



# The Golden String

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## BEDE'S PROPHETIC EDGE (Part I) Robert Hale

One of the last chapters in Shirley du Boulay's insightful biography of Bede is entitled "You Cannot Put a Prophet in a Cage." And she herself concludes her book acknowledging his amazing "prophetic vision"<sup>1</sup> Arthur Jones describes Bede as a "dangerous ascetic [whose] prophetic vision illuminates today's dark age," and adds that "his writings . . . are danger-daring prods, cautions, lures, inducements, challenges, barbs, warnings and reassurances."<sup>2</sup> Bede is renowned especially for his sapiential conferences and writings bridging eastern religion and western, mysticism and science. But there was to his life and writings, from quite early on, also a prophetic edge (maybe an intrinsic dimension of true, full wisdom). And so this prophetic dimension witnesses to the amazingly full character of Bede's spirit. Some "guru types" get so focused on "spiritual practices" and the "mystical" that they tend to ignore the horrendous sufferings and injustices of our time and to forget the "new heaven and new earth" to which the prophet witnesses. Not Bede.

Of course the term "prophecy," whether in scriptural or current usage, does not primarily have to do with foretelling the future, soothsaying, or even a kind of religious city planning. Rather it refers to an incisive, Spirit inspired witness through one's life, words and writings, an authentic testimony that cuts through the respectable pretense of the privileged and calls out for justice and service to the poor, to those on the margin. In fact, true prophecy actually *does* justice, actually *serves* the poor and the marginalized. In this way it is not just criticism of present injustice; it also seeks to open new possibilities for the future, quite beyond the pre-

(Continued on page 2)

## Inside This Issue

Shirley Du Boulay's life of Abhishiktananda coming soon	3
Reflections on Church and Pentecost, <i>Cyprian Consiglio</i>	4
Hearing the Call and Opening the Heart, <i>Meath Conlan</i>	6
Double Anniversary Celebration at Osage Monastery	7
Bede Griffiths Centenary Conference in 2006	10

## MAYA AND SACRAMENT IN BEDE GRIFFITHS Brian J. Pierce

My first 'dabblings' in Hindu thought and theology were frequently met with frustrating encounters with the concept of *maya*, usually translated as *illusion*. It seemed like another subtle form of Manichaeism to me – another world-denying, matter-hating, dualistic ideology. St. Dominic, the founder of the spiritual family in which I have been formed, called the first brothers and sisters together in the early 1200's precisely to combat such a heresy. I could not see how the Book of Genesis' lovely *mantra* – "and God saw that it was good" – could possibly be reconciled with a spiritual teaching that refers to the created world as *illusion*. In the depths of my heart, I truly believe that God does not create illusions.

It has taken several years to break through this impasse. I owe my insights to Fr. Bede Griffiths. I am sure that my Benedictine sisters at the Forest of Peace Ashram in Oklahoma will smile when I say that Fr. Bede would have made a very good Dominican! He had a profound respect and confidence in the world and in history. He loved creation. He loved humanity. I have never sensed any dualistic rejection of the material world in Bede's writings. He certainly does not read the history of God's pilgrim people – culminating in the incarnation of the Word – as *illusion*. And one could hardly read Fr. Bede's reflection on his own spiritual awakening to the divine, as he so beautifully relates in the prologue to *The Golden String*, and come to the conclusion that he considered the material world an illusory obstacle to the spiritual path.

I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still... I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God<sup>1</sup>

I think that it is safe to say that for Bede, earth is definitely "crammed with heaven," to use Elizabeth Barrett Browning's phrase. Creation is not an illusion at all; it is an image of the very face of God.

It has been through reading and re-reading Bede's

(Continued on page 7)

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## The Golden String

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### *Bede's Prophetic Edge*

(Continued from page 1)

sent status quo. It often provides, as Fr. Bruno has noted, an opening out beyond to a very alternative vision, a new perspective of hope, through human conversion and effort, inspired and sustained by the Spirit. It seeks to prepare for, and even nurture, a real expansion of the Kingdom of God in our midst. Through the prophet's word, the suffering people on the margin can look beyond the disheartening 'given' to new, broader, more transcendent horizons—providing an alternative possibility for human community and communion with God. Indeed the prophet himself/herself usually lives *on the margins*, has been forced, or has chosen to be a "liminal figure," an outsider relative to the accepted privileges and values of religious and political institutions. So he is there *with* the marginalized, looking beyond *with them*, enabling them to catch a glimpse of "a new heaven and a new earth."

In this first article we shall sketch once again Bede's life, but from this particular perspective of its prophetic marginality and witness, the hopeful vision it offers. In a second, future article we shall briefly explore some of the specific prophetic actions and teachings of Bede, regarding the poor, non-Christian religions, the church institution, women, gays, and the elderly.

Bede's life from his first years was lived on the margins of English society. When Bede (then Alan) was only four, his father lost his job and savings and never recovered. The "repercussions overshadowed [Bede's] entire childhood."<sup>3</sup> His mother had to sustain the family by her own tiny income from exhausting work. He studied at Christ's Hospital, a school for children of poorer families, and to his "delight there were no class distinctions."<sup>4</sup> That school provided Bede with a glimpse of another way of being community, of being society. But there was also much suffering; du Boulay notes:

. . . the great war had only just ended, rationing was still in force, and the regime was harsh, even by the standards of public schools of the time. The boys slept on 'thin thin mattresses' . . . and they were permanently so cold that they all got chilblains. Two ex-Boer War sergeants carried out at least one public flogging every term, which took place in front of the whole school . . . there was also regular birching...<sup>5</sup>

All this impelled Bede to ponder if less oppressive ways of education and community might not be envisioned. By his last year at this daunting school Bede was becoming politically aware, and he and a little group of friends were "ardent socialists."<sup>6</sup> His reading of Tolstoy led him to affirm, in a society reverencing soldiery and military achievement, the ideal of non-violence. With two friends he even refused to join the required Officers' Training Corps in the name of peacebuilding. He also read Shaw and Swinburne, and was seen as a visionary outsider.

