

The Golden String

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Fall 2003

REFLECTIONS ON THE VISION OF BEDE GRIFFITHS

Douglas Conlan

I would like to share some reflections on Bede Griffiths' vision of religion and spirituality. His journey to India "to find the other half" of his soul was a coming home to himself and to a perennial wisdom which was contemplative, intuitive and unitive, going beyond structures and the exclusively rational mind. It was of these matters that he spoke publicly across Australia in 1985 and again in 1992.

I recall one occasion in 1992 when, during an interview with the Dalai Lama in Perth, Father Bede suggested to His Holiness that it may very well be that in spite of the sufferings of his people, the Tibetan diaspora may be the means whereby Christians recover the mystical dimensions of their faith. He said this as he recalled the many Christians who found their way to his ashram in India, but also because he saw Tibetan Buddhism as a living tradition of mysticism, whose highly skilled teachers were available to westerners seeking meditative and contemplative practices that could help them in their quest for life's meaning.

Bede Griffiths saw that the Eurocentric civilization of the past is giving way to a global civilization in which Christianity will no longer be seen as an isolated religion, but as having its place in the context of the religious traditions of humanity as a whole. He worked tirelessly toward a meeting of East and West in the worlds of mysticism and of science, and he developed his thought with the help of his friend, the biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who spent a year at Bede's ash-

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THE JESUS SUPPER: A FULL EUCHARIST

Beatrice Bruteau

Suppers are important. Eating together is the universal sign by which we can know how any society is structured and thinks of itself. What people eat and how, how they obtained it, and who can eat with whom are the questions to ask. The most significant one is the question of who may eat together. Do the women eat with the men? Social inferiors with their betters? Is the seating prearranged, above and below the salt or with a head table? In some societies women do not eat with men. In many societies rank separation is common (executive dining rooms with better bills of fare). And even in monasteries there is often a head table, set perpendicular to the tables of the monastics, where the important officers and their guests are seated.

The Jesus Supper

At a Jesus Supper none of this is permitted. Absolutely everyone is welcome. There is no reserved seating. The only condition is that you have to be willing to eat with everybody else. The Letter of James in the New Testament deals with this issue (among other matters): The writer rebukes the congregations he is addressing for showing favoritism to the wealthy, greeting them respectfully and seating them with honor, while the poor are unceremoniously told to stand out of the way or sit on the floor. This behavior, he indicates, makes him wonder whether they "really believe in Jesus" (James 2:1-4).

Everyone is absolutely equal in dignity and respectability at a Jesus Supper. This is the heart of Jesus' social program, and it derives directly from, and embodies, the divine filiation that is the foundation of his entire vision. All people are Children of God and must be treated as such. That's the core of the teaching. You can say it while standing on one foot. All the rest is "interpretation," as Rabbi Hillel said. But then you have to "go and study" how to bring this about in practical everyday terms.

I offer one scheme for spelling out the levels at which this "eating together" can be practiced. I call it the celebration of a "full Eucharist" and I imagine it as the instrument by which Jesus and his friends carried out their ministry. I was led to this particular interpretation by the Hindu analysis of the structure of any one of us as a series of "sheaths" nested inside one another.

The outermost sheath is made of food--quite literally: our bodies are made out of the food we eat. So the first level

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The Jesus Supper

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of the Jesus Supper consists of the sharing of food. Everybody is encouraged to bring something, no matter how small. The food you bring represents your own life and labor and protection against tomorrow. But instead of hoarding it for yourself alone—trying to "save your life"—you give it away, offer it to your friends, share it with everyone in the community. And in this way you "gain" your place in the Kingdom of Heaven, by this very act of doing the divine thing: giving to others without demanding a return.

The Five Sheaths

So Jesus' Full Eucharist — 'eucharist' means "good gift"— begins in this simple and homely way by sharing food — what we call a potluck supper. But it doesn't stop at food. In the Hindu model which I am following, the Sanskrit word for this first sheath is *Anna-maya-kosha*, the sheath (*kosha*) made (*maya*) of *annas*, which means food, but also means matter in general. So the sharing at this level includes all sorts of things made of matter: tools, furniture, dishes, clothes, housing, all the basic human needs.

In a Jesus Supper we are concerned that our friends should have what they need. We are alert and aware and eager to take appropriate steps to see that they are provided for. This is an essential part of what it takes to make the Kingdom of Heaven be present. And, obviously, we are the ones who have to do it. The Kingdom of Heaven is not made present by the action of somebody else. It consists of our attitudes and behaviors. Unless and until we ourselves actually do it, the Kingdom won't be here, but just as fast as we do it, to that extent the Kingdom comes into our midst.

In our world, this sharing is usually carried out by fairly big organizations. A great deal of it is done by nations for their own people and for people of other nations. The UN does a lot. Private organizations, religious and otherwise, do much. Most of us, as individuals, just give money to these large bodies, but many of us also give some time and effort as volunteers.

