



The Golden String

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BEDE'S PROPHETIC EDGE (Part II) Robert Hale

We have noted¹ how the life journey of Bede unfolded at the margins of society and religion, and how from that distance from "the mainstream" he offered a rigorous prophetic witness, challenging the given and offering new horizons of hope. Now we will explore in greater depth six particular areas of his prophetic witness.

1) *On Behalf of the Poor*

Bede himself grew up in poverty, went to a school for the children of the poor, lived with the poor in the inner city of London for a period, and then for decades in India, and intentionally chose a life of rigorous simplicity of the *sannyasi*. He was appalled by the opulence and excesses of the rich in the West. He also prophetically critiqued the class system of India and the spiritual roots of what he took to be its indifference to poverty:

The great struggle of the Hindu saint, and in a sense the great aim of Hindu philosophy, was to escape from this wheel of time: to get free from this world of time, space, and matter, and to experience that ultimate reality, that ultimate oneness of being which is beyond time and space and matter and limitation.

It is a wonderful search, but it leaves out the reality of this world. I cannot help feeling that the present situation of India, with its masses of poor, illiterate people, of people suffering from disease and being left to die in the streets, really stems from this basic philosophy—all are caught in this wheel of *samsara*. Your karma has brought you to this state

(Continued on page 8)

SEEKING GOD ALONE A Sangha talk by Cyprian Consiglio

Yesterday in his regular Sunday address the Holy Father spoke of his namesake, St Benedict, the father of Western monasticism whose feast we celebrate today. Pope Benedict summarized Benedict's teaching with the phrase, *Quaerere Deum*, which is Latin for "to seek God." The monk is the one who seeks God. This comes from the section in St Benedict's Rule for monks (RB 58:7) concerning the admission of novices: "The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God." Another well-known phrase from the RB that the pope quoted is very much like it, from Chapter 72:11, On the Good Zeal of Monks: "Let them prefer nothing to the love of Christ."

I heard a tape of Fr Bede Griffiths preaching on this very phrase—literally in the RB, *Et sollicitudo sit si revera Deum quaerit*—on the feast of St Benedict just before he died. He was comparing the Western Benedictine notion of the monk with the *sannyasa* ideal of India, saying that they were basically the same thing at their root. For a time I lived in a cabin in the woods in Big Sur that had been inhabited before me by one of our recluses, the recently deceased Bro Antony, and over the door he had placed a small plaque which read in French, *Dieu Seul*, "God alone," which I left there when I moved in. Not just "seeking God," Fr Bede said, but the monk is the one who seeks "God alone," only God. He then laid out three different meanings of that phrase, "seeking God alone."

First of all, the monk is the one who is alone. This may be the origin of the word monk, from the Greek *monos*, meaning single or alone. This could mean the hermit, but certainly it also means the celibate, or the one vowed to chastity, the one who seeks God by him - or herself. In every culture the monk's "aloneness," as we say in Christian terminology, is an eschatological sign that ultimately we will face God alone: "there will be no marriage or giving in marriage" (Mt 20:30). No doubt in this individuality we will find union through communion, but the *monos*, the single one, stands as a sign of that fundamental aloneness of the path.

Secondly, "seeking God alone" means of course what may be most obvious: seeking nothing but God. Not riches, not fame, not glory, not family. During the *sannyasa diksha* (initiation) in India, the candidate proclaims, "I renounce the desire for offspring, the desire of riches, the desire of the

(Continued on page 2)

Inside This Issue

The Word of the Cross, a homily by Bede Griffiths	3
Pilgrim's Memoir: Merton and Griffiths, David Spillane	4
Bede Griffiths Centenary Conference in California	4
Young Bede Griffiths Sangha . Cyprian Consiglio	5
Shirley Du Boulay's Life of Abhishiktananda reviewed by Bruno Barnhart	6
Meath Conlan's <i>Wisdom of a Prophet</i> to be Published	8

The Golden String

Seeking God Alone (Continued from page 1)

world.” In the RB (33:6) Benedict quotes the Acts of the Apostles (4:32), that the reason that all things are held in common possession among monks is so that no one presumes to call anything their own. And after monks make solemn vows they are to be aware “that from day they will not even have their own bodies at their disposal” (RB 58:25). This is the monk as renunciate, an image we have lost a little in our day and age in the West, where most monastics are highly educated and cultured folks who usually live in middle- to upper-class air-conditioned comfort. (There is a darkly humorous saying: “Nothing is too good for those who have given up everything for God!”) In India, too, quite often in modern times to enter a monastic order is to take a step up on the social and economic ladder. In Asia perhaps even more than here, especially in Buddhist cultures, the monk is often thought of as erudite preacher and scholar, and is highly respected in and even pampered by society. But the archetype remains of the *sannyasa*, the *bhikku*: God alone—the monk is the one who has renounced all and everything for the liberty to search for God alone.

Last of all is the aspect of the Benedictine way that the Holy Father mainly underlined in his talk, saying that Benedict did not found an institution that was oriented primarily to the evangelization of the barbarians who were invading southern Europe, or of any other peoples, as did other great missionary monks of the time, “but indicated to his followers that the fundamental, and even more, the sole objective of existence is the search for God: “*Quaerere Deum*.” St Benedict knew “that when the believer enters into a profound relationship with God, he [or she] cannot be content with living in a mediocre way, with a minimal ethic and superficial religiosity,” the Holy Father said.