A scholarship enabled him to attend Oxford and at this point he could have easily 'gone mainstream,' becoming an

Oxford don or a public school teacher. But he hung out with the Oscar Wilde esthetes crowd, read D.H. Lawrence, Eliot's *Waste Land* and Joyce, pondering on the possibilities of beauty rather than contemporary ugliness, love (even *eros* love) rather than indifference and hate, as motivating forces for a different kind of community and society.

Upon graduation he and two friends, intensely critical of the industrial revolution and modern civilization, journeyed farther to the margins by undertaking an extremely austere rural, communitarian life in the Cotswolds, seeking a simple life dedicated also to study and the search for truth beyond the contemporary illusions of society. They sang William Byrd together, and the words from the psalm "Not to us, not to us O Lord, but to your name give the glory" made a deep impression on Bede "and like so much else in our life were prophetic of events which were to come."<sup>7</sup>

Later Bede approached an Anglican religious order to explore a possible vocation, and the experience in the slums of London that they recommended made a dramatic impact on him. He liked living among the poor but found the "violent oppression" of the slum conditions to be "intolerable."<sup>8</sup>

He afterwards explored the Roman Catholic Church, itself considered, as his father expressed it, "outside the pale." Even Alan's mother once mentioned that nothing would distress her more than that someone close to her should become a Roman Catholic.<sup>9</sup> But he decided to become Roman Catholic none the less, and even went radically farther, becoming a monastic postulant at Prinknash Priory just a few weeks later. Monastic life is, or at least should be, of its very nature marginal; and it should also provide a "counter cultural" model of community based on worship, mutual service and hospitality, and real simplicity of life. But it is quite possible for Benedictine monasticism to assume a quite nicely comfortable and institutional character. Here again Bede might have gone mainstream at least in the context of Roman Catholic-Benedictine monasticism. He was even made Prior of a new foundation, Farnborough, and could have moved "up" from there. But his open arms approach to all kinds of guests who were coming to dialogue with him, also about eastern religions and Jung (not traditional topics in Benedictine cloisters, indeed opening up perspectives quite beyond the monastic enclosure), and his lack of financial skills (an even graver fault?) caused the Abbot to pull him out of his post and send him up to far away Pluscarden Abbey in Scotland, the most northerly Benedictine abbey in the world.

Now he was even geographically marginalized from English mainstream life. But that relative distance was to become quite more immense when Bede accepted the invitation of an Indian Benedictine to attempt with him a foundation in India. Nor would he, as a Roman Catholic English priest, be received by everyone in Hindu India with wild enthusiasm, that country having just achieved its independence

(Continued on page 3)

**Bede's Prophetic Edge** (Continued from page 2)

from England seven years earlier, and after much struggle through the spiritual leadership of Gandhi, whom Bede very much admired. So Bede would be attacked over the next years by more fundamentalist Hindus (it was one from that movement who assassinated Gandhi)—as well as Christian traditionalists because of the startling new ways of spiritual inculturation and dialogue that he was witnessing to in his writings and his very life.

And there in Hindu India he rejoiced to have found “the other half” of his soul. He glimpsed a whole different way of living and being, of acknowledging the ubiquitous sacred, that challenged the alienating materialistic logic of the West. He and Father Alapatt established a very simple monastic presence in a little bungalow. It was not long, however, before Father Bede discovered that what he considered simplicity constituted for the residents of the local village “hitherto unheard of luxury.”<sup>10</sup> Thus his further journey to Shantivanam and his embracing of the radical poverty and simplicity of an Indian sannyasi.

It was from that radically marginalized standpoint that his prophetic witness, teaching and writing truly bloomed. Poor himself, he witnessed for the poor, and effectively helped them. In a time of Roman Catholic exclusivism, even towards other Christian churches, he affirmed the spiritual riches not only of other churches and rites but also of Hinduism and other non-Christian religions; and he provided a glimpse of a profound complementarity of the major world religions. He also challenged a Roman Catholic institution that was often, he felt, excessively opulent, clericalistic, and legalistic; and he proposed quite alternative ways of being church. He spoke out and wrote in favor of women, and from the very deep place of his own mystical experience of the Divine Feminine. He even defended gays, and contested in print severe Vatican pronouncements against them, proposing a society radically freed of homophobia. And against the prejudice of ageism he wrote movingly about, and himself witnessed to the dignity of the elderly and the special spiritual significance and opportunities of the later years. But all this wants to be explored a bit more in a subsequent article. (*Part II will appear in the next issue of The Golden String*)

