It took the Fathers five centuries to sift through the wisdom of Greece and Rome, and we are really only at the beginning with the Asian traditions.

One of the great resources the Church has as the matrix in her relationships with the other religions is her own profound and vast contemplative tradition, her extraordinary mystical life. This has served the Church well, in the monastic sphere, in dialogue with Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists. Just as monastics have been in the forefront of

(Continued on page 5)

**BEDE GRIFFITHS AND THE SHAPE
OF WHOLENESS** *Bruno Barnhart*

Bede Griffiths reacted strongly against the modern western dualism of mind and body, and even more strongly against the crude scientism which had reduced all reality to material bodies and forces. He revived a threefold view of reality as at once matter, consciousness and spirit, and a tripartite view of the human person as a unity of body, mind/psyche and spirit. This is the 'vertical' axis of his vision.

Sometimes, however, Bede's critique of modern western culture would take a different course. He saw it as gravely out of balance, dominated by a 'masculine' rational consciousness. He insisted on the necessity of balancing this 'left brain' perspective with a 'feminine' consciousness which he identified with intuition, imagination and myth. The intuitive mind has a participative understanding of the whole of a reality, rather than an 'objective' and analytical knowledge of interacting parts. This polarity of masculine and feminine, reason and intuition, constitutes the horizontal dimension of his view of the human psyche.

Joining these two images produces a kind of 'cross of reality' (the phrase is from Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy), which may be taken to represent either the human being or the world within which the individual exists, stretching the person toward fullness between spirit and matter or contemplation and action along one axis, and between truth and love or identity and relationship or even past and future along the other. From this vision it is not far to the image of the mystery of Christ which we find in Colossians and Ephesians: Jesus stretched upon the cross joining "heaven and earth," Jews and Gentiles. ■

The Church as Matrix (Continued from page 4)

interreligious dialogue, they can be of enormous value to the Church in her role and identity as the matrix. The Cistercians, in the work of Thomas Keating, William Meninger and Basil Pennington, have been preparing the faithful through the spread of contemplative practice. It now reaches to virtually every area of the Church. Thomas Keating's organization, Contemplative Outreach, and its dissemination of the method of centering prayer, with its integrative teaching of the spiritual life, presents the Church with a precious resource for this new age, this third millennium when the Church will assume her enhanced identity. Without compromise to her nature and mission, the Church will realize a new vision that the Holy Spirit is guiding her into, a new way of relating to the world, the nations, and the other traditions based on the context of this age, and the demands of the time. The Church has always had a genius for adaptation and assimilation. In this new challenge of assimilation she has a choice: to look back to the past, or follow the lead of the Spirit into a future filled with much hope and the promise of a civilization of love, the promise of the Gospel itself, which is the will of God. ■

**BEDE GRIFFITHS: A LIFE IN
DIALOGUE, by Judson Trapnell**
reviewed by Bruno Barnhart

Judson Trapnell describes his fine study of Bede Griffiths¹ as an "intellectual and spiritual biography." Implicit in the book's structure is an interpretation of Bede's life. Its three parts correspond to Bede's own schematization of his development in a conversation with the author.

A few years before his death, Griffiths discerned three stages in his lifelong surrender: God in nature, God in Christ and the Church, and advaita or "nonduality." (p.5)

The book's three parts follow Bede Griffiths' life accordingly: I) from Griffiths' first spiritual awakening (1924) to his conversion to Catholicism (1932), II) from this point through the monastic years both in England and in India until his move to Shantivanam (1968), and III) onward through the final 25 years until his death (in 1993). Each of the three parts of the book is then structured in three chapters, corresponding to a three-stage scheme closely related to the first one: body, soul and spirit. In each part a biographical chapter is followed by a chapter treating the corresponding intellectual developments, and particularly the developments in Bede's 'epistemology,' or theory of consciousness and understanding. Then a further chapter recounts Bede's spiritual journey and his understanding of that journey. A shorter section, looking at the respective period from the point of view of 'dialogue,' concludes each of the three parts.

