

The Golden String

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CONTEMPLATION AND DIALOGUE (Part II) Cyprian Consiglio

The gift of contemplative prayer

Let us resume our reflection with some words of Fr. Bede:

My view is that the deeper your contemplation, the nearer you are to God. The nearer you are to God the more open you are to the world, and that is where the hope lies.¹¹

Fr. Thomas Keating asks: What would be the major elements of a spiritual life that is rooted in its own spiritual tradition and at the same time is in dialogue with the other world religions? And as contemplative communities what ought to be our relationship to this “world of ours as it moves into the new millennium with the enormous baggage of human problems that seem to be almost without end? What can the Christian contemplative tradition give to this world that is coming?” Well, Fr. Thomas says, the great gift that contemplative prayer can offer is simply this: *the experience of Divine Presence*, because it is exactly this experience that is lacking in the post-modern world. And who else is going to be able to bring this realization of Divine Presence back into society but those who themselves have experienced it? So the question then really becomes *how?* How are we going to share this “reign of God” that has been entrusted to us? In what mode are we going to share this “reign of God” that awakens at the heart of the world its own contemplative dimension?

He then goes on to ask if we might rightly ask whether in this new millennium if it still should be the purpose and aim of the religions of the world, or for that matter even of special spiritual disciplines such as yoga or zen meditation, “to make disciples or converts as we have been instructed to do up ‘til now. Rather, he suggests, in light of the historical development of global consciousness that is now emerging, is there “*a new understanding of the Gospel*

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MEDITATION BEHIND BARS Mark Maxey

Dharma Seeds is a newspaper-styled meditation journal — with content ranging from Chan Buddhist Meditation to Centering Prayer — sent to many prisoners across America. The content of the paper is directed toward education and spiritual growth, to help inmates prepare for a positive re-entry into society.

Dharma Seeds is a non-profit organization run by volunteers, without paid staff. All contributions go towards the publishing and mailing of the newspaper to those in jails and prisons, whether state or federal institutions.

Mark Maxey, an ex-felon who embraced centering prayer while at Folsom State Prison in California, started *Dharma Seeds*. He was one of five prisoners that worked with Fr. Thomas Keating to establish the first inmate-run Contemplative Fellowship behind prison walls. Upon his release in 1997 he began to produce the quarterly newspaper, focused upon the contemplative lifestyle.

Dharma Seeds publishes the work of different writers, such as Fr. Thomas Keating, Master Jian Hu and Fr. Bruno Barnhart. The prisoners enjoy the variety of paths and lessons that these teachers offer. While Maxey writes a small column, the majority of the articles are reprinted, with permission, from various contemplative authors. Many prisoners are grateful to have such an ecumenical approach in their reading. The content of any given issue may be from Buddhist, Hindu, or Catholic sources, but all articles are related to meditative practices.

“I awoke in prison with the help of many persons, including Thich Nhat Hanh and Fr. Thomas Keating, who sent us men books and videos which helped us form a meditation practice,” Maxey says. “. . . This ministry is a passion of love, as I want to give back to those incarcerated by providing them with tools that can radically change their lives.” A recent issue introduced the prisoners to Fr. Bede Griffiths and his work. Many of the prisoners struggle to bridge the truths held by the mystics of Buddhist and Catholic backgrounds. Fr. Bede Griffiths’ introduction to these men and women will help them see how the ecumenical movement embraces the Divine Truth, better known as the Perennial Knowledge. This essence is what *Dharma Seeds* seeks to provide the prisoners through various authors and paths.

“We knew if we spread out such a wide net, embracing all that are within the contemplative nature, we would attract those of all faiths,” Maxey says. “The goal was to

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that is now required, in which we see Christ himself emphasizing [instead] that all men and women are brothers and sisters.” Could it be that the *first duty* of the world’s religions in our time may not be to propagate themselves so much—though this can be done with prudence and charity—but to create communion between the world’s religions. The other world religions must first of all be considered “as our brothers and our sisters, greatly loved by God,” with something to contribute to us, and something to contribute to the world at large as well. Perhaps what is needed first and foremost in our day and age is collaboration between all those who have true human values at heart, and especially collaboration among those who have a long tradition of spiritual experience. Why? Because we reject “nothing of what is true and holy in these other religions. As a matter of fact, we have a high regard for their manner of life and conduct; we have a high regard for their precepts and the doctrines, which, even though they are different from our own teaching in many ways, nevertheless “often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people.” As a matter of fact, we are urged by our church “to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of these other religions.” While witnessing to our own faith and way of life, we are urged to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians,” in their social life and culture as well as in their spiritual traditions.¹² This is the great treasure of humanity that now needs to be shared. As Fr. Thomas says, “Perhaps for the first time in history we [could] manifest that all of the human family are the children of God, and that each religion has its part to play in revealing the true God, and that above all it is God’s will that we live together in peace.”