We speak often of the difference between charism and institution; what starts out as a charism sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, becomes an institution with laws and rules and traditions and expectations. What we are speaking of here is not the institution of monasticism so much as the charism of monasticism, the first movement of monasticism, to *fuga mundi* — to “flee the world” to be alone with the Alone. The famous Benedictine scholar Jean Leclercq writes that monasticism resulted not from law or obligations, but from a spontaneous phenomenon—or one could say, at its first movement, a “charismatic” phenomenon—that allows the monk to enjoy an enormous liberty, bound only by this search for God. For this reason St Benedict, though writing a rule for monks, carefully outlining the hierarchy of the monastery, and telling the monks that even their bodies are not their own anymore, nonetheless recognizes that the monks’ main obligation is seeking God alone, and therefore recognizes their right to make choices different than the ones he made, as long as they place themselves inside that which Benedict considers the one absolute: the love of Christ. And so Benedict calls his rule a “little rule for beginners” (73:8) that can lead us to the perfect love that

casts out all fear when we will “run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (RB Pro 49).

In that same line, Abhishiktananda, in one of my favorite passages from his letters, writes about his impatience with going to seminars about monasticism. “Congresses and seminars,” he says, “will not contribute anything.”

Monasticism is in the first place a charism. Structures will be born from the charismatic enthusiasm of individuals. . . . Reform is not going to come from chit-chat and discussion. Benedict, like Antony, went off into the desert, and Francis took to the roads without collecting all the neighboring monks for a congress. (Stuart, *His Life told through his Letters*, p. 301)

This also reminds me of what our Prior General Emanuele Bargellini told me once: “*Cipriano, monachesimo non è un contenitore; è un’energia*—monasticism is not a container; it’s an energy!”

What this all meant furthermore to Bede was that the monk seeks God not through something else, but seeks God directly. Ultimately, the monk does not seek God through work, nor through music, nor through art, nor through study, nor even through service, but through a pure and simple search for a direct, immediate experience of God. This does not necessarily mean that the monk does not work—even the work of evangelization—but somehow the work comes through and from the experience of God, not the other way around. Perhaps ultimately a monk would not so much say, “I find God through music,” “I find God through my work,” or “I find God through my study,” as say “I find music through God, I find study through God, I find work through God.” “Let them prefer nothing to the love of God.” A monk teacher of mine told me something similar years ago in regards to sacred music, for example; he said he did not think that liturgical music was so much the sound of our *searching* for God as it was the sound of our having *been found* by God. It’s a subtle difference, but very important. God alone, nothing preferred to the love of Christ.

This last meaning also applies to our way of meditation. The monk, Fr Bede said, is the one who seeks God in the heart above all, ultimately not through any image, not through any of our meager understandings or thoughts or images of God, as poetic and beautiful and lofty as they may be, but seeking a conscious contact with God—As—God—Is. To do this we enter into the darkness of unknowing, a way of knowing that is a way of unknowing, stripping ourselves of all that we think we know about God—is this not a renunciation, a form of poverty as well?—, ready for an encounter with God-As-God-Is. Now, anything may spring from that, work, service, or art, when the spring of living water flows from out of our heart, but the contemplative way puts that “love of Christ” above all other things, seeking *God alone*, seeking God *alone*, seeking *God alone*. ■

THE WORD OF THE CROSS

A homily at Shantivanam by Bede Griffiths

In this reading (See 1 Cor 1:17-31), St. Paul contrasts the Gospel with the mentality both of “the Jews and the Greeks.” The Jews demanded signs of divine *power*, and in the Gospel from time to time Jews would demand such a sign from Jesus. It was traditional in Israel that if a prophet proclaimed some new message he had to show a sign from God that he that he was a true prophet of God. And remember that it got to the point at which they asked for a sign and Jesus replied that no sign would be given. He wouldn’t give that kind of sign. What mattered to the Greeks, on the other hand, was “*wisdom*,” *sophia*. Philosophy, the ‘love of wisdom,’ was the very heart of the Greek world. And St. Paul preaches this Christ crucified, who is precisely a “stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles.”

What precisely do we understand by *Christ crucified*? I think the first thing noted by the Jews, so eager for signs, would be that Jesus refused to provide a demonstration of power. Recall his temptations in the wilderness: to turn stones into bread, to leap from the top of the temple and be borne up by an angel — some dramatic sign of power, what we call in India a *siddhi*. Jesus didn’t want to demonstrate *siddhis*. And, in fact, he did the exact opposite; he revealed himself not in power but in weakness. And this was a terrible paradox; everybody expected the Messiah primarily to be an earthly king, to topple the enemies of Israel, to re-establish the kingdom; and he clearly rejected that. At least he could have more conspicuously manifested spiritual power; he could have shown himself to be the mighty one continually producing stupendous miracles. But his miracles were never meant to show off; they were always done out of compassion and concern for people. There was in Jesus no desire to demonstrate that kind of power. Instead he showed this terrible weakness — the only plausible explanation for it is that his way is a way of love.

Love reveals itself not in the demonstration of power, but in weakness, in surrendering oneself. Now this surrender was a total surrender of himself and it has exercised this tremendous power ever since. We discern in it the sign of a love which is an incomparably greater power than that which is manifest in all the signs and wonders that people admire. So we derive from our reading the first and fundamental theme that the power of God is revealed in Jesus as this power of love which is ‘weakness’ insofar as it doesn’t fight against the enemies, doesn’t try to destroy them. It accepts humiliation and defeat, yet conquers by love, conquers by suffering, conquers by self-surrender. It’s a tremendous message, when you think about it.