This doubly 'ascending' progression in the book's development might suggest that Griffiths, in his later years, moved beyond Christ and Church — beyond the 'religions' — into a world of unitive consciousness. The author is quick to point us away from this misunderstanding by recalling Bede's principle of integration: each successive phase must incorporate the preceding phases. In his Conclusion, Trapnell reiterates Bede's commitment to orthodoxy: "his sense of vocation to integrate each new step of his experience and thought within the Catholic church's and (one could add) his culture's self-understanding." (200) Don't look for humor in this book — nor in Bede Griffiths' writings. But one may smile as the author defends his subject's theological position not — like most of Bede's commentators — by demonstrating that he remained consistently orthodox, but by explaining why he might have wanted to do so. Judson Trapnell responds to criticisms of Bede's unyielding commitment to his Christian convictions by presenting him as a "culture bearer." Culture-bearers, according to Trapnell (following Karl Joachim Weintraub) are those who

through their upbringing and education fully "bear" the surrounding culture within them and yet "lose trust" in
(Continued on page 6)

The Golden String

Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue (Continued from page 5)

the very ideals of that culture. Such persons then experience a fundamental disorientation, no longer able to rely upon their culture to guide their life journey. In reorienting themselves by establishing an ideal that goes beyond yet integrates existing values, such individuals serve to transform the culture itself.” (8)

Bede Griffiths’ own cultural passage, it is clear, takes place in dialogue with the Asian traditions.

The author gives a great deal of attention to Bede’s ‘epistemology.’ Not only the second but the third chapter of each of the book’s three parts unfolds from this perspective, since he follows the progress of Bede’s spiritual journey in the key of *symbolism*. His relationship with the Divine is seen as mediated first by nature, then by Christian symbols to conclude in the final period “beyond the symbols of the religions.” The book’s main axis, then, is the development of a *theory of knowing*, and this study of knowing converges upon the mediating role of symbols.

Evident in Bede’s writing is an ambivalent relation to religious symbols. While essential in their role as mediators between human consciousness and God, they intrinsically point beyond themselves to an immediate — indeed nondual — union with the divine Reality. The conception of a “real symbol,” which Griffiths shared with Karl Rahner, bridges the gap between mediation and nonduality. In a final step, with the help of this same idea of “real symbol,” the author opens Griffiths’ theory of symbolism toward an anthropology, a general conception of the human person.

Religious symbols...are not means that are rejected once the end is reached; rather, they are aspects of the end itself through which one has been drawn toward participation in that end; in Karl Rahner’s language, they are “real symbols.” The “real symbol” is not an accidental or temporary reflection of the symbolized; it is an expression and communication intrinsic to the symbolized, a self-disclosure of the reality to which it as a symbol points and toward which it draws the receptive human consciousness. For Griffiths, the range of what may qualify to stand in this nondual relationship to the divine mystery (the symbolized) is broad, including ultimately all persons, even all creation. His theory suggests that each human being is, in a sense described by Rahner’s theology, a “real symbol” of the divine mystery, both particular and universal, limited and unlimited, human and divine. (203-204)

The ultimate “real symbol” is the divine *Logos*, and that *Logos* incarnate in Jesus Christ. At this apex symbol becomes person, and every human person is potentially a symbol of the nondual divine Absolute. Bede Griffiths is such a real symbol of the divine Mystery — but so, potentially, is every one of us.

If the real symbol mediates between the nondual Absolute and this conditional world, the culture bearer

mediates between the past (fixed in present forms) and the future. As both personal real symbol and culture bearer, Bede Griffiths bridges these two dualities — as well as a third, between his individual person and the society (or church or humanity) within which he lives and works.

Trapnell’s concluding summary brings together the themes of his book, broadening the focus from Bede’s story to that of every culture bearer. Here it is a question of the relation between “individual spiritual transformation and cultural change.” The last word is *surrender*.