**Notes:**

1. Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (New York, Doubleday, 1998), pp. 239, 269.
2. Arthur Jones, “The Christian Yogi: Bede Griffiths Traveled East to Speak to the West”, in *The National Catholic Reporter*, February 18, 2005, pp. 1, 12.
3. du Boulay, p. 4; see Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (Hereafter *GS*), p. 18.
4. du Boulay, p. 9.
5. du Boulay, p. 10.
6. *GS*, p. 25. See also Kathryn Spink, *A Sense of the Sacred: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1998), p. 45.
7. *GS*, p. 70.
8. *GS*, p. 101. Cf. also du Boulay, p. 58.
9. *GS*, p. 96. Cf. also Spink, p. 79.
10. Spink, p. 115. ■

**COMING SOON: SHIRLEY DU BOULAY'S  
BIOGRAPHY OF ABHISHIKTANANDA**

*The Cave of the Heart: A Life of Swami Abhishiktananda*, by Shirley du Boulay (author of *Beyond the Darkness*, the celebrated biography of Bede Griffiths), will be published in the United States by Orbis Books in October 2005, and should be available from Alban Books ([www.albanbooks.com](http://www.albanbooks.com)) in England, in early December. Here are some excerpts from Raimon Panikkar's glowing foreword, written as a letter to his friend.

. . . To speak about the ineffable is not an easy task. Shirley du Boulay has described your character in a wonderful manner and I can only endorse what she has written. . . . Through the author's vivid narrative I have relived a bit of my life. . .

. . . I will only underline a few aspects of your life, just to add some minor strokes to the biography. For now, with the hindsight of these past decades, I better understand the significance of your stubborn existence. From your early youth you had but one single aim: to be *ekâgratâ*, as we say in India, or “God intoxicated,” as some people might put it. India was just a symbol. The *âtman* within was ‘calling’ you. . .

. . . You yourself wrote that you felt you were much too French and even Cartesian in your spontaneous approach to reality. That was simply normal—a proof that you were never rootless. We are all the fruit of our culture. You were aware of this and it helped you to overcome some of your ‘scruples.’ But you were not aware of how much you remained (like most Westerners) a disciple of Parmenides: reality could not be contradictory. And here was the source of your anguish at finding yourself to be at the same time Christian and Hindu, monotheist and *advaitin*. For me this was no problem at all, not only because I see no contradiction, but also because I do not identify reality with rationality. The real is not obliged to obey Parmenides and we do not fall into irrationality if we are aware of it. . . . Your anguish came out of a dialectical thinking. Your greatness was that you overcame dialectical thinking, not by another way of thinking, but through painful and excruciating experience. That experience was enormously fruitful. You remained loyal to two dialectically opposed world-views. For this, we are grateful to you. . .

. . . I was then not much younger than you, but now I am much older than you ever were; perhaps this entitles me to bear witness to your life. I know most of the persons Shirley du Boulay mentions in this biography. Many of them are no longer alive. Her book is of an immense value because it describes you as you were: a man of flesh and blood, an incarnated man, and not just a “thinking reed.” Writing about you she also describes not only the situation of the Church in India but, indirectly at least, of the world at large. ■

## REFLECTIONS ON PENTECOST AND THE CHURCH Cyprian Consiglio

There is a dual aspect of Pentecost, individual and collective. It is first of all the “penetration, the impregnation of all our faculties by the ‘mystery of depth.’”<sup>1</sup> As the entrance antiphon from the Roman Rite sings, “the love of God is poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5).” It is also the birth of a new community. Fr Bede wrote:

When the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost, the power of the Spirit which had transformed the body and soul of Christ at the resurrection was communicated to his disciples. A new consciousness dawned, a consciousness beyond the ordinary rational consciousness, which set the apostles free from the limitations of our present mode of existence and consciousness and opened them to the new world of the Resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

During the days around the feast of Pentecost, especially when it fell as it did this year so close to the election of the new pope, it is appropriate to reflect on the meaning of Church, and perhaps to expand our notions of what the Church is. These reflections of mine are based on my reading of Fr Bede, especially his remarks in *The Marriage of East and West*.<sup>3</sup> To Fr Bede, first and foremost, in the broadest terms, the Church is simply humanity—human beings becoming conscious of their destiny as children of God.

In the language of the Hebrew Scriptures, Adam and Eve are the symbols of humanity created in the image and likeness of God. Our foundational myth of the Fall is trying to convey that something happened in the development of the human race: when they sin they turn away from the Spirit and fall back on time-bound nature. As a result of this, the “upward movement” of nature itself, the “evolution of matter through life and consciousness to eternal life in the Spirit” is stymied somehow, blocked, stunted. “But at the same time the mystery of redemption [also] begins.” At the same moment, the Spirit begins drawing humanity back into right relationship, into life in the Spirit. Now Bede says this is the beginning of the Church—humanity being drawn out of sin by the power of the Spirit by responding to the Word of God. So in this sense, “the Church is present in humanity from the very beginning of history.” Whenever a human being wakes to consciousness and discovers an openness to the “transcendent mystery of existence” in his or her basic intuitive consciousness, that is the power of the Spirit drawing him or her to eternal life. This is why we can say that the presence of the Spirit can be traced in all the religions of humankind. “Everywhere, in ritual and sacrifice, in doctrine and sacrament, in prayer and worship, there is the presence of the Spirit drawing [humankind] to himself: in other words, the presence of the Church.” Particularly in our day and age when we have such a tendency toward “identitarianism”<sup>4</sup> and

defining boundaries, it would be marvelous to grasp this understanding of the Universal Church.