And then the other aspect is *wisdom*. The Greeks sought wisdom in philosophy, and quite clearly Jesus did not preach that kind of wisdom. There is another kind of wisdom that St. Paul often mentions; that is the wisdom of the knowledge of God. We don’t think of this so often; Jesus revealed not only the love and the power of God but this

wisdom of God. He revealed that at their highest point, the two are one and the same. He revealed that the highest knowledge is the knowledge of love. Scientific knowledge, philosophical knowledge, theological knowledge— all these ways of knowing have their value, but the highest knowledge is what is called the knowledge of love. Wisdom is knowledge by love; and when you come to think of it, if you really want to reach the deepest knowledge of a person, you only do it by love. You don’t know a person except by love. And the deepest knowledge is *personal* knowledge; your knowledge of science, of nature, is very good as far as it goes; your theoretical psychology will help as far as it goes, but the deepest knowledge, the only really authentic knowledge is the knowledge of love and the discovery of the reality of the person. Jesus went behind all the outward appearances to the heart of humanity, the heart of the person and revealed this knowledge by love. I think this is really the message which is revealed in the cross, and it is not essentially a message of suffering. This latter interpretation has been a great misfortune. Most people think of Christ crucified first of all as suffering, and that the Christian message is *you must suffer*. Of course we do have to learn to bear suffering, but that knowledge only comes through love.

Much of the Gospel has been falsified in that way. Many of the modern crucifixes, especially some of the Spanish ones, show Christ suffering on the cross. There was not one crucifix on which the suffering Christ is found in the early churches; in fact, before the 11th century. When they did display the cross it bore a triumphant Christ. The meaning was love’s triumph over sin and death. In the Syrian Church, to which we once belonged, the crucifix is always made of silver, gold and precious stones and it is called the *Cross of Light*; it is a sign of triumph, of victory, of glory.

And that is why on Good Friday you still veil the statues and you veil the crucifix — which seems a complete contradiction; the reason for it was that in the Eastern Church the crucifixes were these brilliant jeweled, gold and silver things and you veiled the glory of the cross on Good Friday. But now in our Western church with our suffering Christ on the cross we veil it on Good Friday for no reason at all; it’s just at that time (logically speaking) that it should be visible. It’s only an old custom that was retained despite changed circumstances.

That’s the point you see — that in the early church the cross is seen as the triumph of love and of grace and of God overcoming the suffering and death — and not as signifying only the humiliation and the suffering. That aspect of suffering has been so emphasized in modern Catholicism that it upsets people badly. There’s enough suffering in life without putting further suffering onto people. And of course that approach does not teach us how to bear suffering.

You only bear suffering through love. Only by love do we really learn to accept suffering and bear it. So I think that the preaching of the cross can be very misleading — or it can be wonderfully sustaining. ■

**A PILGRIM'S MEMOIR: MERTON
AND GRIFFITHS David Spillane**

1) New Haven, Connecticut - May 1953

For a 14 year old boy six weeks of convalescence, from what should have been a simple appendectomy, seems like a lifetime. But sometimes surgeons botch even the easy ones. Fortunately, my mother decided to give me *The Seven Storey Mountain* to read. I imagine Merton's spiritual autobiography published in 1948 must be the last one of this genre to make the best seller list in modern times. I was enthralled as only idealistic seekers in their mid-teens can be. All these years later that youthful enthusiasm seems naively idealistic. Nonetheless, I remain beholden to Merton for showing me a peek into the contemplative life and the call to the inner spiritual dimension.

2) St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Mass. - April 1954

Longing to see for myself what this Trappist life was like I booked a retreat. The guesthouse was a simple converted old home about a mile from the monastery. I remember rising at what for me was the middle of the night to walk up the winding road under the starlit sky to watch the monks file silently into the church and fill up the choir stalls. How could your spirit not rise to God with the intoning of *Deus in adiutorium meum intende?* Where do I sign up? It never came to pass for a variety of reasons and while I ran for years fleeing 'The Hound of Heaven', I was pursued by a relentless lover.

3) O. L. of Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky - Feb. 1959

My life seems to be in tatters. Even though I am attending a prestigious university on an academic scholarship and am an excellent athlete, fraternity life, booze, parties and young women have my life all a jumble. I took the long bus ride down here looking for answers and hoping to see Merton. I could not pick out Merton among the monks, and the good priest who heard my confession had little time for my youthful angst. No answers were forthcoming. The following year I flunked out, joined the Army and eventually ended up in Vietnam. From there on my life descended into maelstrom. It's not a pretty picture and I will spare you the Hollywood details. Though I seldom went near a church for years, I went on to read almost all of Merton's writings.

4) The Catholic Center, Hong Kong - March 1982

It is cold and damp, and the wind off the water is penetrating.. After noon time mass, I stop for the first time in the little adjoining book store and browse. I pick up a slim volume with a black and white cover entitled *Return to the Center* by Bede Griffiths. Who's this guy and why is he dressed like a sannyasin? His books speak volumes but for me what comes through in his writings, as well as Merton's, is the authenticity of a lover of God - a rare and to be treasured quality.

5) Holy Cross Abbey, Berryville, Virginia - July 1982

I come to spend two months with the community to address the question - did I miss the fork in the road in my

teens when I wanted to be a Trappist? I have several long talks with the Abbot, along with several of the other monks, on this subject. In my last conversation with the Abbot, who interestingly was a former novice under Merton, and a close friend, he has some words of wisdom that have stuck with me all these years. Very few people are called to a lifetime in the cloister. The root of the words monk and monastery comes from the Greek *monos* referring to the vocation to remain singularly focused on the love of God. This can be done anywhere, not only in the monastic life. Continue to be the pilgrim you've always been.