Those individuals who through grace are deeply transparent to the Spirit give voice to ideas that express the loving will of that Spirit for humanity as a whole. These ideas, in turn, serve as symbols, drawing the minds of others toward their common source in the ground of consciousness, for some effecting a spiritual transformation that reflects the changes needed throughout the culture. The essential attribute that such individuals embody, then, is the very same to which Griffiths often returned in his self-understanding: surrender. Through surrendering ever more thoroughly to the Spirit within, the individual may become a more concrete expression of the change being stirred in a culture by that Spirit. Such persons not only express symbols that mediate cultural change, they themselves become living symbols who through their transparency allow the healing light of the Spirit to touch the culture. Here is the lasting witness of Griffiths’s life: that true spiritual surrender brings transformation not only in the individual but also through that individual in the world; and that such surrender demands our being fully the limited life-as-symbol that we were created to be. (207)

For Bede, it is in the context of *dialogue* that this surrender and this transformation take place.

The language of this book is scholarly rather than rhetorical. The author does not raise his voice or make bold gestures. The sometimes academic-sounding abstractions — ‘symbol,’ ‘culture bearer,’ ‘theory of mind’ — do not immediately convey the depth and power of the insights that characterize this study. To find this light and energy, the reader must do some work.

Judson Trapnell’s themes — his conceptual tools — are in fact well chosen to bring out the significance of Bede Griffiths and his work. The focus on Bede’s *consciousness-theory* makes more accessible one of his principal contributions toward a new sapiential Christianity, freed from the aging conceptual containers of the western mind. An even more important contribution, Bede’s central conception of *advaita*, or nonduality, is generously discussed. *Dialogue* characterizes the critical threshold across which Catholicism steps with the Second Vatican Council, as well as the context in which a new Christian vision must develop. The accent on Bede’s role as *culture bearer* brings into relief his place in this larger historical

(Continued on page 7)

Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue (Continued from page 6)
transition. *Surrender* — Bede's defining spiritual attitude at his critical turning points — emerges as the principle of orientation and forward movement at a time when the familiar landmarks can no longer be seen.

The interpretation of Bede's thought from a sapiential viewpoint, which this book suggests, leads further. The rediscovery of Christian wisdom is not an end in itself; it must conclude in an incarnation. This rediscovery is an opening of consciousness towards the mystery of Christ as it unfolds newly in the world today — embodied in real human beings. This movement may be felt in the progression from symbol to person which appears at the end of the book. The Christ-mystery does not conclude with knowing, even with nondual consciousness, but with the whole person and the whole of humanity.

Today a predominantly external and 'structural' conception of Christianity — expressed in a body of fixed traditional symbolism, in "dogma, ritual and organization," as Bede Griffiths would put it — begins to give way to a more dynamic relationship to the mystery which is unfolding within the individual, within all humanity, within the world itself. Bede's citations of Teilhard de Chardin are significant, particularly as he worked toward his own synthesis in *A New Vision of Reality*. Bede himself, nearing the end of his life, awakened more and more to the actuality of the Spirit around him, drawing humanity together and impelling it forward into a new phase. Judson Trapnell's study of Bede brings out for us both the nondual interiority at the heart of this rebirth and the dynamic movement of the birth process itself.

A task toward which this study points is a further theological integration of Bede Griffiths' vision from the side of the Christ-mystery itself, opening up the mystery from the central perspective of nonduality. — a further development of the *Christian advaita* which was always coming to birth at the core of Bede's thought.

The clearest example of Griffiths's renewal of key religious symbols is his work on articulating a Christian *advaita* in which the traditional symbols of the Trinity, Christ and Logos, communion, and love are recast in the light of a contemplative vision, a reshaping that brings these symbols into creative dialogue with the spiritual philosophies of the Eastern religions. (202)

The principle of nonduality is a key which opens Christian scriptural interpretation, theological reflection and spirituality toward the mystery's intrinsic fullness and power. In the time of Aquinas, Eckhart and Ruysbroeck, the key was turned part way round in the stubborn lock. Today our encounter with Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism encourages us to turn the key full circle and open wide our Christian consciousness and understanding to the unitive divine light that pours from within the New Testament.