This brings us to the second level of a Jesus Supper, the sheath made of *prana*, energy. When we give time and energy and our presence to help others, we are sharing on the *prana* level. We help build a house with Habitat for Humanity, we give an afternoon a month at a Food Bank, we visit shut-ins, the elderly, the ill. All this sort of life-sharing is eucharistic—literally giving your life to nourish others. It shows especially when we console, comfort, counsel with others, sharing our emotional energies.

We can also share our thoughts. This is the third level, *manomayakosha*, the sheath made of mind. This means talking with people, showing them photos of our grandchildren (remember this is how Sadat of Egypt and Begin of Israel broke down the barriers to settling a war between their countries), telling our stories of our lives, getting to know each other well. We discuss the news of the day, share knowledge and skills, work on community projects together. We build up our sense of belonging to one another

this way. The sense of living by one shared life grows. A "eucharistic body" is being formed.

We grow to trust one another. Deeper empathy develops. We feel safe with each other. We become able to relax many of our defenses and let the deep hidden self come toward the surface. The deep self has usually had some profound experiences. There have been times when we were personally visited with states of exalted consciousness. The *buddhimayakosha*, or *vijnanamayakosha*, is the sheath of our high awareness. When we trust one another enough and are living in terms of purity, hospitality, and generosity, we start to share our secret favors from on high. This is the level of insights and sudden understandings, awareness of the Presence of God. When the wonders of divine life are shared in this high mood, even those who only hear about them somehow enter into them.

And this brings the community to the level of *Ananda*, the sheath of bliss, a shared joy in living the divine life. When the community's sharing has reached this pitch, then we have a Full Eucharist, the Kingdom is really present, the individual persons are uniquely expressed, the community is at one, and heaven and earth have kissed each other. The values of the Divine have appeared in human form.

Community and Covenant

Please notice that it takes a community to do this. It is not the act of a single person. That's because the values at stake imply personal interaction. You can't have friendship without having more than one. And you don't have friendship unless the friends are in a strong sense united, living by the same life. Both manyness and unity must be verified.

This is why the concept of covenant is relevant. A covenant is an agreement, a pledge among those participating, that they will protect and enhance the lives of all the others. They will not take advantage of anyone. They will not try to extract value from the others without producing any themselves. They will work to build a good life for all. They will take care that the goods gained by the community are shared among all members. The goal of the community is the shared living itself. Everything that is done — or avoided — is for the sake of people. *People are the bottom line*. The experience of living together happily is the bottom line. People are never used as means to gain wealth. The wealth that the community produces is used to benefit people.

But even this covenant among people has to be set in the context of a yet farther-reaching web of interactive processes. This amazing and possibly very rare planet, with its astonishing variety of life, supported by the delicately balanced features of land, air and water, light and temperature, is also a member of the covenant community. It contributes the most, for it makes it possible for the rest of us to live at all. It offers us all sorts of opportunities for pleasure, knowledge, aesthetic rapture and religious awe, unending

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Bede Griffiths' Vision (Continued from page 1)

ram writing his book, *A New Science of Life*. Through his daily exchanges with Sheldrake, Bede came to understand the view, emerging in contemporary science, that the universe is not to be seen simply as a system of solid bodies moving through time and space, but rather as a field of energy pervaded by consciousness. He wanted to explore this new cosmology as a basis for the encounter of religions, for the re-interpretation of myths and symbols, and for the development of a new language in which these myths and symbols may be communicated.

It was during that hour-long meeting in Perth that the Dalai Lama became excited over Bede's sharing some of the highlights in the history of mystical theology, including such figures as Evagrius of Pontus and Dionysius. His Holiness jumped alongside Father Bede, took his hand and declared, "I never knew Christians could think like that!"

Bede Griffiths held that in the future Christianity would be seen in relation to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sufism, as well as to the primordial religions of the world. He perceived the so-called "new consciousness" as moving humanity beyond the exclusively rational mind, with its dualism and its perception of reality as consisting of separate entities. In his growing appreciation of science, he referred to the work of theoretical physicist David Bohm, who speaks of an "implicate order" of unity within the cosmos, from which the universe is always unfolding into an "explicate order" of particles, of forms and structures. Here quantum physics meets the non-dualistic traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Bede Griffiths was convinced that as we move beyond the present religious forms and structures — something that he saw as not only necessary but inevitable — we begin to see an underlying unity beyond their diversity. He saw that all religions are expressing symbolically something which cannot be expressed in rational terms; the attempt to do so, whether in catechisms or in official statements, is bound ultimately to fail. Even the 'content' of his own Roman Catholic Church, like that of the other churches and religions, transcends all rational, discursive thought. Occasionally, during his lunchtime meditations at the ashram, he would recall St. Thomas Aquinas' remark, after having a

The Jesus Supper (Continued from page 2)

discoveries in the ongoing creative development of the complex cosmic economy. When we see ourselves as responsible actors in this domain, we see more truly and feel more deeply. The planet also must be protected, lived together with, not taken advantage of, not disrespected, not treated as a mere means to our enhancement but as a community possessing values in its own right. And this is one of the ways in which we can find an encouraging example of many of the dimensions of the Jesus Supper in the Camaldolese hermits and oblates. (To be continued) ■

vision one day, that in comparison with what he had just seen all that he had written was as straw.