6) Sydney, Australia - May 1992

I attend two successive weekend talks by Fr. Bede Griffiths. I finally get to hear him in person after having read all his books. He is frail but his speaking voice is still strong and vibrant. To my pleasant surprise both venues on Saturday and Sunday are completely filled with eager and attentive listeners. Fr. Bede talks about 30 minutes, breaks briefly, then takes about 30 minutes of questions. His talks are an overview of the material in his last book *A New Vision of Reality*. During his break he remains on stage and talks to well-wishers. On the second day I get in line during the break in the hopes of paying my respects. The line moves slowly and one of the organizers moves to cut off the line as break time is expiring. To my good fortune I am the last one in the line before the cut off. When I get up to Bede, he seems almost physically translucent. I hold his hand for a very brief exchange and feel grateful for the opportunity.

I don't think Merton or Bede knew how many lives they influenced and continue to influence. In my musing on why this has been the case I feel that it is as much the profundity of their writings as it was the authenticity of their being and their love of God uniquely expressed in their lives. May we give thanks to God for such inspiring examples and pray that He will grace us with more in these difficult times. ■

**BEDE GRIFFITHS CENTENARY
CONFERENCE IN CALIFORNIA**

The year 2006 marks the hundredth anniversary of Bede Griffiths' birth. From Friday June 30 to Sunday July 2, 2006, The Camaldolese Institute for East-West Dialogue will be offering a conference on the theme: *The Continuing Quest: Carrying Forward the Vision of Bede Griffiths*, at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California. The weekend will include conferences, a round-table discussion and an Ashram style eucharistic liturgy. Among the monastics participating will be Bernardino Cozzarini (the new Camaldolese Superior General, from Italy), Sr. Donald and Sr. Pascaline, George (from India), Martin (from India), Laurence Freeman (from England), Robert, Joseph, Bruno, Cyprian and Thomas. Price for the weekend, including all events, room & board, is \$220. For reservations contact Lawrence Balthasar, 805 528 0286. E-mail: lbalthasar@calpoly.edu ■

YOUNG BEDE GRIFFITHS SANGHA IN CALIFORNIA Cyprian Consiglio

Sangha or **samgha** (Sanskrit/Pali, 'gathering, community') . . . The sangha developed with two emphases, one being the pursuit of enlightenment through contemplation, the other being 'the bearing of books', undertaking work on behalf of society at large, in teaching, performing rituals. . . (from *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*)

I led a series on Christian meditation in the Fall of 2004 at Holy Cross parish in Santa Cruz, California. I had based the talks largely on Fr Bede's teaching, entitling the series "Spirit, Soul and Body: The Universal Call to Contemplation," both the title and the subtitle being themes that were prevalent in Fr Bede's writings. As for the subtitle, my aim in the series was to be able to speak to Christians who had already found some introduction to meditation and contemplative prayer through the treasures of the east—through *za-zen* or yoga, for example, as is so prevalent in our area—and were looking for a bridge between that practice and their Christianity. So, as Fr Bede showed by example, while teaching I always tried to draw as much as possible on "universal wisdom" in order to show the resonances between the Christian contemplative tradition and other spiritual paths. Also, as Fr Bede taught, the series was based on the assumption that all people are called to share in the gifts of contemplation, not just professional religious. As many of us know, many Christians have been being fed by other traditions because until recently there have been few Christian teachers who have been able to hand down our own contemplative practice.

The series was a great success and at the end of it it was obvious that some of the participants wanted something more, though it wasn't clear to me what exactly that something was. Shortly afterwards I was visiting Shantivanam in India again. While there I met some folks from the Bede Griffiths Sangha of England, and it seemed immediately obvious to me that I ought to try to organize the same type of thing in California. Upon returning from India, I gathered a small group and we began. We eventually decided to adopt the name *Sangha Shantivanam* (which was also the original name of the group in England) to be as inclusive as possible of other teachers such as Abhishiktananda and Jules Monchanin, but also to have a direct tie-in with Saccidananda Ashram. The following is our statement of purpose:

Sangha Shantivanam is a Christian community which aims to promote the Universal Call to Contemplation through shared prayer and spiritual practice, and to be a sign of unity and an instrument of peace by seeking to understand the experience of Ultimate Reality as found in all the world's spiritual traditions.

We take our name from Shantivanam, Saccidananda Ashram in Tamil Nadu, South India, whose three founders, Pere Jules Monchanin, Dom Henri le Saux, OSB (Swami

Abhishiktananda), and Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB Cam., sought to lead a contemplative life in both the deepest tradition of Christian Benedictine monasticism and the ancient tradition of Indian sannyasa. In the true spirit of an ashram, Shantivanam became a place of both ecumenical and inter-religious gatherings as well as a spiritual home for seekers from every tradition from all over the world. Toward the end of his life, Fr Bede, who had become an internationally known author and teacher, was both initiating Christian sannyasis and receiving lay people as oblates of Shantivanam. We aim to continue his and his predecessors' work through personal practice and study-dialogue.

We have undertaken this effort with the blessing of the community of Shantivanam, Saccidananda Ashram, and also of the Camaldolese Benedictine Congregation and the Bede Griffiths Trust: A Society for the Renewal of the Contemplative Life.