Unfortunately, up until now the major religions of the world have been one of the chief sources of violence in our world. At least part of the reason for that is because the greatest security that most people experience is in their religion, so any real or perceived threat to one’s religion feels like a threat to a greater security. This, if we are honest, is one of the reasons we tend to be over-protective and somewhat over-idealistic about our own particular tradition, not necessarily because we ourselves are so religious or deeply spiritual, but because we want the security of being right, and maybe even a certain feeling of superiority, that we are somehow better than everybody else. As Ken Wilber writes, (in an essay entitled “Translation versus Transformation”) religion in its primary stages often acts as a way of creating and building up a sense of a separate self, conforming to a certain image, archetype or model. Then that separate self or the collective of separate selves that gets created by our religious belonging has to be fortified, defended and promoted.

On the other hand, what we often find happens through the contemplative experience is the sense of a separate self begins to dissolve! And with that these (what Fr.

Thomas calls) “rigidities and exaggerations” that we use to defend and promote our tradition also start to relax a little bit—sometimes a lot!—and suddenly, through having had an experience of the ineffability of God, experiencing God’s mysterious fathomless depths, we simply stand in awe, humbled at the mystery that surrounds us, in all of created reality as well as the mysterious depths of the person standing in front of us. And we realize with humble relief that we don’t, as a matter of fact, have the cosmos all figured out. As a Christian I might even be able to admit just as suddenly that, yes, the fullness of the godhead dwells in Jesus bodily, and yes, there may be nothing that can be added to the revelation of God in Christ, but no, *we have not yet fully understood what either one of those things really means!* But perhaps through the eyes of another tradition a fuller understanding of the revelation of God in Christ is finally being unveiled for us, perhaps some aspect of our own tradition that had remained thus far inchoate.

The Trinity and aspects of divinity

My favorite example of this is Raimundo Panikkar’s approach to the Trinity. In an article entitled “Toward an Ecumenical Theandric Spirituality,” he describes three aspects of the divinity and three forms of spirituality that correspond to those three aspects: the Father as relating to the silent apophatic dimension, the Son as relating to the personalist dimension, and the Spirit as the immanent dimension.

The silent apophatic dimension he relates to the Father, since the Father expressed himself only through the Son and of himself has no word or expression. This apophatic spirituality is similar to the Buddhist experience of nirvana, and also to the silence of the Taoist and the Upanishads. Panikkar says specifically Buddhism could be considered the religion of the Father, and in the Buddhist silence the Christian can glimpse a reflection of the depths of the Father since the Buddhist moves to the experience of apophatic silence by negating the way of the Word, of thought, of *logos*.

The personalist dimension Panikkar relates to the Son, since the Son is the personal mediator between God and humanity, through whom creation, redemption and glorification flow. This is especially helpful in our dialogue with Judaism and Islam, even when our differing understandings of the revelation of the Word (which we share with them as children of Abraham) break down because, “The Jew and the Muslim see ultimate reality expressed in the word of God; and the Christian in the person of Christ, who is the personal Word of the Father. The Word of God, then, is personal and intensifies personality since it differentiates at the same time as it unites.” This could be an aid in dialogue with the devotional strains of all popular religions, certainly that of Hinduism.

The immanent dimension Panikkar relates to the Spirit, since the Spirit is the union of the Father and the Son, which in turn has its resonance in the Hindu doctrine of ad-

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vaita, non-duality of the individual self and the Absolute. "...the advaitic Hindu seeks undifferentiated union with the Absolute; in this he or she reflects the spirituality of the Spirit since the Spirit's work is primarily that of union." I would add to this also the sense of immanence in the tribal traditions, and the primal peoples.

A subtle distinction must also be noted at the same time: as Ewert Cousins points out, Christians never speak or write of the Spirit in its pure form as it appears in advaitic Hinduism, just as the spirituality of the Father never appears in its pure apophatic form as it does in Buddhism.