Bede held that while the mysteries may not be adequately expressed in rational or logical language, they may be symbolized. He said that, in fact, both scientific theories and religious doctrines are symbolic structures which open the human mind to the transcendent. Yet, while the symbolic structures within each religion have their value, for Bede all symbolic structures have limitations because they are socially and culturally conditioned.

Bede Griffiths saw the significance of Christianity in relation to its unique, profoundly historic structure. All matter and all humanity is gathered together in the person of Jesus, to be transformed in the One Reality which he called Abba, Father. Yet for Bede a main limitation of Christianity was an exclusiveness which derived from this same historical dimension. He held that this exclusiveness, in particular, had to be transcended — or allowed to die — as we move, individually, into the mystery of Christ. For Bede it was a matter of extreme urgency that we in the West realize the opportunity that this age presents for being open to the religious traditions of humanity — particularly of the East — and for discovering their unity in the depth dimension which underlies them all; that is, in the mystical dimension.

Father Bede celebrated this opportunity in a special way. He was a friend to seekers of whatever religious faith — or of none! He turned no one away, spoke to all newcomers before the next night prayer, listened with his heart to all who approached him with personal problems (ashrams have traditionally drawn people with problems) and answered all his mail, from everywhere in the world. This openness to friendship would occasionally involve him in a surprising scene; when the Dalai Lama recognized his old friend in Perth he rushed up to him and ran his fingers through Father Bede's long white beard. Bede, always the Oxford Don, was momentarily taken aback by this familiarity, but as soon as he recovered from the shock his face crinkled into an appreciative smile. Afterwards Bede took me by the arm and, with a tear in his eye, said, "I do think he rather likes me!"

While Christianity, like the religious traditions of the East, has its own long history of mystical teaching, many contemporary Christians are unaware of its riches. During his 1992 visit to Australia, Bede spoke to me of his personal rediscovery of Tibetan *Dzogchen*, the tradition of 'direct transmission' of contemplation. He saw this as one way in which Christians, should they care to explore it, could find common ground with members of another religion. Thereby, he suggested, Christians might recover the depths of their own tradition. I remember him acknowledging unashamedly Tibetan Buddhist teachers to whom he owed much; among them the Dalai Lama and the late Lama Anagarika Govinda. Bede Griffiths, contemplative and mystic, understood that the present world structures and the old civilization are

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Bede Griffiths' Vision

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breaking down. Within this dying, he saw, there can be a re-birth of meaning, penetrated by a new consciousness. Science today, he would repeat, recognizes that order comes out of chaos. When old structures break down and the traditional forms disintegrate, precisely in that chaos a new form and new structure, a new order of being and consciousness emerge. Perhaps this is one reason why he was always able to remain centered and comprehending amid the chaos that — with the varied characters and their personality traits — was often the norm of ashram life in India.

For Father Bede the old is always dying and the new is always emerging, and that which is new works a social and cultural transformation in the old. Every religion, he would say, looks forward to a time when the end will come, and the new birth will take place.

Whether as a hidden mystic living quietly in a mud hut in India, or as a prince of the church living in a palazzo in Rome, or simply as one of the millions of men and women of the earth, we all, I suggest, look for peace and harmony. Like Father Bede, we all long to come home to ourselves. I remember discovering a little statement of C.S. Lewis, gathered with other sayings in Bede's hut. Lewis, who had been Bede's tutor at Oxford and his lifelong friend, said that the thing he longed for most of all in his life was to discover the place from whence all the beauty came. These words struck me as saying much about the occupant of that small mud hut. Throughout his many years Bede Griffiths was a living example of one who desired that very wisdom, and it was this that drew so many to him and to his thought. *(These reflections were written for the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Shantivanam)* ■

**SPECIAL EVENTS OF THIS YEAR 2003,
THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF
BEDE GRIFFITHS' MAHASAMADHI**

USA: Osage Monastery

On the 10th Memorial Anniversary of the death of Fr. Bede Griffiths, the community of Osage Monastic Ashram in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, invited Friends of the Forest to come celebrate for two days. On Saturday, May 17th, Eusebia DaSilva read Michael von Brück's feature article on Bede Griffiths just before Vespers in the sundance circle of the main house. After supper Fr. Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam. gave a conference on Fr. Bede's thought entitled: "The Re-birth of Monastic Wisdom", which was much appreciated.