We are currently renting a double room in the basement of an old high school, one half of which is a meditation hall, and the other half a meeting room with the beginnings of a lending and reference library. We have a treasurer, a librarian, a guardian of the sangha room, and a small steering committee. Presently we meet every other week for *satsang*. Our meetings always begin with a prayer service based on that of Shantivanam, which includes chanting mantras and reading from *Universal Wisdom*, chanting psalms and reading Scripture. We then have a period of teaching and discussion based on common reading that we are doing, and follow that with a period of meditation. After meditation we offer intercessory prayer using some form of the Buddhist *metta*, and then conclude with a prayer that we have adapted from the Taitriya Upanishad, and then a period of business and socializing. We have had one day of recollection together at a local retreat house, and have two longer retreats scheduled for the months ahead.

I was especially pleased for our humble beginnings when I watched a film of a 1992 interview with Fr Bede entitled "Exploring the Christian Hindu Dialogue" during which the following exchange took place:

Q: What would you like to see happen here in the United States as far as setting up a center for spreading this kind of spirituality?

Fr Bede: I'm very interested now in lay communities. I find so many people have this call to contemplation—though they may not use that word for their spiritual life—and don't feel called to the traditional monastic or religious life and nor to a simple married life. They want to find a way to dedicate their lives as lay people working in the world to contemplation, the experience of God in final fulfillment. So what I have in mind is what we call "oblate communities." . . . I want to see free lay communities coming up with a bond with a monastery or with a monastic tradition so that they get guidance but have a freedom to develop in their own

(Continued on page 6)



**SHIRLEY DU BOULAY'S
LIFE OF ABHISHIKTANANDA
Reviewed by Bruno Barnhart**

Shirley Du Boulay, author of *Beyond the Darkness*, the celebrated life of Bede Griffiths, has now given us a splendid account of the life and development of Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux, 1910-1973), *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Orbis, Maryknoll N.Y., 2005 (US \$22.00). These two carefully researched narratives are of unusual value in opening to us the inner chemistry of the interaction between Christian and Hindu spiritual traditions in the early years of their contemporary encounter.

Abhishiktananda's story is well told: out of a mass of historical data the author has brought into clear focus the essential development and its successive stages, her subject's progressive concentration upon the 'one thing' that he deemed necessary. The book itself is shaped and impelled by the French monk's accelerating inward movement as he surrenders to the gravitational attraction of the archetypal *One*. His intense, strongly carved character emerges quickly as he seizes upon his own 'golden string' and follows it un-deviatingly to its end. This is a decisive, one-pointed character, who wrote of his own journey with dramatic force. Reading his words we share the passionate excitement of his quest, the anguish of his inner conflict, the journey through darkness and light, the hardly expressible clarity and freedom of his progressive awakening.

In the book's early chapters we read of Henri Le Saux's childhood on the Breton coast, with its intense family relationships, then his entry into the Benedictine monastery of Kergonan, not far from his home. Soon we feel ourselves swept into the powerful movement which will define the French monk's life as he feels the attraction of the spiritual depths of India and responds to it. Having received an invitation from Fr. Jules Monchanin to join him in a new Indian-Christian monastic experiment, he reached Tamil Nadu in August 1948, at the age of 38. Like Bede Griffiths and countless other westerners, he was immediately captivated by the land, its people and ageless spirituality; India would become his permanent home.

In January of the next year the inner attraction intensified as Le Saux traveled with Monchanin to the sacred mountain Arunachala and there met the *advaitan* holy man Ramana Maharshi. At this point the goal of Le Saux's journey to the East — now become an ultimate, metaphysical East — was determined. He was committed to the realization

of *advaita*, nonduality, to the attainment of *Atman*, the nondual Self, and would progressively surrender to the absolute demand of this goal which had meshed fatally with the structure of his own personality. At the same time, a deep conflict, not to be resolved until the very end of his life (if then) emerged: between this archetypal all-consuming attraction of the *One*, and his profound Christian faith, burdened with the whole undifferentiated complex of belief, custom and obligation that was the legacy of a devout Roman Catholic in the early twentieth century.

More precisely, two counter-forces began to assert themselves in tension with this central drive of the unfolding story, The first, which will persist until the end, is Le Saux's deep Christian faith and his attachment to the cultural forms in which he had known it. The second, which will eventually fall aside, is his commitment to Shantivanam — the ashram project in which he had agreed to collaborate with Monchanin. The essential line of the story, as it unfolds, is Le Saux's relentless pursuit of *advaita*, in a continual — and often anguished — conversation with his Christian faith. This faith, it must be remembered, had been 'formed' in the rigid and defensive counter-Reformation Roman Catholic mold that had endured for four hundred years and would continue until the Second Vatican Council. The brittle, over-rationalized theological complex, built on the scholastic model, in which Le Saux had been instructed, must have both heightened the attractiveness of the Vedantan mystical tradition for him and made the tension between Hinduism and Christianity much more agonizing for him than it would have been today, when the mystery of Christ is accessible to us both in its unitive depth and in its distinctive historical dynamism.

We accompany Henri Le Saux (now *Abhishiktananda*: ('Bliss of the Anointed One, The Lord', p.83) as he seeks a personal guide on the way of *advaita*. At length in 1956, after sojourning with two other teachers, he encountered Swami Gnanananda, whom he recognized as his own *guru*. (125-137) After a month in intense solitude, he embarked upon a new phase of his life, in which he traveled extensively around India, formed many relationships and himself became a sought-after spiritual teacher. During the years 1961-63, he participated in the interreligious dialogues promoted by Jacques Cuttat and, a few years after the Second Vatican Council, he contributed his prophetic voice to the National Seminar on the Church in India, in Bangalore.