In Christianity, the Father and the Spirit are united through the Word. The Father's silence comes to expression in the generation of the Word; and the Spirit leads Christians to a differentiated and dialogic union with the Son, and through the Son to the Father. Hence for Christians, the Word colors and integrates the spirituality of the Father and the Spirit. Both in experience and understanding, the Christian's spirituality of the Father and that of the Spirit are always mediated by the Word. Nevertheless, Christians can glimpse through the Word the spiritual attitudes of the Buddhists and the Hindus as reflecting dimensions of their own Trinitarian spirituality.¹³

The Trinity has a twofold universality that enables us to see the great spiritual traditions as dimensions of each other. First of all, it reflects essential aspects of the religious experience itself (a universality) and so is found as a pattern throughout the world's religions and philosophies. And, following on that, the Christian notion of the Trinity can provide a kind of overarching pattern for seeing the spiritual attitudes that are fundamental to humankind, as they have been identified in the major religions of the world, in relationship to each other when we see them operating together in the Trinity. More importantly, it could be that we Christians may not even know or understand the depth of the mystery of the Trinity until we have opened ourselves to and responded in depth to the Trinitarian dimensions as found in these other traditions. What can Taoism and Buddhism teach us about who and what we call the Father? What can Islam and Judaism, let alone the devotional-bhakti elements of other traditions such as Hinduism, teach us about devotion to Jesus? What might the native, primal peoples teach us about the Holy Spirit?

Ewert Cousins says, "Often the partners discover in another tradition values which are submerged or only inchoate in their own." This is why William Johnston insists on the need that Western Christianity has for Asian mysticism, as I would say, to uncover the rest of the Gospel, to unfold the inner meaning of the Gospel in a way that we may not have found words for yet.

The experience of the soul in its depths

But, to be in dialogue with the other world religions requires this *experience*—i.e. not just notional knowledge

but experience—because in their own way each of the great spiritual traditions of the world in their higher spiritual disciplines have experienced this depth, and we Christians are sometimes sadly lacking in bringing that same depth of experience to the conversation. What we're trying to say here is that it is not at the level of doctrine or dogma, nor is it at the level of ritual or language or cultural expressions, that we are necessarily going to find agreement—nor should we try to force it all to agree and simply say "See it's all the same!" because it's not, and to say so is an insult both to one's own tradition and to the other's. As Bede Griffiths wrote in *Return to the Center*,

Where then is this eternal religion — the *sanatana dharma*. . . — to be found? It is to be found in every religion as its ground or source, but it is beyond all formulation. It is the reality behind all rites, the truth behind all dogmas, the justice behind all laws. But it is also to be found in the heart of every [person]. It is the law 'written on their hearts.' It is not known by sense or reason but by the experience of the soul in its depths.¹⁴

He then goes on to quote William Law's *Spirit of Prayer*, which I paraphrase for you here:

Your natural senses cannot possess God
nor can they unite you to God;
no, your understanding,
your will and your memory,
can only reach after God,
but they cannot be the place of God's dwelling in you.
But, there is a root or depth in you
from whence all these faculties come forth,
as lines from a center
or as branches from the body of the tree.
This depth in you is called the Center,
the Fund, the Bottom of the soul.
This depth is the unity,
this depth is the eternity,
I had almost said the "infinity" of your soul;
for it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it or give it
any rest
but the infinity of God.¹⁵

It is at this depth that all true religion is to be found, and this depth is also the source from which all true religion springs, and the goal to which all true religion the aspires. And, most importantly, this depth is present in the heart of every person. Bede says it was from this Center that we fell and it is to this Center that we must return. And ultimately, the purpose of every religion is to make this known and to map out the path of return.¹⁶

To paraphrase Fr. Bruno again: Not only is the Mystery present in a different way in each tradition, but we are supposed to learn from all of them, from the primal, tribal religions all the way up to the highly developed traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. The great religions all begin

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with a mystical experience and its only then that they develop into complex systems of thought. But if we really want to know the Mystery we have to “penetrate through the exterior shell of the rationalized system to realize within ourself the original experience.” And that experience, at least as it is articulated by St. Peter, is to participate in the divine life which Jesus came to share with and among human beings, “that you may become partakers of the divine nature.” This is the reign of God and the essential message of all religion, the central message of the Gospel. External religion, including ours, with its rites, dogmas and institutional structures, “exists only to bring people to the personal experience of this mystery. External forms, the ‘language’ of religion, must be continually revised to enable them to communicate the mystery to the people of a new age. The mystery, however, already dwells in the heart of every human being, and the church — that is *we* — must awaken to this ‘universal revelation.’¹⁷