On Sunday, May 18th, Fr. Bruno was celebrant for the festive Eucharist after which Judy Walter read a uniquely relevant article by Fr. Bede on Non-Violence, an article discovered by our friends in England at the B.G. Sangha. After dinner the video, *A Human Search* (on the life of Fr. Bede) was shown. There followed a men's panel sharing memories of Fr. Bede. Robert Doenges, John Douglas and Fr. Bruno contributed. At the conclusion of the buffet supper everyone

enjoyed the women's sharing of memories of Fr. Bede. Participants on this panel were Judy Walter, Eusebia DaSilva and Sr. Pascaline Coff. Vespers followed just before the 7 pm. Conference of Fr. Bruno. "Bede Griffiths and the Unity of Consciousness." This, together with many other events of the two days, was caught on video. All concluded with a double *arati* (ancient Eastern fire blessing) rendered by Judy and Eusebia wearing colored prayer shawls and leading with the *bhajan: O beata Trinitas, Infinita Bonitas; Saccidananda Namaha, Saccidananda Namaha.*

UNITED KINGDOM: Bede Griffiths Sangha

A celebration of the Life and Vision of Father Bede was held at Gaunt's House, Wimborne Minster, on July 17-20. This event was organized by the Sangha both to celebrate the 10th Anniversary and to provide a focus for renewal in the lives of people touched by his life and wisdom. The event was organized in the spirit of a family gathering, with contributions by people who knew and loved Father Bede. As is the custom with the Sangha, the time was structured around three gatherings for meditation and prayer, in the morning, at midday and in the evening. Each day came to a close with *namajapa*. The prayers included chanting, singing of *bhajans*, and readings from scriptures of different traditions. About 120 persons participated in the celebration.

Four main speakers had been invited to provide the framework for the event: Brother John Martin Sahajananda, Shirley du Boulay, Dr Rupert Sheldrake and Dr. Judson Trapnell. Judson, because of the onset of his final illness, was unable to participate. In addition there were concurrent sessions with opportunities to see videos including *The Human Search*, workshops on *bhajan* singing, and yoga. Also provided were a special workshop and demonstration of classical Indian dance. One plenary session was dedicated to personal reflections on the life and inspiration of Father Bede. Exhibits featured photos and other memorabilia and a display of the work of the Swami Bede Dayananda Trust.

UK: The John Main Seminar

The John Main Seminar is the annual international gathering of the World Community for Christian Meditation. Father Bede led the Seminar at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1991. The 2003 John Main Seminar, in commemoration of the anniversary, focused upon the life and work of Bede Griffiths. Entitled "Bede Griffiths and the Future of Christian Wisdom," it was held at Reading University, near London, from August 21-24. Three speakers were featured: Shirley Du Boulay, Andrew Harvey and Bruno Barnhart. Shirley Du Boulay, author of the esteemed biography of Bede Griffiths, *Beyond the Darkness*, spoke of the stages of Bede's life and of his intellectual and spiritual evolution. Andrew Harvey spoke on Bede's discovery of the feminine and, in a second presentation, on Bede and the Universal Christ. Bruno Barnhart's first talk focused on Bede's relation to the wisdom traditions of East and West, and his second talk on Bede's vision of the future. In addition

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Anniversary Events

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tion to the lectures and discussions, there was an evening celebration of Fr. Bede which featured readings from his works, music and personal recollections by friends. Paintings by Jyoti Sahi, a long-time friend of Bede, were introduced by the artist. The three speakers participated in a panel discussion moderated by Laurence Freeman, who then celebrated the closing liturgy. Fr. Laurence had conducted a retreat for many of the (nearly 180) participants during the three days preceding the Seminar.

ITALY: Conference at Camaldoli

The monastic community of Camaldoli commemorated the tenth anniversary of the death of Bede Griffiths, (who had become juridically a monk of that community), with a public conference on the person, the thought and the witness of Bede, and on his dedication to dialogue with the cultures and the religions. Entitled *Fr. Bede Griffiths (Swami Dayananda): A Bridge between East and West*, the Conference was held on the weekend of Pentecost (June 6-8). For a number of years Camaldoli, together with representatives of the other living faiths present in the Casentino area, has held a vigil of interreligious prayer at that time. For Christians, it is the Solemnity of Pentecost, more than any other feast of the Lord, that stands out as the foundation and the soul of the interreligious dialogue.

The first presentation (see page 7) brought out the personality of Fr. Bede as man of dialogue. The speaker, Fr. Bernardino Cozzarini (the first Camaldolese monk to stay at Shantivanam), introduced the conference participants and showed how Bede dialogued with the various human, social and religious situations in which he found himself. Another monk of Camaldoli, Ivan Nicoletto, emphasized the influence which western culture had on the formative, human and spiritual journey of the young Bede. Antonia Tronti, a friend of the community and teacher of yoga, developed the theme of the encounter of Bede the monk with the East, and how he arrived at the doctrine of *Advaita*, or nonduality. The conference was attended by about 65 guests.

THAILAND: Bede Panel at Globalization conference.

The Bede Griffiths Association co-sponsored the **Payap University Conference on Religion and Globalization** in Bangkok, beginning on July 27. A panel dedicated to Bede Griffiths was led by Douglas Conlan, with participation by Michael von Brück, Ruben Habito and John Douglas. (See Douglas Conlan's introductory address on page 9.)