Meanwhile, however, the tidal pull of *advaita* had not abated. Abhishiktananda's life began to reflect this attraction more visibly as he found himself increasingly drawn to the Himalayas and, high within those mountains, to the source of the sacred river Ganges. In 1964 he made an arduous pilgrimage to the source of the Ganges with Raimon Panikkar. (194) There in the high North, at Gyansu near Uttarkashi, a solitary hut next to the Ganges had been built for him, and he settled into it in October 1968, to spend half

(Continued on page 7)

Shantivanam Sangha (Continued from page 5)

way.

Q: Do you see Shantivanam inspiring little groups here in the United States?

Fr Bede: I do rather have a hope that we will be able to found some kind of community here in the United States.

To contact us please write us at <bgsangha@yahoo.com> ■

Life of Abhishiktananda

(Continued from page 6)

of each year there until the end of his life. A few months earlier he had made his final departure from Shantivanam, leaving the ashram in the hands of Bede Griffiths and the two young monks that accompanied Bede from Kurisumala.

The story enters a new phase and speeds to its conclusion as we find Abhishiktananda joined by a brilliant young disciple, Marc Chaduc. Between the two there developed an intense resonance, at once spiritual and very human. Now, for the first time, the older man experienced the mystical relationship of guru and disciple from the other side. According to the records that they left, the two journeyed in a brief time through a series of truly ‘Himalayan’ shared spiritual experiences. I found this part of Abhishiktananda’s story somewhat difficult to credit, given his proclivity for spiritual drama, the rarity of such spiritual experiences genuinely shared by two people, and the likely difficulty, in the extraordinarily intense atmosphere of that relationship and those days, of discerning different levels of reality.

The intensity of these experiences with his disciple may well have weakened Abhishiktananda and helped to bring about the severe heart attack that laid him low on a Rishikesh street on July 14, 1973. It was at the time of this physical collapse, he would recall, that his great nondual enlightenment occurred. After months of convalescence under the loving care of a community of religious sisters in Indore, Abhishiktananda died quietly on December 7, 1973. He was only sixty-three, but had lived under self-imposed conditions of poverty and physical hardship during most of the twenty-five years since his arrival in India.

Toward its end, Du Boulay’s narrative focuses on Abhishiktananda’s final awakening which — consistent with his entire quest — he interpreted as the experience of *advaita*, nonduality. Here at the end we read his final attempts to put the great experience into words. We find also the precious clues that he was to leave toward the realization of a ‘Christian *advaita*.’

The discovery of Christ’s “I AM” is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burnt up within the fire of experience. . . . I feel too much, more and more, the blazing fire of his I AM, in which all notions about Christ’s personality, ontology, history, etc., have disappeared. And I find his real mystery shining in every awakening man, in every mythos. (238-39)

. . . *The awakening alone is what counts.* (237)

The life of Abhishiktananda, rushing to its conclusion here as the unmistakably clear unfolding of the implications of a single boldly drawn spiritual choice, confronts us, finally, with a theological challenge — and an opportunity for deeper understanding. The fruit of our reflections may retain the same duality and tension that marked this life. I find myself rejoicing in Abhishiktananda’s central intuition and deploring his apparent reduction of Christianity to a single principle.



One can hardly fault this monk’s single-minded dedication to his path, his spirit of renunciation or his depth of understanding of the ‘universal wisdom’ of monastic life. Further, I believe that he divined more accurately than anyone else in his time the primary point of contact between Asian nonduality and Christian experience: that is, the baptismal event which is a participation in the ‘nondual birth’ of the Word and of Jesus Christ. This nondual experience can then be traced throughout the Gospel of John, and particularly — as Abhishiktananda loved to repeat — in the series of Jesus’ “I am” sayings. From this single point of origin there will unfold quite naturally a nondual Christian theology, more simple and explicit than ever before.

In leaving behind the essential theological balance and fullness of the mystery of Christ, however, and absolutizing the ‘Eastern’ nondual (or baptismal) pole of the Christian experience, he implicitly reduced Christianity to one phase or dimension of itself. Here one can see the oft-verified danger of an exclusive ‘way of personal experience’ and the need for an adequate theological consciousness — sensitive enough not to exclude the experience and the truth of other traditions but at the same time aware of the dynamic fullness of the Christian mystery. Abhishiktananda, we know, continued to cherish his Christian faith while voyaging to its Eastward extreme. His story and his exultant final “Eureka!”, however, leave me wondering if this seeker, captured by that magnetism of the One, may have set out toward the single, timeless star of the nondual Absolute and predetermined his goal in such a way as nearly to reverse (metaphorically speaking) not only the journey of the wise men from the East but the event of Incarnation itself, preferring to travel in a spiritual country where Christ in the flesh has not yet ‘happened,’ a country illumined only by the interior flame of pure, nondual spirit.

Shirley Du Boulay has made most happily available to us in our own language the story — both the visible and the interior pilgrimage — of this bold and eloquent monk. Abhishiktananda has made himself an irreplaceable landmark of our contemporary spiritual world by his uncompromising pursuit of this deep, centermost path among the spiritual ways that have opened to us through the new encounter of Hinduism and Christianity in our time.