We who belong to the visible Church by faith and baptism are not an exclusive group of the ‘saved’; we are a sign of salvation; we manifest God’s saving purpose for all humankind and for all creation. But Abhishiktananda adds that God also preserves non-Catholics and non-Christians alongside the Church “until the Church becomes ready to integrate the values they represent.” In addition to the visible Church, wherever, however, a person encounters God or truth or reality or beauty or goodness or love—any of what the philosophers call the transcendentals; no matter what name a person may give to the Transcendent Mystery of existence; even if a person is formally an agnostic or an atheist, they are encountering the grace of God in Christ.

They are so first of all because all forms of beauty, truth and goodness are manifestations of the Word, and it is that Word that became flesh in Jesus, who became the Christ. The Word, John’s Gospel teaches, enlightens everyone coming into the world. Everyone is brought into contact with the Word in some way or another, be it through art, science or human relationship; and anyone who responds to that Word is in some way responding to Christ, and so by virtue of that is in some way already a member of the Body of Christ, the body of redeemed humanity which is the Church. This is my understanding of Karl Rahner’s term the “anonymous Christian,” the transcendental freedom and openness that characterize truly being human, what Nathan Mitchell calls “the ability to reach out endlessly after others and *the Other*,” “the ineradicable human potential for self-transcendence and change,” and a “‘transcendental eroticism’ that drives all human knowing, willing and loving.”<sup>5</sup>

The Church recognizes that Church is already being born in the hearts of all who experience and respond to the Word, however it may be manifested. This is also why the Church could write in *Nostra Aetate*, which it seems appropriate to quote once again, that She

... rejects nothing of what is true and holy in [other] religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and the doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This is why the Church therefore

...urges her children to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.<sup>7</sup>

It was marvelous to hear Pope Benedict echo these themes as well in his first homily, saying that he was addressing himself to everyone, “even to those who follow other religions or who are simply seeking an answer to the

(Continued on page 5)

***Pentecost and the Church*** (Continued from page 4)

fundamental questions of life and have not yet found it ... to assure them that the Church wants to continue to build an open and sincere dialogue with them, in a search for the true good of [humankind] and of society.”

Further, and this may be the subtlest aspect of the Church, Fr Bede says that “it is not only the whole of humanity but the whole creation which constitutes the body of the Church,” because matter itself was created from the beginning with an innate tendency toward life and consciousness. Here, of course, we hear echoes of St Paul—that “all creation groans and is in agony even until now as we await the redemption of our bodies.” We human beings, as the late Pope John Paul loved to say, are the priests of creation, because we believe that human consciousness was created from the beginning “with an innate tendency towards the final and perfect consciousness of the Spirit.” All of creation is in some mysterious way dependent on our accomplishing our redemption, which is none other than our re-establishing this right relationship with God in the Spirit. It is the same Spirit present in matter, present in all of life, and present in human beings. In Jesus, who we might say is the high point of spiritual evolution, “this movement of matter and consciousness towards the life of the Spirit reached its culmination.” In Jesus, the divine consciousness took possession of human consciousness and, through that process, both his body and his soul, matter and consciousness, were transformed. This is what awaits us, who have been grafted onto the vine; this is Jesus’ glory that he shares with us.

In the Resurrection, then, as well as in the Ascension, and most decidedly in the descent of the Holy Spirit—the love of God being poured into the hearts of the believers—we see that what was accomplished in Jesus is what is destined to happen in all human beings. That is why we say with St Paul, that the first Adam was a living soul but the New Adam, Jesus, became a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45). “The Word became flesh” means that the divine Spirit entered into the depths of matter, into life and consciousness. The divine Spirit entered into the midst of human sin and suffering and raised the whole of it up to new life and new consciousness. So in this way, “the Church is present in all creation and in all humanity.” The Church is “the ‘becoming’ of God”; the Church is “the manifestation of the infinite, eternal being in the course of time and change and history.” The Church is “not simply a static presence, but . . . a dynamic power,” like yeast in the dough, “changing the course of history and transforming the world” from within.

I am reminded that there are two marvelous things about the yeast and the dough. First of all the yeast acts by disappearing into the dough! And secondly, it does not change what it affects; it merely makes it rise, from the inside. In this line, then—Cardinal Ratzinger, in his book *A New Song for the Lord*, quotes Romano Guardini being positively Taoist in explaining how to understand our mandate to exer-

cise dominion. “Dominion . . . does not mean that humans force their will upon what is given by nature but that they possess, shape and create out of knowledge; this knowledge, however, accepts what each being is in and of itself.”<sup>8</sup>

From the broadest view of the Church we can return also to a very personalist view of Church. Our great Camaldolese saint Peter-Damian, in his eloquent explanation of eremitical prayer, teaches that the “Church of Christ in all her parts is united by such a bond of love that in each part the entire Church is present.” This is why we meditate, because in some way we each and individually carry the entire Church within us. We individual living stones are “holographic”—we carry the entire Church in our matter. The “yeast in the dough” is the Spirit within us with whom we come into conscious contact by our contemplative practice, and begin this process of allowing that Spirit to transform our bodies and our souls, our flesh and our consciousness. This then is who we the Church are meant to be and become for our world, the same Spirit-bearers, beginning that work of transformation in our very bodies, in our own souls.

As we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer that our sacrifice which makes our peace with God “would bring salvation to the whole world,” so too we pray and meditate for ourselves, and for our whole world, ‘til the yeast in our dough, the indwelling Holy Spirit, allows us to become transforming agents, yeast in the dough of the world.