Someone else who might agree with this is Pope Benedict himself. He gave a general audience in St. Peter's Square May 14, 2008 on a little known but very influential ancient Christian mystic known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Pseudo-Dionysius' theology is the foundation of what we call apophatic theology which is “marked by the conviction that it is impossible to say who God is, that only negative expressions can be used to speak of him; that God can only be spoken of with ‘no,’ and that it is only possible to reach him by entering into this experience of ‘no.’” The Holy Father goes on to say that Dionysius the Areopagite has a new relevance today: just as in his own day he was a mediator between the spirit of Greek philosophy and the Gospel, today he could be “as a great mediator in the modern dialogue between Christianity and the mystical theologies of Asia, because there is “a similarity between the thought of the Areopagite and that of the Asian religions. And here he says we can begin to understand “that dialogue does not accept superficiality” because

Precisely when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ, an ample space for dialogue also opens. When one finds the light of truth, one realizes that it is a light for everyone; polemics disappear and it is possible to understand one another, or at least, speak to one another, draw closer together. The path of dialogue consists precisely in being close to God in Christ, in the depths of the encounter with him, in the experience of the truth, which opens us to the light and helps us to go out to meet others—the light of truth, the light of love. In the end, [Dionysius] tells us: Take the path of the experience, of the humble experience of faith, every day. Then, the heart is made big and can see and also illuminate reason so that it sees the beauty of God.

Let me repeat: An ample space for dialogue opens up when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ. When one enters into the depths of the encounter with

Christ, we find the light of truth, and we realize that it is a light for everyone and suddenly the polemics disappear, and it is possible to understand to one another, or at least to speak to one another and draw closer together. And when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ, the experience of truth, we find the path of dialogue, we open to the light, and that experience helps us to go out to meet others. So, Dionysius tells us and the Holy Father affirms: Take the path of experience, the humble experience of faith. It will make your heart big, and we will be able to see, and the heart will be able to illuminate our reason so that we can see the beauty of God.

Saint Bonaventure, the great Franciscan, himself highly influenced by Dionysius, writes about this way beautifully in his treatise “The Journey of the Mind to God”:

Seek the answer in God's grace, not in doctrine;
in the longing of will, not in the understanding;
in the sighs of prayer, not in research;
seek the bridegroom, not the teacher;
darkness, not daylight;
and look not to the light
but rather to the raging fire that carries the soul to God
with intense fervor and glowing love.
Let us die, then, and enter into the darkness,
silencing our anxieties, our passions,
and all the fantasies of our imagination.¹⁸

The deeper our contemplation, the nearer we will be to God; and the nearer we are to God the more open we will be to the world, and that is where the hope lies.

Notes:

11. Bede Griffiths, 1984, Shalom News, Kansas City, KS, 5-6.
12. *Nostra Aetate*, #2.
13. Ewert Cousins, *Christ of the 21st Century*, 82.
14. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, 99ff.
15. William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer*, ch. 11.
16. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, 99ff.
17. *The One Light*, 396
18. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. ■

THE GOLDEN STRING IS ONLINE!

Each issue of The Golden String is now being posted — complete — on the Bede Griffiths website, www.bede.griffiths.com Back issues, from the beginning of the Bulletin in 1994, will also be found on the website. The format is .pdf, which requires that Adobe Reader be installed on your computer. This program is available free at www.adobe.com — a link to this site will be found on the Bede Griffiths website. Many of our subscribers, now that they can download The Golden String from the website, may find it unnecessary to have the paper copy mailed to them. If you wish to discontinue your paper subscription, let us know — for example, by an e-mail to bruno@contemplation.com — and we will remove your name from the mailing list. This will be expedient particularly for subscribers outside North America, since international postage rates are high. All postage rates, as you have seen, are now increasing regularly. ■



NEWS

• Matthew Cobb becomes Website Manager

At the end of June, management of the Bede Griffiths website was entrusted to Matthew Cobb. Matt is an Episcopal minister and lives as a householder in Wamego, Kansas, with his wife and two children, aged 12 and 14, among the people making up the small communities within the prairie ecosystem of the Blue and Kaw Valleys. He recently made a pilgrimage to India after six years of preparation with his soul-friend and spiritual comrade Ed Hays. During his pilgrimage he fell in love with Mother India. An entry in his journal, dated January 4, 2009, reads:

Had fever of 105 degrees which made me very afraid. I had seen a homeopathic physician who gave sugar pill prescription. I knew that I needed to see a western doctor with penicillin. I became delirious and thought that I would die. As I lay in my bed crying, my dear friend Sr. Margaret said, with her hand over my heart, "Surrender to the mother." I did and all fear vanished in an instant from within my heart.