*Extracts from Raimon Panikkar’s Foreword to **The Cave of the Heart** — in which Panikkar reflects on Abhishiktananda’s anguish at finding himself “at the same time Christian and Hindu, monotheist and advaitin,” will be found in the last issue of **The Golden String** (Summer 2005), p. 3. ■*

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Bede's Prophetic Edge (Continued from page 1)

where you are dying in the street, but when you have died, you will be reborn, and, please God, you will have a better birth next time. If one can help someone else to have a better birth, if one can help him on his way, that is good; but there is no obligation to do it. Karma is working itself out.²

Bede, for all his love of Hinduism, emphatically rejects this "terrible fatalism"³ and opposes to it "the Prophets" through whom

. . . gradually that moral ambivalence is removed and He is seen to be a God of absolute holiness and justice. I do not think that one can find anywhere in Hinduism and Buddhism a comparable conception of the holiness of God which is essentially a moral holiness...and holiness involves justice to your neighbor. Isaiah said, "To what purpose are your sacrifices and your vain oblations? Learn to do well, seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow'. This is a tremendous movement away from a mythological understanding of the world towards a historic understanding. God is acting in the history of His people, and when they reject the orphan and the widow and the poor they reject God. This is something new."⁴

Bede himself endeavored, through the practical capacities of his wonderful disciple and monk Christudas, to honor and serve the poor, the orphan and widow in their midst. The ashram of Shantivanam "kept in close contact with the villagers through a dispensary, two spinning units employing sixty girls and a nursery school which they helped to establish and where they provided a daily meal for some fifty children"⁵ As the years passed these endeavors were expanded. "Numerous social projects, very efficiently managed by Christudas, were run from Shantivanam...They built houses for poor people, provided a shed and some eighty looms in a project designed to liberate the weavers from the landlords; they ran a tailoring institute for poor girls; projects for spinning and gem-cutting; a 'Self-confidence project' for thirty of the poorest children; free

MEATH (DOUGLAS) CONLAN'S MEMOIR OF BEDE TO BE PUBLISHED

Wisdom of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Bede Grif-fiths, by Meath Conlan, Ph.D., will be published in May 2006 by Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Illinois. Conlan, a long-time friend of Father Bede, reflects in this book upon his experience of this friendship and its consequences in his life. He has gathered a number of stories, recalling events in and around his own life in the light of Bede's teachings and their influence. The book is structured around five qualities of "the spiritual journey of Noble Purpose" (equivalent to the quest for attainment of what Bede called *the deep Self*): Initiating, Visioning, Claiming, Celebrating and Letting Go. ■

education centers; and when Bede received the John Harriott Award in 1992, he spent the money on a house for old people."⁶

Bede also raised the question, beyond immediate assistance to those in need, of the importance of changing the social structures themselves which create so much need. He writes for instance:

We build schools and hospitals which keep the present social system going But we do not enquire whether that system itself is not essentially unjust, so that a great deal of work is being put into perpetuating an unjust social system . . . Nowadays the emphasis is more and more on actual change in this world, changing society and making a more human life. In doing this it is understood that we are working with God. . . This was the concern of Mahatma Gandhi...⁷

But Bede's prophetic vision, like that of John the Baptist and Jesus himself, calls us even beyond this commitment to earthly change to a focus on the Kingdom of God:

Even though our work is to change the world for the sake of the Kingdom of God, we have also to be always looking beyond. As Jesus said, "My Kingdom is not of this world."⁸

So Bede calls us beyond an easy either/or and challenges us to "endeavor to hold these two opposites together in a living, harmonious tension. Precisely how to do that is one of the main problems of life."⁹ That call to a transcendent Kingdom will continue to characterize the ultimately contemplative thrust of Bede's prophetic witness, though he remains emphatically aware of the sufferings of humanity in history.

2) Dialogue with Eastern Religions

Du Boulay notes that "as early as 1937, the year in which he was solemnly professed, "[Bede] had written to Martyn Skinner telling him how he was beginning to explore Buddhism, Hinduism and the writings of Lao-Tzu and to recognize their value. It was a matter of great urgency, he thought, that their relationship to Judaism and Christianity should be understood." The Roman Catholic Church and typical Benedictine monasticism were not at all on the same page as Bede, and "such ideas were far from being common currency; in fact, to many they would have been shocking. For a monk to have come to these conclusions in his early thirties...places him arguably ahead of his time, certainly at its cutting edge."¹⁰ Quite more typical of the time, and for decades to follow, was the condemnation of "indifferentists" by the influential theologian Adolf Tanquerey who insisted:

Man cannot indifferently profess any religion at all which claims that it is revealed, but he is bound to seek out the true Religion and to embrace it. If God has revealed some religion to man, this religion is certainly one, just as truth is one...God cannot be worshipped equally in truth and in error. Furthermore, religions that differ cannot at the same time be true.^{10a}

But Bede was on quite a different track when at Farnbor-

(Continued on page 9)

Bede's Prophetic Edge (Continued from page 8)

ough and then more thoroughly at Pluscarden he continued his studies of oriental thought. He noted already in his first book *The Golden String*, regarding Indian wisdom:

Here was a great religious tradition comparable in extent and grandeur with our European tradition, showing an original power of thought as remarkable as that of the Greeks and yet completely different in its orientation. Whereas for the Greek man was the center of the universe and everything was considered in relation to him, from the Indian the supreme reality was Brahma, the absolute Being, and the whole finite world of man and nature was regarded always in its relation to this absolute reality...Certainly from a Christian point of view the importance of Indian philosophy can hardly be over-estimated. It marks the supreme achievement of the human mind in the natural order in its quest for a true conception of God.¹¹