**Notes:**

1. Abhishiktananda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, p.216.
2. *The Marriage of East and West (MEW)*, p. 36.
3. All the following quotes will be from *MEW*, pp. 192-204.
4. I have borrowed this term from John Allen.
5. Nathan Mitchell, “Mystery and Manners: Eucharist in Post-Modern Theology,” *Worship*, March 2005, p. 139.
6. *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Romano Guardini, *Die Macht*, pp. 26-27, quoted in Joseph Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord*, p. 44. ■

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**RAIMON PANIKKAR RECALLS**

**ABHISHIKTANANDA** (see p. 3 above)

“If the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die ...” You died to yourself, but the earth has received you and the fruits are visible. The changes you dreamed of for the Church are not yet all fulfilled, but at least they no longer appear odd or impossible. New “winds” are blowing, in spite of passing backlashes. Nobody today raises an eyebrow on hearing that the Church is not identical with the Catholic government in Rome. The self-given title of the Church, repeated again in the Council, is precisely *sacramentum mundi*, which in the original language of the first Fathers sounds even better and deeper: *Mysterion tou kosmou*, the Mystery of the Kosmos. To that *mysterium* we gave our loyalty. ■

## HEARING THE CALL AND OPENING THE HEART Meath Conlan

*I could never doubt that behind all the accidents of this life, behind all the pain and conflict, there is a definite power at work which is shaping human destiny.<sup>1</sup>*

I listened to the voice of this mother: full of anguish and despair. Her telephone call woke me from sleep. In between her tears she explained how her eldest son was travelling late at night, home from a sporting event some hundreds of kilometres from home. It seems he had fallen asleep at the wheel and overturned the vehicle. She and her husband had not yet seen their son, but they had news that he'd broken his neck and had been taken by ambulance to a distant regional hospital, that he was in traction, and that the doctors had warned that if he was to ever regain his mobility he would have to remain completely immobile for half a year at least.

The parents of the young man — I'll call him Kim - asked me for two things: prayer and that I would go immediately and speak to their son, an active sportsman of a somewhat youthfully impatient disposition, urging him to see the absolute need and good sense of remaining stock-still for six or more months. At first I was disinclined to leave immediately, assuming that the hospital's medical staff was in the best position to assist the young man. I also wanted time to prepare my motivational speech. But I agreed to go to him: it was four o'clock in the morning and I arrived some hours later around breakfast time.

It was 1978 and I was only a decade older than Kim. I was daunted by the challenge. I felt completely inadequate. I had no idea what I would say to him, and I fully expected he might very well tell me what to do with my advice. On the way to the hospital I prepared a multitude of motivational speeches, all of which I discarded as vacuous and as-reflections of my needs such as looking good or clever, rather than his situation. Then at the very last turn in the long corridors that led to the Intensive Care Unit I recalled reading in his autobiography, *The Golden String* Dom Bede Griffiths' words: "I could never doubt that behind all the accidents of this life, behind all the pain and conflict, there is a definite power at work which is shaping human destiny."

Bede, while a young man in the Cotswolds, had for the first time in his life, during one long night alone, come face to face with his true being, and had been "carried away by a great wave of prayer, an event that "in the depths of [his] soul determined the rest of [his] life." His reminiscence was that love had overtaken his life, that it would not be resisted, and that this love would not accept compromise: it demanded his surrender. Bede wrote of this event:

Once surrender had been made, that power took over

the direction of my life. I had been striving to come to terms with it, to allot it a certain place in my life but it had shown me that it would accept no compromise. I wanted to keep my own will and to direct my own life; but now I had been forced to surrender. I had placed my life in the hands of a power which was infinitely beyond me and I knew from this time that the sole purpose of my life must be to leave myself in those hands and allow my soul to be governed by that will.<sup>2</sup>

I entered Kim's curtained bed-space. My mind was empty, yet in my heart I trusted that words would come. I felt moved at his plight. Lying on his back with weights attached to his feet and screws drilled into his skull with more weights attached to them, he was being stretched and held in place. I saw now why his parents asked for me to do my best to urge him to remain totally still. But for six months!

I came close to his bed and placed my hand on his. I looked at him and felt myself pray: "Not my words, Lord, but yours." It was as though I stood apart from me and heard myself say: "Kim, I hardly know you, but I do know that you will only get better if you remain absolutely still. However you'll never do that if you rely on your own strength to stay motivated. I believe you need to surrender the next six months of your life, not for yourself, but for someone or some people that you know *need* you to make this sacrifice right now." Apart from these words I have no idea of what I said. I stayed until his family came and left, with the promise that I'd return as often as I could over the next several days, weeks and months.

The following day I saw Kim's eyes. There was no fear or resentment; they were, I sensed, radiant with joy. As I approached him he movingly shared with me how angry he was at what I'd said. He recalled how "pissed off" he was, and asked himself how I dared to come and lecture him at such a time. But his mind and heart had changed when, later in the day of my first visit, his parents had come hand in hand and offered for Kim's sake to work with dedicated selflessness to make their marriage work and not get the divorce that they'd been planning over the recent months; that this was *their* sacrifice for their son.

Kim said to me with touching honesty and humility: "Until this accident happened to me, I did not know that suffering and my attitude of surrender to God's will could be such a privilege." He spoke of how he'd wanted to control his situation; how he'd use his physical strength and strength of mental will to reverse this change in fortune. He spoke of his anger and sense that the universe, and God had conspired against him and that life was unfair. . . Kim assured me that from this day on he'd come to realise the benefits of surrender, and as a consequence, he'd be doing everything he could to access the spiritual strength that lay deep within him; that come-what-may he'd be relying on God's love above all.