The astute focus of this study on Bede Griffiths' theory of knowledge and of symbolism, as the central axis of his thought, has one further advantage. It points to the

direction in which a theological integration of Bede's vision will need to move. It becomes clear that the center of gravity of Bede's vision is high, and that to meet the Gospel on its own ground a descent will be required. Bede's faith was deeper than his *gnosis*, faith reaches lower than *gnosis*. Faith comprehends levels of unitive reality which are too dark for *gnosis*. Salvation (that is, *divinization*), according to the New Testament and the early patristic tradition, takes place in and through the body; it is sacramental. A Christian *advaita* must be grounded in the dark that is before and after knowing. There is a nonduality 'before' intuition and knowledge. There is a baptismal nonduality of 'identity' deeper than knowing, that precedes experience and knowledge. There is a eucharistic nonduality — expressed in 'surrender' — that is fuller than knowing, and that succeeds mystical experience and knowledge. Bede's last years witness to this latter 'dark' *advaita*.

In the 'foolishness of God' which Paul proclaims, the nondual Absolute descends lower than we can know or feel. We can imagine a further 'incarnation' of Bede's *advaitan* vision, in which this 'prior dark' and 'latter dark' of a Christian *advaita* are recognized in their sacramental depth. *Atman* may be recognized in the baptismal rebirth — in the nondual identity that is *received* at the dawn of knowledge, in Christian initiation. Love and its consummation in the surrender of self may be understood as a eucharistic participation in the cross of Christ — in the *actualization* of the original nondual gift at the sunset of knowledge, in the loving gift of self which is surrender. Symbol, incarnated, becomes sacrament. Knowledge is fulfilled in body; knowledge is completed in act.

Perhaps the theological project of the founders of Shantivanam — a contemplative understanding which would embrace *advaita* and Trinity — remained still within the millennial Christian perspective of 'high' theology and spirituality. What is most needed now — if we are to realize the depth and power of the Christ-mystery as the great 'event of nonduality' — may be an understanding of the *advaitan* meaning of *Incarnation*. ■

1. Judson Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue*, State University of New York Press, 2001, 279 pp., \$16.95. paper pp.\$16.00##.

Bede Griffiths on Intuition, Self and Spirit

There is a point where intuition, having passed through the realms of darkness and of twilight into the sun, now passes beyond. It carries with it all the deep experience of the body and the blood, and all that the emotions and the imagination have impressed upon it, and now passing beyond images and thoughts, it 'returns upon itself' in a pure act of self-reflection, of self-knowledge. This is the experience of the mystic, who, set free from all the limitations both of body and of soul, enters into the pure joy of the spirit. The spirit is the culminating point of body and of soul, where the individual awakens to the eternal ground of his being.

The Marriage of East and West, p. 167. ■

NEWS

- The Osage+Monastery community and friends of the Forest of Peace Ashram celebrated the **8th anniversary of the mahasamadhi of Fr. Bede Griffiths** on Sunday, May 20th with creative Vespers and a reading from Fr. Bede's *Return to the Center*. A buffet supper for all followed, by a much appreciated conference by Fr. Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam., on "Non-duality and Person in the teachings of Bede Griffiths". An audio tape is available: Bede Griffiths Conference Osage+Monastery 18701 W. Monastery Rd. Sand Springs, OK 74063 e-mail: osagemonastery@juno.com Fr. Bruno also gave three days of lectures, May 16-18, on the Gospel of St. John from the perspective of wisdom Christianity.
- **Nine Tibetan monks from the Deprung Losaling Monastery** in S. India joined the Osage monastic community with its retreatants on July 10th for noon meditation, dinner and an intermonastic exchange of several hours.
- **Fr. Joseph Wong** has recently returned from several months in **China, Hong Kong and Taiwan**. During March and April he taught Christology at the Sheshan Seminary in Shanghai, China. He then directed a weekend Lenten retreat for the seminarians on "Christian Meditation and Chinese Spirituality." After Easter Fr. Joseph flew to Hong Kong, where he offered conferences to the Department of Religious Studies of the Holy Spirit Seminary College on "Comparing the Taoist Sage and the Johannine Jesus."