OTHER EVENTS honoring Father Bede during the anniversary year included:

- A special memorial issue of **The Golden String** in May, featuring personal recollections of those who knew Fr. Bede or were influenced by his work;
- A **book study course** on *The One Light* at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, conducted by Sr. Marguerite Buchanan;
- **'Return to the Cave of the Heart'** Experiential

workshops at Mercy Center, conducted by Russill and Asha D'Silva;

- Publication of a new colored **brochure** designed for the Bede Griffiths Trust by Douglas Conlan;
- A **pilgrimage** to Shantivanam and other sacred places in India led by Russill and Asha;
- Publication of four of **Bede Griffiths'** most popular **books** by Medio Media in the United Kingdom, where they had been out of print;
- A special anniversary celebration at Bede's ashram, **Shantivanam**, in Tamil Nadu, S. India.
- Publication of Wayne Teasdale's *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought*;
- Publication of John Martin's *You Are The Light*;
- Republication of Shirley DuBoulay's biography of Bede Griffiths, *Beyond the Darkness*. ■

ENCOUNTER WITH BEDE GRIFFITHS

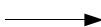
(Part II)

Michael von Brück

My relationship with Bede did not end when our family returned to Germany in March 1985. We used to return to India and to Shantivanam once a year, and I took the chance to work on a German translation of the Bhagavad Gita and rework Father Bede's commentary on this great text of the Hindu tradition in order to get it published in German. Bede also visited us in Germany several times, accompanied by Christudas, his loving and faithful disciple. In Germany he visited our ecumenical meditation centre near the French border, called Neumühle, where he gave talks and impressed many of my students deeply. He looked around at the centre, where Zen is being taught next to the Prayer of the Heart, Christian contemplation, Yoga and Tibetan forms of meditation, where an ecological awareness is being tested so that we use solar energy and try to avoid waste, where people from all walks of life and religions can gather and work for a deeper understanding of their own life. He looked and exclaimed: "This is really a model." Well, Neumühle had received a lot of inspiration from Shantivanam in India.

During my visits to Shantivanam in the late 1980s and early 1990s we spent three summers, concentrated for one or two weeks each time, on the Gita. We debated the meanings of certain passages and Bede was eager to learn more, to bring out new dimensions of the text and, most of all, apply it to present day questions. For there were so many people from all over the world, from all walks of life, with all kinds of expectations, frustrations, hopes and gifts who met in Shantivanam. Bede was the centre of their quest for a few weeks, before they went on their spiritual journey, and he was so modest, so sensitive, so non-judgemental and all-embracing, that everybody felt touched by a special holiness that Bede himself received everyday and passed on through his shining eyes and his gentle touch of blessing.

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Encounter with Bede Griffiths (Continued from page 5)

What was so special about “Bedeji”? Bede was a person of a warm heart and an investigating, curious intellect at the same time. With typical British reluctance to show emotions a special tenderness surrounded him, a gracious gentleness which impressed me every time we met, even after more than 20 years of knowing each other. He was deeply enchanted with India and had even a romantic perception of the Indian village though he lived there right in the midst of all the dirt and noise and even so much human quarrelling. He was able to infect others with his love for India and thus awaken a curiosity and depth in all the travellers who would gather at Shantivanam at tea time or in the chapel or in front of his hut for philosophical explanations or private counselling. His deepest intention was, to reconcile the contradictions of the intuitive and the rational, of religious experience and science, of arts and philosophy which had torn apart Western culture so deeply. This new synthesis should bear fruit in the Gandhian style of life in the Indian village – at an international conference held in Shantivanam on “Appropriate Technology” he would point at the ox cart. And Bede was very proud when the new installation for biogas-technology was introduced to the Ashram kitchen. “Small is beautiful” – this famous statement by the economist E.F. Schumacher was one of his often quoted sayings. He felt that the message of India was one of genuine simplicity of village life on the one hand and of the existential realization of the oneness of reality on the other hand. Again and again he tried to apply these two insights when people came to him with countless questions about how to live a meaningful life, how to attain God realization, how to build lasting human relations, how to meditate, how to get rid of the use of drugs – just to name a few of the problems Bede was confronted with daily.

What was his attitude towards Christianity? He loved the church as the mystical body of Christ, and he suffered under the rationalistic and ritualistic misunderstanding of the Christian heritage. He felt the truth in the Upanishadic expression of the Oneness of reality and at the same time celebrated mass according to the Catholic ritual. Certainly, indigenous elements such as Sanskrit mantras, readings from the Holy Scriptures of India, Tamil hymns and so on were part of the daily liturgy. But the mystery of the sacrifice of the mass remained the centre of daily life in Shantivanam. Bede was open to non-catholic Christian traditions, but it did not bother him too much to study the differences. For him, the great mystical traditions were the key to overcoming the differences within Christianity and between the different religions of the world. Thus, Islam was of interest to him only with regard to its mystical traditions, especially in the form of the non-dualistic philosophy of religion as exposed by Ibn Al Arabi. Bede felt that this understanding of reality came close to Shankara, and even Mahayana Buddhism as interpreted by T.R.V. Murti and D.T. Suzuki seemed to be not so different from the great sayings of the

Upanishads, the Gita and the great Christian mystics. I found this quote from Suzuki and related it to Bede, because it corresponded intensely to his experience:

It is not the nature of *prajna* (mystical intuition) to remain in a state of *sunyata* (the void) absolutely motionless. It demands of itself that it differentiate itself unlimitedly, and at the same time it desires to remain in itself. This is why *sunyata* is said to be a reservoir of infinite possibilities and not just a state of mere emptiness. Differentiating itself and yet remaining in itself undifferentiated, and thus to go on eternally in the work of creation...we can say of it that it is creation out of nothing. *Sunyata* is not to be conceived statically but dynamically, or better, as at once static and dynamic.¹

However, during the last years of his life he suffered more and more under the impression that all present day religions are masculine in their character. Bede who had left his monastery in England precisely for that reason and had embarked on his adventure to India, wanted to discover the feminine side, both in the religions and in himself. This was the main concern of the last months of his life, especially after his first stroke which had brought him the gift of a deep spiritual experience of “the mother,” as he would say. This feminine side, he said, needs to be developed and nurtured. All the dualities of world and God, nature and mind, heaven and earth, male and female need to be integrated, and this was, Bede understood, the task for our generation and the next ones to come.

Bede has always remained a Christian, if the usage of this terminology is proper altogether. However, he had heard an echo in the Hindu contemplative experience which he had discovered first in the great mystic texts of Christianity. And he took the Great Mother not only as a symbol, but as a mental and even political basic attitude from which a transpersonal pattern of our understanding of God and world would emerge so that our life should become more harmonious, softer, more graceful and gentle. This was his message.

For nearly twenty years I had the privilege to know Father Bede, to be with him and read under his guidance the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita and the Bible, especially John’s gospel. We would meditate together in silence at the banks of the Kaveri and we celebrated joyfully — but always with some emotional restraint — the great festivals of the Christian and Hindu religions. Bede radiated the gentleness of a sage, and he knew that in reality all is quite different from even our loftiest mental perceptions and projections, even in the transpersonal and mystic forms. Now he probably *knows*. ■

1, Charles A. Moore (ed.), *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1951, page 45.

Correction: The May 2003 issue of **The Golden String** (on page 1) was wrongly marked “volume 8, no. 2.” That issue is actually **volume 10, no. 1**.

Remembering Father Bede *by Stefan Reynolds*

Some men should have mountains
To bear their names to time.
Grave markers are not high enough
Or green enough for those who,
When they were alive, were so alive.

This is no epitaph. I write no obituary.
I list no date of birth or death.
For what is history
When it lists the events
 but misses the meaning?
Nor is this a mourning song
But only the naming of a mountain

Even the best biographers
Can only draw a man's shadow
They give the shape and form of a life
But not the substance
Not the smile of life that flickers like light
Over running water.

Fresh and green,
His great river flowed past my stream
And yet we were one
For all that flows, flows to the sea
And something of him remains with me.

I knew him in the final years when,
 after his stroke,
He needed someone to sit with him at night
And I, sitting in his hut by the river,
Would listen to the silence
 of those long Indian nights,
When even the crickets seemed to hesitate.

His presence spoke silence
And he and the river combined
To bear all thought away.
For the mind is itself a river
Which flows from the source
And runs to the open sea.

Its own current dissolves.
In that hut the sea
Was sitting next to me. ■

**BEDE GRIFFITHS: A BRIDGE BETWEEN
EAST AND WEST**
Bernardino Cozzarini

It was not easy for us to decide on a title for this gathering. (The Camaldoli Symposium) We wanted one that would illuminate the life of Fr. Bede and at the same time be significant for us. In the end we have settled on the present title (Bridge between East and West) because it best expresses the dynamic of the journey, of the 'crossing and being crossed,' of the search.

Bede has named for us the two banks upon which the arches of the bridge are to rest: the East and the West. Rooted in these two cultural and spiritual worlds, there he has built a bridge, his life. He has celebrated his 'marriage' so that the riches of both sides might encounter one another and enter into dialogue. He has built it, he has passed over it, and he has consolidated it through dialogue, leaving us free to venture across it or not. . .

the man of dialogue

Ever present to himself, Bede the monk personally received every guest who came to the ashram. He engaged himself with each person, introduced them to the ashram life, and at the same time showed them the complex of the ashram, so that the buildings were not unfamiliar to them, and so that they could feel themselves involved immediately in the rhythm of life of the community. Then it was up to the guest to decide how far to enter into the experience of the ashram.

Bede was present and yet discreet. He knew how to ask a question at the right moment and how to enter into the person's life on tiptoes, without ever jolting or violating the intimacy of the spiritual journey. This quality of attention was natural to him but extraordinary for the guest. If he noticed that one of the guests was hesitant to ask for a meeting with him, it was Bede himself who would take the initiative and request an encounter with the guest.

Usually the meeting was not long, but intense and meaningful; it opened windows and doors so that each might see and be seen. Out of this wisdom that derived from his knowledge of the human spirit, he would offer some pointers, suggestions, counsels. These were not a matter of many words, but brief. Just a few words. They were not understood at the moment, but gradually you grasped their meaning and new human and spiritual horizons opened to you. And there you were. You might remain in that state of stupor for days. Then you began to see in a different way your relations with the others and with yourself. What had changed? You could not say, but you knew that it had happened. It was not yet the moment to speak; it could not yet be put into words. Then perhaps you went to him again and he said: "Go, and live." You felt a new freedom. You had come into relation with your center.