Matthew made oblation at New Camaldoli Hermitage on May 17, 2005, marking the culmination of a four year soulquest for a community in which to live his vocation as monastic-for-the-world. His life vow is to always "Be Attentive — Fearing No one."

Teresa Matyniak, who has managed the Bede Griffiths Website for years with admirable competence, will be on hand to help Matthew during the phase of transition. Those of us who have been involved in some way with the website are grateful to Teresa for her magical skills in the realms of cybernetic mystery, for the beauty and efficiency of the website, and not least for the graciousness with which she has always related to us — the uninitiated — without ever a weary sigh or pitying remark. .

• Bede's Anniversary celebrated at Osage

Bede Griffiths' *Mahasamadhi* anniversary was celebrated this year at Osage Forest of Peace in Sand Springs, Oklahoma on May 17-18. Fr. Bruno Barnhart, from New Camaldoli, was again invited to be celebrant and guest speaker. His two conferences were profound and provocative, as usual.

On Saturday night the topic was: "The Age of the Holy Spirit." Oblates and Friends of the Forest who were present were engaged by the subject, as was evident in their challenging questions to Bruno.

On Sunday the celebration began with the ancient Eastern Fire Blessing and a sharing of minds and hearts on how we each first encountered Fr. Bede Griffiths. This was followed by a buffet supper, and the final conference, "New Church and New World in Bede's Vision," climaxed the celebration. Homilies during Eucharist on both Saturday and Sunday were taped and savored. Regarding the future of the Forest...this "Shantivanam of the West", as Fr. Bede loved to call it, we prayed "Fr. Bede intercede!" ■

JESUS IN THE LOTUS, by Russill Paul

Reviewed by Cyprian Consiglio

In our Sangha room in Santa Cruz there is a news item downloaded from the Internet that has been hanging on the bulletin board for three years now. It reports on Pope Benedict's giving permission for Yoga to be taught in seminaries in India. That minor news article has been pointed out numerous times for various reasons, among them a defense of Christians doing Yoga, and what is to many people a surprising liberality in this pope's particular intellectual fortress of orthodoxy. But Pope Benedict is actually consistent in this regard, for example in the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1989. Ironically but typically, many folks focused only on the negative aspect of this document, and refer to it as a scathing report against Yoga because it warned Catholics of dangers and errors from non-Christian forms of meditation and against being carried too far into ways of thinking that contradict orthodox Christian theology. In focusing on that they unfortunately failed to recognize the opening of a window for dialogue with the strictest adherents of orthodoxy.

We find the following statement in chapter 5 on "Questions of Method": "The majority of the great religions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it." The document goes on to quote *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's declaration on relations with other religions:

[Just as] "the Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,"² neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured. It is within the context of all of this that these bits and pieces should be taken up and expressed anew.³

This stream of Christian Yoga was already opened as early as the 1950's with the French Benedictine Jean-Marie Dechanet's *Christian Yoga*, which was startling in its anticipation of most inter-religious movements within the Christian church in the West. That work, like much of the best scholarship going on in Roman Catholicism in the years just before and after Vatican II, was steeped in patristic anthropology and Greek philosophy, and made a clear line of reasoning to show how one could easily adapt another anthropology to articulate the Christian understanding of the human person. The lineage has continued through the years up to the current work of Paulist Father Thomas Ryan's book on Yoga, *Prayer of Heart and Body*, of which one member of our Sangha—not a Christian, but herself a long time yoga teacher—says, "This book has it all. He really gets it!" In between have been many others, including Thomas Matus' well-beloved *Yoga and the Jesus Prayer Tradition*.

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tion and the writings of one of Fr. Bede's closest early disciples, Swami Amaldas of Shantivanam, who died tragically young but not before leaving us with *Yoga and Contemplation* and *Christian Yogic Meditation*.