Here is a prophetic voice shaking the walls of European smugness and self-sufficiency, seeking to open windows, and also doors to other vistas, philosophical and especially spiritual, contemplative. Bede would spend the rest of his life struggling with the relationship not just between Greek and Indian philosophy, but between the deepest wisdom of the Vedanta and the mystery of Christ. Bruno has traced this exploration brilliantly, as it moves through reflection and pondering, "Eastern" nonduality becoming through Bede's final mystical experience "the basic quality of Bede's own consciousness..." and the mystery of Christ a reality "that is taking place in his own flesh and blood."¹²

Bede the contemplative prophet calls us beyond every conceptual articulation, ultimately, into the transcendent ineffable Mystery. As Judson Trapnell also argues, for Bede the final reconciling insight occurs beyond discursive intellect, and "must dawn within every sphere of one's life through an ever-deepening receptivity to the work of the Spirit, in other words, through surrender."¹³

3) *The Roman Catholic Institution*

Religious institutions, including sometimes the Roman Catholic, are not always amused when prophets criticize them and call the faithful to look beyond their structures and symbols and doctrines to a more transcendent Mystery. But Bede felt the need early on to note shortcomings of his church. The very year he made his life vows he wrote that the Index of Forbidden Books, still in force, was "a survival of the old world which is an unconscionable time a-dying. I don't think anything can be done until it is dead."¹⁴ Just two years later he wrote with the kind of prophetic insight that cuts through impressive appearance: "The Vatican is one of the best organized bureaucracies in the world, with wireless, telephones, central heating and everything up to date. But I always have the feeling that it is clogged and bound by the chains of tradition, so that really new life cannot develop...The old order of Christianity must go."¹⁵ Later, from the distance of India, and perplexed by what he considered the constricted, legalistic

mentality of the Vatican, his criticism sharpened: "The Church is still in the nineteenth century, it has not progressed."¹⁶

Millions of Catholics down through the recent centuries, and indeed so many non-Catholics, have been awestruck by the splendor of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. But Bede was less impressed, and quoting *the Prophet*, he said several times to his good friend Wayne Teasdale: "Just as Jesus stood before the Temple buildings and said 'I tell you solemnly, not a single stone here will be left on another: everything will be destroyed', so one could equally well stand before St. Peter's and say 'Not a stone upon a stone will remain'."¹⁷ Du Boulay rightly noted that Bede "wanted a Church that was more concerned with love than with sin . . . that gave meditation its rightful place at the heart of its practice."¹⁸ Christ is, for Christians, the fulfillment of the prophetic charism¹⁹ and Bede invoked him in calling Christians to look beyond the institution to something quite greater: "Jesus did not preach the Church. He preached the kingdom of God."²⁰

Bede's criticisms of the institution were motivated also by his experience of so many who had been alienated from the Church. People from the West flocked to his ashram, and he noted, in an article in the prestigious journal "The Tablet":

Of all the young people who came to our ashram in search of God in India, 60 per cent are Catholics, who tell me that they gave up the practice of their faith when they were 15 or 16, because of the way in which the faith was presented to them seemed to them meaningless or irrelevant.²¹

The institution and its approach, rather than mediating grace and good news, and supporting the spiritual journey, seemed to so many to be even a counter-sign and weight: "For most of them Christianity is deemed to be identified with a formal, dogmatic, moralistic religion which is a positive obstacle to their interior growth."²² Bede's prophetic voice had an ultimately contemplative motivation and goal, and this perhaps accounts for its telling power and depth. What saddened him most was the failure, in his view, of the institutional church to help so many in their sincere spiritual quest for deeper prayer. Thus the much-criticized Letter from the Vatican of 1989 regarding "Some Aspects of Meditation" saddened him in a particular way. He wrote in response:

Many Christians are looking to the church for guidance in contemplative prayer and failing to find it. They then turn to Hindu and Buddhist masters for guidance and often through them come to understand something of the depth of Christian mysticism. But for such people, this document offers no assistance whatever. It is, rather, calculated to put them off and make them confirmed in their belief that the Christian church has nothing to offer those who are seeking God in the dark, often on a lonely path and desperately in need of the guidance the church so often fails to give.²³

(Continued on page 10)

The Golden String

Notes:

1. *The Golden String*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Summer 2005), p. 1ff.
2. *The Cosmic Revelation*, p. 118.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 122f
5. Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, p. 160.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
7. *River of Compassion*, p. 90.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Du Boulay, p. 87.
- 10a. Adolf Tanquerey, *A Manual of Dogmatic Theology*, New York, Des-
clee, 1959, vol. 1, p. 32f. See also the whole section, "Outside the Church
There Is No Salvation," pp. 138ff.
11. *Golden String*, p. 171.
12. *The One Light: Bede Griffiths' Principal Writings*, ed. Barnhart, p. 21;
see the whole section from p. 19.
13. Judson B. Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue*, New York,
SUNY Press, 2001, p. 148.
14. Bede, letter to Martyn Skinner, June 1988, quoted in Du Boulay, p. 88.
15. Bede, letter to Martyn Skinner, April 1940, quoted in Du Boulay, p. 88
16. Bede, cited in Du Boulay, p. 254.
17. Bede, *Ibid.*
18. Du Boulay, p. 254.
19. See for instance Luke 4:16ff.
20. Bede, *The Reason for Being*, unpubl. MS, quoted in Du Boulay, p. 254.
21. Bede, "Two Theologies," *The Tablet*, July 12, 1980, quoted in Du Bou-
lay, p. 203.
22. Bede, letter to *The Tablet*, April 21, 1984, quoted in Du Boulay, *ibid.*
23. Bede, "Meditation: Is East Least and West Best?," *National Catholic
Reporter*, May 11, 1990, quoted in Du Boulay, p. 234.

(To be continued) ■

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