Kim did in fact regain his complete physical integ-

(Continued on page 7)

## DOUBLE ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATED AT OSAGE MONASTERY

- The Osage Monastic ashram community and Friends of the Forest of Peace in Sand Springs, Oklahoma hosted their annual **Bede Griffiths mahasamadhi** celebration the first weekend in June this year. Festivities began with a pilgrimage to the local Hindu temple in Tulsa, where we were given a helpful introduction to Hinduism by Raj Raghavan, a long time friend of the community. Bhajans and the *arati*, (the fire blessing) and *prasad*, were shared together with a helpful explanation of the new *murtis* (statues) which had arrived from India and were being prepared for a grand *Prana Prathishtapana* the following week. The pilgrimage returned to Osage at 4:45 for Vespers followed by a buffet supper and a conference by Fr. Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam, on “Bede Griffiths and the Global Threshold.”
- **The Osage+Monastery community** celebrated its own **25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dedication** on June 5<sup>th</sup>, the day after the Bede Griffiths Mahasamadhi celebration. Fr. Bruno again gave an enriching conference on “The Eucharist, Monastic Wisdom and Fr. Bede Griffiths.” Some 40 friends of the Forest joined the community for this final gift. Guest of honor at the Mahasamadhi celebration this year was Maria Roopa Thomas, from Tamil Nadu, daughter of two beloved disciples of Fr. Bede: Bro. Thomas and Sophia. Maria is presently on scholarship in a doctoral program at Marquette University in Minnesota. ■

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**Hearing the Call, Opening the Heart** (Continued from page 6)  
rity. He returned to his sports as an active participant for many years, and his parents remained together, more in love and more grateful than ever. Not all stories like this necessarily end with such positive resolve, but I can see the spirit of Dom Bede’s words, that “pain and conflict” in any seemingly negative human situation arises, by and large, from resistance to the power of love. This resistance is the same as blindness. Such blindness is like being “held captive by the material world” and its values, and in a sense, by our ego-self . . . So often we fail to see the inner beauty and abundant riches that we already are. Bede Griffiths reminds me of the necessity of regaining true sight and of finding inner peace — as he wrote in his autobiography: “only when we [break] with the illusion of this world and face the reality, which is hidden in the depths of our being.”<sup>3</sup>

### Notes:

1. Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String (GS)*, p. 117.
2. *GS*, p. 117.
3. *GS*, *ibid*.

*Meath Conlan’s memoir of his experiences over many years of friendship with Father Bede, Wisdom of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Bede Griffiths, will be published by Templegate this year. ■*

## Maya and Sacrament

(Continued from page 1)

writings, each time more and more amazed at his artful capacity to bridge Hindu and Christian spirituality and theology, that I have finally been able to glimpse the truth behind the Eastern teaching on the material world, the created world as *maya*. I think that the obstacle for me personally has been the word “illusion.” *Illusion* sounds to me – a westerner – like something false, not real, like a mirage in the desert. I am no great scientist, but I happen to know that the lovely crimson-colored rose outside my window, glistening in the morning sun as I write these very words, is *not* a mirage. It is, in fact, very real. Just yesterday I walked up to it to enjoy its aroma. Why does Hindu thought insist on calling it *maya*, was my question for years. Am I supposed to pretend that the beautiful rose is just a construct of my imagination? To do that I’d have to lie to myself.

Luckily, the scales began to fall from my eyes little by little. I do not know if Bede makes this exact statement, but I would venture to say, based on the insights I have gleaned from his writings, that Fr. Bede would be comfortable saying that the crimson-colored rose is not an illusion at all; it is a *sacrament*. Christian theology defines a sacrament as a symbolic sign or gesture that actually has the power to make present that which it symbolizes. In the sacrament of baptism we touch the living Christ who is truly present.

What Fr. Bede has helped me to see is that the Hindu doctrine of *maya* actually resembles quite closely what we might call a kind of sacramental theology. Sacramental theology, of course, encompasses a broader spectrum than just the seven sacraments that the Western Church groups together as having a special place in Christian worship and discipleship. There are many ways that God’s presence in Christ is mediated to us sacramentally. Making a pilgrimage to a holy place, for example, can be a very powerful sacramental experience. This was certainly true in medieval Europe, and continues today in many parts of the world.

What Fr. Bede experienced in the theophany that he describes in *The Golden String* was certainly a sacramental experience. The sacramental signs of nature opened him up to the presence of God. As Bede himself frequently cites from the Bible, “The Spirit of the Lord has filled the world”<sup>2</sup> – another way to say that “earth is crammed with heaven.” It is because of this fullness that the whole world takes on a sacramental character. All of creation becomes a place where we encounter God. This is what we sing about in the Cantic of Daniel: “Bless the Lord, all that grows in the ground; sing praise to God and highly exalt him forever. . . Bless the Lord, seas and rivers; sing praise to God and highly exalt him forever”<sup>3</sup> Creation sings to God, because creation is full of God’s presence. The divine music present in the material world is, in fact, its very essence. As Bede notes,

Every material thing is a kind of incarnation, an expres-

(Continued on page 8)

**Maya and Sacrament** (Continued from page 7)

sion in terms of matter and energy and life of the one supreme reality.<sup>4</sup>

Someone else experiencing the spectacular sunset and the lovely music of the lark that radically changed Bede's life might have just called it a profound encounter with the beauty of nature. For Bede it was something much greater than that. The experience was sacramental; his heart was opened up to a face-to-face glimpse of Truth itself. As he himself says, the sky seemed but a veil covering over the face of God.