The final month of Fr. Joseph's trip was spent at the Jesuit theologate of Fujen Catholic University in Taipei, where he did research for a textbook on Christology which he is preparing to write in Chinese. Fruit of his ten years teaching this subject, the book will give special attention to inculturation in the Chinese context, with chapters presenting Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist perspectives on Jesus Christ. Each tradition offers its own particular themes for integration with Christology: e.g. knowing and carrying out the will of Heaven in Confucianism, *wu-wei* or nonaction in Taoism, and mercy and compassion in Buddhism. It is the Taoist-Christian dialogue that has occupied Fr. Joseph particularly during recent years, and he continues his research and writing on that subject. Joseph is a Research Fellow of the Ricci Institute in San Francisco, which sponsored his trip to China. ■

Our readers are invited to share news of events — recent or planned — related to Bede Griffiths and his work or, more generally, to the dialogue between East and West.

COMING PUBLICATIONS

- Bede Griffiths' *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita* will be newly published by Templegate this Fall.
- *The One Light: The Principal Writings of Bede Griffiths*, edited and with a commentary by Bruno Barnhart, will be published by Templegate this fall. Publication date and price are still to be announced. The book, about 500 pages in length, includes substantial extracts from Bede's ten books, as well as lectures and articles, and some of his many letters to *The Tablet* on current issues in the church and world. The collection moves from Griffiths' early experience of the divine presence in nature and his philosophy of intuition and imagination through his discovery of Christ and the church to his studies of the Vedanta and the 'perennial philosophy,' and his ongoing work toward a 'marriage of East and West.' There follow the writings stemming from Bede's encounter with the 'new science' and his late synthetic essays, and expressions of the dramatic experience of his final years.
- *Purity of Heart-Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions*, will be published by Continuum this fall. The book presents the papers presented at the East-West monastic Symposium at New Camaldoli in June 2000 (reported in *The Golden String*, 7-1, Summer 2000, p.7-8), and is being edited by Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong. At the beginning of the book, the eighteen papers are placed in their vital context by Fr. Tom Hand SJ and Br. David Steindl-Rast OSB. In addition to the Christian tradition, Hindu, Chan and Zen Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian traditions are represented in the volume's eighteen chapters. Fr. Cyprian Consiglio's essay is entitled *The Space in the Lotus of the Heart: The Anthropological Spirit in the Writings of Bede Griffiths*. ■

THE BEDE GRIFFITHS WEBSITE

will be found at www.bede.griffiths.com

Features include a biography of Father Bede, photos, 'Satsang,' 'Meditations,' news of interreligious dialogue, selected articles from The Golden String, essays on Wisdom Christianity, selections from the newsletter of the Bede Griffiths Sangha (UK), feature articles, news of academic research, book reviews and a listing of available resources: books and both audio and video tapes. Some links have been newly added.

The Website, created in February of 2000, is currently receiving 3000 visits each month. ■

**IN THE CAVE OF THE HEART:
A REPORT ON OUR THIRD
PILGRIMAGE TO SOUTH INDIA**
Russill and Asha D'Silva

In May of 2000, Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, offered "The Cave of the Heart," a live-in retreat that sought to replicate the experience of daily monastic life at Bede Griffiths' Hindu Christian Ashram in South India. The five-day, in-depth experience was meant for those who were familiar with the work of Bede Griffiths as well as those who were not; it was an opportunity to come together and be invigorated by a common purpose. Many members of the team that facilitated this retreat had had a close relationship with Fr. Bede and continued to propagate his vision through their work. This retreat proved to be a powerful vortex that coalesced much of the spiritual energy that accompanied us on our third annual pilgrimage to Shantivanam: an experience that we have been calling a "Journey to find the other half of the Soul" and which could just as well be named "in the cave of the heart". Our destination was Bede's Ashram in South India.

A lot of energy went into the preparation of this experience. Like any important ritual, the amount of preparation determines the quality and depth of the experience. Both the participants and the organizers worked hard towards this end. An important feature was referring to each other as *pilgrim* in all our communications. We still encounter people who ask us, "How did your tour go"? We don't explain. But for those who want to join us on this journey, this experience is a pilgrimage, not a tour. Because pilgrimage is our objective, 90% of our fellow pilgrims attest that the experience is nothing less than life transforming.