It is not easy to live there: to stand, to dwell, to remain at the center, because that is the place of the tensions,

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Bridge between East and West (Continued from page 7)

of the deepest conflicts and of the most radical contrasts. His advice was to persist, to remain still until the opposite poles were reconciled: the divine and the human, the masculine and the feminine, man and woman, matter and spirit, charism and institution, mind and heart. . .

The dialogue developed further, bringing you to an encounter, to a ritual, to a celebration, to a wedding in which the East and the West are places, parts of yourself, which disclose a human existence which is coming to unity, to communion, to harmony and to the “Marriage of East and West.” (see *The Marriage of East and West*.)

Such an experience, lived in silence, sustained by a rhythm of prayer, of meditation and of work, opened the mind to a vision of reality, to the New Vision of Reality, profound and lofty, small and great. Within you and outside you. In the cave of the heart and in the cosmic universality. (see *A New Vision of Reality*.)

The new openness to the world came from an experience of the compassion of God who handed over his own Son to death, and who from that death has communicated the spirit of life to the entire universe, so that now it is pervaded by this vital fluid of life, by the embrace and by the *Dayananda* (‘bliss of compassion’) of God. (see *The Cosmic Revelation and River of Compassion*.)

In every meeting with him, one could experience this depth, and this breath of universality. Often the impression was that of being placed in a space that was too large and universal, and not knowing how to orient oneself, how to proceed. But he was there, and you would hear yourself say again, when you least expected it, “I would like to see you.”

Many conversations happened that way. And then you could fly, you could run, you could go forward without fear, while he continued to carry all of you in his nocturnal prayer, in the morning meditation and in the evening prayer, where he received and greeted every guest, as St. Benedict says in his Rule: “Let the guest be received as Christ in person. . . Welcomed with the embrace of peace. . . Let them pray together. . .let the Holy Scriptures be read. . . Let Christ be adored in the guest, because it is indeed Christ who is received.” (RB 53)

without preference between persons

It belongs to the dynamic of love to open one’s own heart to the other and to the others. With the same attention, like one who has nothing else to do, I would see him accompany a guest, explain and answer. He seemed to celebrate, to make present the absent One. He was a liturgist: he lived the encounter as if it was the only encounter. And then the guest settled in, recollected, at prayer, surrounded by a presence, the Presence, while Father Bede returned to his cell and took up again the work that had been interrupted a little while before. Interreligious dialogue is born from these attentions. Inculturation arises from receiving the other in a certain way.

All were received, listened to, given hospitality, set-

led in — even if it was on the porch of the library. No one was sent away, shown the way to the front gate. He went beyond appearance, status and titles, to encounter the person who had come to the ashram. Swami Dayananda began with the person, as he or she was, how they were and how they presented themselves. On the basis of this human reality he manifested his compassion, revealed the goodness that filled his heart. One felt accepted, not judged — but above all loved.

He was exigent, however. When a young Catholic insisted on being initiated as a *sannyasi* by him, Bede, who did not consider him ready, invited him to study the Catechism of Pius X. “Then,” he concluded, “we shall see.”

because rooted in the scripture

At the center of life. . . a love. . . an experiential knowledge — a knowing that knows how to not know, as the Upanishads say, and so is attentive. Starting with the Bible, rooted in Christ, he dwelt in the center. That center around which not only our life but the life of the whole world revolves. From the Bible to the Vedas, to the Upanishads, to the Baghavad Gita, to the Koran. . . Bede gathered that ‘golden string’ that runs through all the scriptures and brought to light the divine spring from which the authors and the readers draw strength, energy and life. Drawn by this thread of gold he entered and dwelt in that center where the smallest is greater than the large. Such is the Divinity that lives in the cave of the heart of every human being. It is like a mustard seed that, when it has fallen into the earth, dies and then sprouts forth and finally becomes a tree in which all the birds can find a place to make their nests. “The song of the birds, the shapes of the trees, the colours of the sunset, were so many signs of this presence, which seemed to be drawing me to itself.” (*The Golden String*, p. 10)

the dialogue with the great religions

Father Bede had a fixed point from which to set out, to which to refer, with which to orient himself in his interreligious dialogue.