A sacrament is the doorway through which we come into God's presence. The door itself is *not* God; it is an instrument. What Bede and the East are attempting to do through the teaching on *maya* is to invite us not to spend our entire lives marveling at the beautiful door, but to walk through it into the transcendent Reality we call God. When Jesus prophesied about the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, they thought he was crazy.<sup>5</sup> They thought he had turned against the Jewish faith and the sacred dwelling place of God. Jesus was actually trying to do just the opposite. He was trying to show them the way beyond the external sign of the temple with its "beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God" into the *real Temple* of God's very Self.

In *The Marriage of East and West*, Bede carefully spells out the teaching on *maya*, showing its compatibility with the Judeo-Christian tradition. He begins with a quote from St. Paul: "Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely his eternal power and divinity has been clearly perceived in the things that are made."<sup>6</sup> Bede elaborates:

From the beginning of history, as far as one can tell, [humanity] has recognized behind all the phenomena of nature and consciousness a hidden power...There is not a particle of matter in the universe, not a grain of sand, a leaf, a flower, not a single animal or human being which has not its eternal being in that One, and which is not known in the unitive vision of the One. What we see is the reflection of all the beauty of creation through the mirror of our senses and our imagination, extended in space and time. But there in the vision of the One all the multiplicity of creation is contained, not in the imperfection of its becoming but in the unity of its being."<sup>7</sup>

One of the keys to Bede's clarifying insights, at least as far as my own understanding, has been his use of the phrase, "behind all the phenomena of nature." This phrase finally opened up the deeper meaning of the concept of *maya* for me personally. The idea of a greater Reality which stands behind and manifests itself in the natural world is much easier for my Western mind to grasp than the term "illusion." To marvel in the beauty of creation, then, is in no way an obstacle to grasping the ultimate Truth of God. Natural beauty, the human body and mind, art, sexuality, even politics and public discourse – all have the capacity to

reflect of the beauty of God. Meister Eckhart says something very similar: "All that God ever created is nothing but an image and a sign of eternal life." There is certainly no dualistic Manichaeism in this theology.

For Bede, then, every expression of life in the natural world, every moment in the life of a human being has the possibility of opening us up to a sacramental encounter with God. The crimson-colored rose has the full potential of being a sacrament of God's beauty and goodness – as long as I am willing to gradually allow the eye of my heart to be opened to *that* which is *behind* the rose, that "supreme reality" which has become incarnate in the rose. For the time being I am able to glimpse this revelation intuitively, "dimly as in a mirror,"<sup>8</sup> but this intuitive glimpse is what the spiritual journey is all about. We are always on a journey to an ever deeper *seeing*. The other option is to fall down and worship the rose as Ultimate Reality, and thus be caught in the trap of *maya*.

In several of his writings Fr. Bede uses a parable from the Chandogya Upanishad to underline the truth of the one, unifying, supreme Reality that stands behind and beneath all phenomena. From *A New Vision of Reality*:

The guru tells the disciple to take a fruit from the tree, break it open and then take a seed and break it open, and he asks the disciple what he can see. The disciple says, 'I see nothing,' to which the guru replies, 'In that nothing, that hidden essence which you cannot see, the power of the growth of the whole tree consists...Thou, Svetaketu, art that'<sup>9</sup>

In other words, notes Bede, there is only one ultimate Source of life, only one ultimate Reality: "The source of the universe around us is the source of our own being." To contemplate the evening song of a lark or the beauty of a crimson-colored rose is to open ourselves to that hidden essence which is behind all that exists.

In a talk entitled "Modern Physics and the Eucharist" which Fr. Bede gave at Shantivanam Ashram in South India in 1989, he delves further into this teaching on sacrament, relating it directly to the sacrament of the eucharist. Using the Thomistic distinction between sign and reality, Bede cautions his listeners not to get caught up in the sacramental doorway that the eucharist itself proposes to be. "St. Thomas Aquinas has a very definite vocabulary here," says Bede.

A *sacramentum* for him is a sign. All sacraments are signs...The bread and the wine in that sense are sacramental signs, and *the reality behind the sign* [is what Thomas] calls the *res*, the thing. So we have the *sacramentum*, the sign, and the *res*, the reality. The bread and the wine themselves are a *sacramentum* – a sign – but through and with and in that sign the reality of Jesus is present... a spiritual body and spiritual blood and that soul of Jesus, the consciousness of Jesus transformed and now one with the Divine Consciousness."<sup>10</sup>

(Continued on page 9)



**Maya and Sacrament** (Continued from page 8)

What Bede is saying here is that the eucharist is one of the most important doorways through which we enter into the presence of the Risen Christ. But he is also raising a note of caution: a person could conceivably become so attached to the physicality of the eucharist – the consecrated host and wine – that the person would actually end up distancing him or herself from the actual encounter with Christ. This, too, would be to fall into the trap of *maya*. In the end, we are called to be disciples of the Living Christ and not of the consecrated bread and wine. The eucharist is the sacramental doorway that leads us into an encounter with Christ, the beloved Son of God.