From the moment we connected as a group in Los Angeles, till the day we left the Ashram in India, each one of us in the group practiced this very simple objective and it made all the difference. We said our mantra internally as much as we could, practicing the awareness of the Divine Presence at all times. We constantly practiced "seeing different." This meant avoiding judgment and comparison as we experienced life styles and systems on the other side of the planet. We practiced "right attitude" at all times, communicating to each other with love and consideration. Without any doubt, this was the most powerful and joyful pilgrimage we have had so far. The reason for this is because we have learned so much, year after year, and much gratitude must be offered to our very first pilgrims who braved our maiden voyage: no one knew what to expect. Our second pilgrimage was definitely smoother as we knew how to prepare the group. A thanks is likewise due to our second batch of pilgrims: they were a marvelous group of people.

Each year we have striven to make this experience not only better but also different. The first year our emphasis was Bede's Ashram. The next year we placed the emphasis on chanting, and this worked well after the release of the *Yoga of Sound* music albums. This year our emphasis was strong on pilgrimage as well as chanting.

One of the highlights of this particular trip was a climb up to the top of the holy mountain known as Tirueengkoil Malai, considered to be one of the most powerful places of pilgrimage in South India. This mountain is recognized as first among the 50 seats of spiritual power in India known as "peetams". Legend associates the mountain we climbed with the great South Indian sage Agastya. According to local custom, it is considered of immense spiritual merit if the pilgrim manages to visit three holy mountains within the course of a single day and receive darshan, or blessing, from the deities enshrined in the temples atop each of these mountains.

To pace ourselves rightly we made single day pilgrimages to a temple or two from the Ashram, which we used as our base. The afternoon we arrived at the base of Tirueengkoil Malai it was very quiet. Some had opted to remain at an ashram of Tantric yoginis where we stopped en route to the mountain. The rest of us climbed the ancient steps barefoot and in silence. The sun was just beginning to go down and the view was simply spectacular when we reached the top. Once inside the precincts, we stopped to meditate in front of the stone statues of Shiva and Parvati, personifications of the opposites on every level of being. We chanted and prayed with sacred movements in the temple of Parvati and later did the same in the temple of Shiva alongside it. It was one of our most profound experiences.

Another special feature of our pilgrimages are the opportunities we have to interact personally with disadvantaged young people, elderly people and children through social projects. This does not take away from our time of prayer, meditation, chant, and pilgrimage: in fact, it enhances all of these. Each year we make it a point to visit the social outreach projects managed by the Ashram and other communities that we visit and many of our pilgrims are moved to help. Nothing is asked for; the very visibility of the need awakens the giving. Sometimes these efforts are in secret and no one knows about it. At other times someone in the group asks the others to pool in to realize something substantial. The first year we helped a group of gypsies get out of a legal situation and funded their industry of trinket manufacturing. The year after that we donated a number of sewing machines to young girls who had completed a training program; they could now set up their own business. This year, one of our pilgrims coordinated the construction of a dining hall for a large group of orphaned children.

There is a sense of fullness and completion after the pilgrimage is over and integrating back into Western culture

(Continued on page 10)

The Golden String

Pilgrimage*(Continued from page 9)*

is by no means easy. We return changed, powerfully different. A new perspective has emerged and a new consciousness has been given us. Many of our pilgrims have returned a second time so we know that we must be doing something right. Now that others are planning to join us a third time, we can't help feeling that we might be doing something special, but it would not be right for us to take all the credit. The people of India, the temples and the land itself awaken wonderful experiences for us all. But mostly it is Spirit herself, itself, himself — nothing but Spirit shines through every moment of this undertaking.

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*Visit
the Bede Griffiths Website:
www.bede.griffiths.com*

The Golden String

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The Golden String, Bulletin of the Bede Griffiths Trust, is published at New Camaldoli Hermitage and edited by Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam. Statements contained in articles do not represent views of the editor nor of the Board of the BG Trust, but solely of the authors.

The Golden String is available in the U.S. from
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The Golden String is published twice a year. Payment of a fixed subscription fee is not required, but production and mailing of the Bulletin does rely on the support of those who receive it, and we encourage an annual donation. *Thank you!*

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