Into this stream now steps Russill Paul, himself an intimate disciple of Fr. Bede, with his book, *Jesus in the Lotus: The Mystical Doorway between Christianity and Yogic Spirituality* (New World Library, 235 pp., \$14.95). This book serves not only as a defense of Christian Yoga, but as an *apologia pro vita sua* for Russill's own interspiritual journey, as he describes it using the word made famous by the late beloved Wayne Teasdale. Russill will of course be well known to students of Fr. Bede's thought and readers of *The Golden String*. Besides being a world-renowned musician with his groundbreaking work in the "Yoga of Sound," he is a well-known teacher of Eastern spirituality. A native of South India, religiously he was raised for the most part in typical Western Christianity while always living in a Hindu cultural environment. It was not until his entry into Shantivanam that he was able to fully explore his own Hindu roots under the tutelage and with the full encouragement of Fr. Bede, simultaneously being formed as a monk and a yogi—that is, studying the Christian contemplative tradition while immersing himself in what Russill refers to as the "three pillars of Indian culture": Sanskrit, Yoga and Indian classical music. After leaving Shantivanam to pursue a vocation as a married man and musician, and in the years following Fr. Bede's death, Russill worked for many years with the Rev. Matthew Fox and the Center for Creation Spirituality in Oakland, and maintained a close bond of friendship and working relationship with Wayne Teasdale in the latter's work in interspirituality. He leads yearly pilgrimages to India centered around Shantivanam. He now lives in Austin, Texas, from where he runs a Yogic Mystery School. It is especially fascinating to read Russill's own account of his life's story in this book, his conversion experience as a young man, the moving details of his close friendship with Fr. Bede, and — what I found particularly courageous on his part — details of the extraordinary paranormal experiences he underwent as he delved into Zen and *vipassana* Buddhist practices, and his "breakthrough into the void."

What is also quite educational both for those who have never visited Shantivanam, and for those of us who have, is Russill's recounting all the elements of the monastic life at Shantivanam during his years there while Fr. Bede was still alive. There are excellent explanations of the Hindu symbolism and the use of Sanskrit, and special note made several times about Fr. Bede's careful attention to detail "in his conscientious avoidance of syncretism" (p. 72), such as "segregating" Catholic prayers "such as the Our Father, Hail Mary and the Glory Be... in a well-defined Christian section." This, Russill explains, "was also a way of maintaining canonical orthodoxy while allowing us to work with two major traditions side by side, letting them inform each other, and enriching our reflections immensely in the

process" (p. 86-87)

It is notable how many times Russill elaborates what might be considered to be "old-fashioned," traditional doctrines and practices. But, as Fr. Bede himself did, so Russill breathes new life into them by seeing the inner mystical meaning that was their inspiration, such as the "mysterious process ... known as transubstantiation" (p. 88), and how "the practice of Gregorian chant qualifies as a form of yoga" (p. 89). He also, surprisingly, includes a lament that "when the Catholic Church stopped using Latin in masses, this took out all sense of mystery"! With all due respect I found that to be a little over-stated—all sense of mystery?—but something that would surely warm the heart of Pope Benedict and his liturgical partisans.

The section entitled "Comparing the Traditions" that ends chapter 3, and the first section of Chapter 4, "Finding Unity with the Divine," are worth many re-reads. Here he carefully places the Hindu conception of Ultimate Reality next to that of Christianity, often describing them in complementary ways: the Christian notion of communion next to the Hindu experience of *darshan*—seeing, union by communion and relationship next to union by identity; the Hindu understanding of human movement toward the Divine next to the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Divine's initiative; the three stages of purgation, illumination and union corresponding to the three yogas of the Bhagavad Gita; the seven chakras corresponding to the seven vices and virtues as well as the seven Sacraments. All the while he gives due respect to the differences as well: different visions of what exactly fulfillment is; and the differing views of the importance of history, which can also be complementary, balancing out the Bible's sense of "engagement with the world while transforming the ego" with the Eastern scriptures' emphasis on "how to disengage with the world and awaken to spiritual reality beyond the ego" (p. 103). As Russill writes, "the individual who can embrace the two and hold these seemingly paradoxical perspectives in balance may be the prototype for the future."

One of the greatest contributions of a book such as this, which I would not hesitate to say is also the contribution of Yoga that Christianity needs the most, is contained in the section of Chapter 4 entitled "The Role of Sexuality in the Spiritual Process." I do think that Russill again overstates the case, and in a pretty shocking way (see p. 28 for example). However, hyperbole aside, I think that he would again find unwitting collaborators first of all in Pope Benedict himself, who was widely criticized in conservative circles for writing his first encyclical on *eros* and *agape*. But also, whether one agrees with its conclusions or not, some mention ought to be made in the name of fairness also of John Paul II's magisterial work "A Theology of the Body," which hardly deserves the critique that sexuality is "rarely spoken of in a spiritual context." If anything, it may actually be that Christianity, and Roman Catholicism in particular,

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Jesus in the Lotus (Continued from page 7)

over-spiritualizes sexuality and anthropology in general when it too easily falls back on Greek dualism. As Russill himself writes, “Christianity is essentially about the body, as exemplified by the crucifixion and the resurrection” (p. 27). And so, even seemingly unimportant things such as “the lack of nutritious food in many Christian monasteries and retreat centers” take on greater significance.