There is only one absolute religion and that is the religion of the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Love, present in some measure in every religion and in every [human person], and drawing all [persons] into that unity for which [the human person] was created. There is only one Absolute Way, which is the Word of God, that Word which is God himself, communicating himself to [humanity] and making himself known “in many and various ways” to different peoples. That Word was “made flesh” in Jesus of Nazareth, but he does not cease to make himself known to other people in other ways. So also the Holy Spirit, which descended on the disciples at Pentecost and continues to dwell in the Church, does not cease to work in other people and to dwell among them in other ways. All religions are historically conditioned and though the Absolute may be found making itself known and communicating itself in a re-

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ligion, the religion itself can never be “absolute” in the sense of being free from historical and cultural conditions. We have to recognize the presence of the Word of God and the Spirit of God in all religions and indeed outside all religions, while we acknowledge the unique revelation of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ and the unique manner of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Church. (*The Golden String*, Foreword to 1980 edition, p. 3-4)

a fragile bridge

It is a fragile bridge which can become stable when another crosses it. The traveler strengthens it, the poor person enriches it, the stranger makes it familiar, the distant person brings it close, the different person makes it similar — because all are one single thing in him. . . . It is built and it is ever still to be built, because it needs the contributions of all and the experience of each. . . . It is a bridge to cross and also a reality by which each of us must allow ourself to be ‘crossed’ and penetrated. Each one contributes one’s gift and receives a gift. No one is only a giver. While you give, you also receive something very important. It is a bridge! ■

[The above is from Fr. Bernardino’s introductory address to participants in the anniversary Conference held at Camaldoli June 6-8: Fr. Bede Griffiths (Swami Dayananda): *A Bridge between East and West.*]

BEDE GRIFFITHS AND GLOBALIZATION
Douglas Conlan

Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) was one of the most significant and visionary pioneer-leaders of the contemporary interreligious dialogue movement. In 1955 he traveled from his Benedictine home in England, and lived for the rest of his life in contemplative simplicity in India. He said he came to “find the other half of [his] soul.” His courageous exploration of interreligious dialogue and inculturation, as well as his personal search for wholeness, peace and harmony transcended his own life. Without discrimination, he accepted all, of any religious faith or none, who came to his “Forest of Peace” at Saccidananda Ashram. His presence and words encouraged visitors from all over the world to share time and space in meditation, study, silence, shared work and sacred ritual.

Bede’s life was a prophetic call for women and men everywhere to work together towards transforming global society according to the common values found in all religions. During his visits throughout the world, a growing audience appreciated his non-expert, yet subtle grasp of modern science, and its relation to mysticism. He also appreciated the need that the world has of developing a spiritual perspective on matters related to the market place. Bede Griffiths received friendship and recognition from fellow pio-neers in the dialogue of faiths. He was convinced that

only through maintaining an attitude of openness to the common points of convergence in each other’s religions, could these leaders hope to influence the larger world of international finance and politics for the good of all people everywhere.

People are worried about the globalization of trade and the economy. Protests in recent years against globalization have captured great attention. This is despite some evidence showing that by and large globalization is making the world richer and making poor countries richer, too.

Bede Griffiths stated that no system is an end in itself, and globalization, like any other system, must serve solidarity and the common good. It must serve culture and the individual, not dominate them. He saw in India that globalization has the capacity to bring greater economic and social interdependence, but it also brings rapid changes with little respect for already existing and often ancient social systems and cultures. Through his contact with local villagers in India, especially the disadvantaged, he saw that globalization was being forced upon people, rather than being a process in which people could actively participate.

Bede Griffiths daily informed himself of world events. He understood that the market process imposes values that are often hostile to faith and traditional ways of life centered on the everyday rituals of family and community. These are the values of **secularism, individualism and consumerism**. They impose themselves on the natural landscape of people’s lives like a flood, overwhelming the points of reference which give meaning and direction to people’s lives. Individuals and societies tend, as a result, to lose their sense of personal and cultural identity. As societies fragment, individuals may become more open to radical solutions. The cultural and ethical features of globalization should be of particular concern to the followers of Jesus.

Bede Griffiths daily challenged his listeners to investigate what underlies developments in the modern world. He would rightly ask, what is the concept of the human person that globalization proposes? Aware of the seasonal rhythms of nature in the village life around him in India, he would ask, what sort of culture does it favor? Does it leave room for the experience of rituals as expressions of faith?

If the benefits it offers are to endure, globalization must, Bede would say, take into account the importance of faith in people’s lives. Despite the significant historical role of religion in violence and war, the problems globalization faces cannot be solved without religion.

Bede Griffiths’ life is an inter-religious “case study.” The aim of our discussion on this Panel this morning, will be to see ways in which the lessons of his “new vision of reality” might be discovered, developed and shared with a wider global audience.

(This talk was prepared as an introduction to the Bede Griffiths panel (moderated by Fr. Douglas) at the Payap University (Thailand) Conference on **Religion and Globalization.**) ■



The Golden String

DEATH OF JUDSON TRAPNELL

Dr. Judson Trapnell, friend of Father Bede and author of the acclaimed study, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue*, died of cancer early in August. Judson served on the Publications Committee of the Bede Griffiths Trust. ■

PUBLICATIONS

- Wayne Teasdale's *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought*, has been published by Sky-light Paths. This is a new edition of Wayne's *Toward a Christian Vedanta* (1987).
- John Martin's *You Are The Light* has been published by O Books, an imprint of John Hunt Publishing, in the UK. The book brings together a number of booklets published by Brother Martin over the years including his *New Vision of Christianity*.
- Shirley DuBoulay's celebrated biography of Bede Griffiths, *Beyond the Darkness*, has been republished in the United States by National Book Distributors. ■

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

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