*Maya*, then, can be a very important teaching for us. In our present day, given the rise of religious fundamentalism in some sectors of almost all of the world's great religions, the teaching on *maya* is one which we must look at again. The transcendent One, whom we call by different names, is always greater than any name or description. The holy scriptures of the different spiritual traditions (Upanishads, Torah, Bible, Koran, etc.) are sacramental doorways which have the capacity of leading us into the presence of God. This is what we discover in *Lectio Divina*. The Word of God can actually open us up to a face-to-face encounter with God. In and of themselves, though, the scriptures are *sacramentum*; they are not the divine *Res* itself. They are not God. "No words can ever express what God is," says Bede.<sup>11</sup> Even the words of the Bible can become *maya*, for it is possible to be attached to sacred words *about* God while turning our backs on the very presence and Truth of God.

For Fr. Bede, to embrace the teaching of *maya* is ultimately a path to spiritual freedom, for in so doing one chooses to live one's whole life in a detached manner – refusing to give ultimate obedience to any-thing or any-one but God alone. In his own life, this freedom was symbolized, sacramentalized, through his choice to consecrate the last half of his life to God by living as a *sannyasi* – a person who renounces the world to seek God alone. "A *sannyasi*," says Bede,

. . . is one who renounces not only the world in the biblical sense of the world of sin, the world which today is so clearly set on the path of destruction. A *sannyasi* renounces the whole world of 'signs,' of appearances...The *sannyasi* is one who is called to witness to this Truth of Reality *behind the signs*, to be a sign of that which is beyond signs.<sup>12</sup>

In the words of the *Isa Upanishad*, we can almost hear Fr. Bede's own heart lifted up in prayer:

The face of truth remains hidden behind a circle of gold. Unveil it, O God of light, that I who love the true may see.<sup>13</sup>

Bede seems to be teaching us that, from a certain perspective, our entire life can be understood as *maya* – a sacramental reflection of a greater Reality. Careful not to

denigrate the beauty and value of human life, the life of the *sannyasi* points us beyond all that is good in this world to the One who is the fountain of goodness itself. The spiritual path of a *sannyasi* is like that of a shooting star, quickly progressing into the dark cave of the heart, into the unmitigated presence of the One who is without name. For the *sannyasi*, notes Bede, the phenomenal world simply disappears. His or her whole life is directed to that Reality which is behind the phenomenal world – God. Bede points to the life of Jesus as an example:

. . . Jesus himself, the great *sannyasi*, disappeared after the resurrection...Only when he had gone could the Spirit come. . . Like the Master, the disciple must disappear. . .<sup>14</sup>

. . . An 'ashram' is only a stopping place, in which a *sannyasi* may live for a time...So also every Church, every religion, every human community, is only a stopping place, a tent which is pitched on this earth by pilgrims who are on their way to the City of God... when we have entered the City there are no more walls and no gates, for faith itself must pass away...For those who are willing to die, death is the gateway to eternal life.<sup>15</sup>

It seems, then – if we follow Bede's thinking through to its logical conclusion – that death itself is, for the pilgrim, the great sacrament, for when death is embraced, the final veil drops away; *maya* is no more. "We have to die in order that we may live," says Bede, whose life was saturated with the paschal mystery. In death "we will see face to face" that which in this life we have only glimpsed. "Then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."<sup>16</sup>

**Notes:**

1. *GS*, p.9.
2. Wisdom 1:7
3. Dan 3:76-78.
4. *MEW*, p.103.
5. Lk 21:5-19.
6. Rom 1:20.
7. *MEW*, pp. 89, 92.
8. 1 Cor 13:12.
9. *NVR*, p.64.
10. "Modern Physics and the Eucharist," pp. 8-9; cf. *MEW*, p.43.
11. *MEW*, p.101.
12. *MEW*, pp. 42-43.
13. Isha Upanishad, v. 15, *The Upanishads*, trans. Mascaró, Penguin Classics, 1965, p.50.
14. *MEW*, pp. 43-44.
15. *MEW*, p. 44.
16. 1 Cor 13:12.

*Brian Pierce is a Dominican who has lived at Osage Monastery for a year and a half, has twice visited Shantivanam, Bede Griffiths' ashram in South India, and is now living and working in Lima, Peru. In 2005 Orbis Books will publish his book on the writings of Meister Eckhart and Thich Nhat Hanh. ■*

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## *The Golden String*

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### **BEDE GRIFFITHS CENTENARY CONFERENCES IN CALIFORNIA**

The year 2006 will mark the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Bede Griffiths (on December 17, 1906). The Camaldolese Institute for East-West Dialogue plans to celebrate the centenary with a symposium of scholars and friends of Father Bede at New Camaldoli, in Big Sur, California, from June 24-28, followed by a public conference at Mercy Center, in Burlingame California, on the following weekend: June 30-July 2. The theme of both events (to be co-sponsored by the Bede Griffiths Trust) will be *Carrying Forward Bede Griffiths' Contemplative/Prophetic Vision*.

As the time for these conferences approaches, more specific information on the presenters and content of the individual talks will be supplied in *The Golden String*, as well as the information needed to make reservations for the Burlingame event. The presentations at the Big Sur symposium will be edited and published in the form of a book, as were those of the summer 2000 Asian-Christian monastic symposium, *Purity of Heart and Contemplation*, which also took place at New Camaldoli. ■

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[www.bede.griffiths.com](http://www.bede.griffiths.com)

## **The Golden String**

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