For me there was one point that is not completely clear, that might open the door to a wider conversation, and that is the distinction, if there is one, between *Christian Yoga* and *interspirituality*. On more than one occasion the author suggests that even though Yoga grew out of “the womb of Hinduism,” it is a “non-religion” (pp. 16, 48), which in many cases stripped itself of its Hindu “religious and cultural associations,” especially many “institutional and superficial aspects” (p. 9). He also states that “the motive [of Yoga] was never to convert others to Hinduism” in the West. And yet I found myself asking, first of all, if there is a difference between “Hindu-Christian interspirituality” and “Christian Yoga,” or are they the same thing? Is Christian Yoga already interspirituality? Can one adapt an outward form, such as Yoga or za-zen, without adopting another spiritual worldview and theological vocabulary? It may seem like a subtle distinction, but it is one that may be important in the dialogue especially with the more conservative elements of our Christian communions, who might be able to be won over to an outward form such as a Christian practicing Yoga, but might find more difficulty with the concept of Hindu-Christian interspirituality, which does not sound as if it is a non-religion stripped of religious and cultural associations.

There was one other area of concern for me that is related to the above. Russill had stated in the preface that he wanted to address various groups. He is addressing those “who feel betrayed and disillusioned with their tradition,” “Western Yoga practitioners, many of whom are ignorant of, or indifferent to, or even hostile to, Christianity,” and also “those who feel a strong call to live within an authentic blend of traditions.” I think that this book will be quite amenable to those three groups. He writes that he also hopes to speak to Christians who “are extremely prejudiced about Yoga and Hinduism” in the hope that “this work will cultivate an appreciation and tolerance for a great spiritual tradition and methodology,” I fear that those in this last group may find the introduction and opening chapter a little difficult to get through. They contain a biting critique of ordinary Christianity. It is not the content quite as much as the tone: I found myself wincing as I read the reiteration of the common critiques against Western Christianity. Even one of the blurbs on the back of the book seems to contain an accusation when it speaks of “the simple solace of unthinking dogma.” I’m afraid some readers may find these critiques offensive—or at least, again, overstated. I hope that readers will persevere because all these things are attenuated more

in the later pages of the book where Russill says that he hopes what he has said has been respectful, and that it ought not be generalized.

We need to lead folks from the known to the unknown, and so I hope readers do not get blocked at the entrance to this fine treatment of Christian Yoga because, as Russill himself wrote, “the individual who can embrace the two and hold these seemingly paradoxical perspectives in balance may be the prototype for the future.” There is a great treasure here for such a person, both in the gifts the Yoga tradition has to offer Christianity, and in Russill’s lifetime of work in bearing those gifts to so many, and now through this new book.

Notes:

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation”, (Vatican City, 1989), no. 16
2. Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).
3. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops,” no. 16. ■

UNITY AND COMMUNION
Bede Griffiths

In the Hindu Revelation the ultimate reality is *Sat Chit Ananda* — Being, Knowledge, Bliss. The search is for that ultimate Being, that ‘ultimate reality’ — *sat*, and that ultimate Being and Reality is Conscious; it is *chit*, ‘consciousness,’ a conscious awareness of infinite eternal being. And the consciousness of that eternal being is bliss, *ananda*, ‘pure joy.’ That is the goal of Hinduism — to reach that *sat-chit-ananda*, and that *sat-chit-ananda* is pure oneness, one without a second.

In the gospel there is a further depth revealed. In the ultimate reality there is revealed not merely an identity, but a communion. The final Christian Revelation is that the Godhead itself, the ultimate reality, is a communion of persons, a communion of persons in love, and that gives a further dimension to our understanding of reality. The Hindu believes that God is love in a sense, and that you can love God but not that the Godhead itself is love. There cannot be love without two. If God is a pure monad as He is in Islam, as He tends to be in Hinduism, He cannot be love in Himself. But in the Christian concept the Godhead itself is love, is a communion of love. There is a distinction within the Godhead Itself, distinction beyond our comprehension which we crudely express in terms of person and relation. These are human terms pointing to the reality. The reality is that God is love, that there is something which corresponds to personal communion in love in the Godhead, and we are called to share in that communion of love.

(Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, quoted in *Bede Griffiths: Essential Writings*, edited by Thomas Matus, (Orbis Books, 2004), p. 119-120.) ■



HERMITAGE REFLECTIONS

Elbina Rafizadeh

Today is the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, one day after the solemnities of St. Romuald and the Sacred Heart of Jesus collided on the nineteenth of this liturgically congested month of June. I'm sitting on the deck of a trailer that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. The trailer is named 'Logos' and is located at New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur. The blue jays have returned for their daily bread. I like to pretend that the jays show up only when I come but, in truth, this is a pattern established long before.

There is a pecking order, I notice, as the dominant jays, the ones with spiky tops, eat first, while the more submissive wait their turn. Don't they know? There is enough for everyone. Three deer saunter by; one glances my way, lingering, then returning to the task of thinning the brush. There is peace in this moment of time, when lately peace has been difficult to attain. My mind wonders about what lies on the other side of the ocean. In this sacred pause, amidst the living poetry of the scene, I ask myself, "Beyond the ocean horizon, beyond Asia, in the Middle East, is there also a refuge from destruction and war? Is there a place where serenity flourishes among wildlife that lingers near humans without fear? Can peace still be found anywhere amidst the terror of war?"

During vespers last evening, one of the monks offered a prayer, "For peace in the Middle East, in Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and especially for the people in Iran." Yes, peace, and the end to turbulence and chaos, an end to the sacrificial deaths for the cause of justice. The monks have prayed daily for the war-torn continent and her people, especially for the martyrs who have sacrificed their lives for peace, freedom, and dignity. These times are troubling, and I feel very sad, so powerless to help those whose suffering I cannot even imagine. All I have to offer is prayer.

Although in the past, in the midst of nature and prayer, I have been able to become immersed in God, this morning is different. I am deeply troubled again. I read through my journal, looking for inspiration, and come across this entry from last May, during the annual *Mahasamadhi* celebration for Bede Griffiths, at Osage Ashram, Forest of Peace.

May 17th, 2009. Sunday morning

As most are probably awakening to television, the mixed aroma of fried bacon and eggs, brewing coffee, and the rustling of newspaper pages, I awaken in the silence of forest dawn in a quiet ashram tucked into the Osage Forest, by Sand Springs, Oklahoma.

The bird-calls at dawn remind me of similar moments before morning prayer at Saccidananda ashram. In India, if not the sounds of birds, the call for prayer from Hindu temples serves as the wake-up bell.

The cabin where I dwell is called 'Sophia.' The furnishings are simple, with a twin bed, small desk, dresser, and night-stand. The windows face the forest, the last image before I close my eyes at night and the first when I wake. This morning, like most spring mornings, light filters through the leaves — it is a simple, yet glorious pleasure.

Sunday afternoon.

I have almost finished reading Thomas Matus' *Ashram Diary*. This book recounts his experiences when he first traveled to Saccidananda Ashram in India and his time with Bede Griffiths. He writes also of the tours to Hindu temples that he led from Camaldoli, his experience in Italy and Big Sur, and of the time when Bede Griffiths died. His descriptions are translucent, especially those of his experiences in India, which remind me of my own journey to Shantivanam.

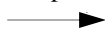
In one entry, Fr. Matus writes, "Again I sensed the veil between my imagination and Jesus. So my imagination is not the way to him. I am to know him by faith, to love him without seeing him." This statement resonates; faith has been everything for me. Seeking God during challenging times can prove discouraging. But as faith awakens in the heart, God's presence is revealed once again.

The miracle of possibility becoming reality cannot be taken for granted — like this ashram in the forest, founded by a Catholic nun. Who would have thought that in the American Midwest, of all places, an ashram would spring up where people of different national backgrounds can find a common bond in God? While the power of Fr. Bede's encouragement and blessing is unquestionable, I believe it was also tenacious faith in God that paved the path. I must always remember that with God all things are possible.

Five years ago, I was not aware of Bede Griffiths and Abhishiktananda, whose writings eventually led me to New Camaldoli, to Saccidananda Ashram, and to Osage Ashram. Back then I was just as troubled, when war was eventually declared on Iraq. It was supremely discouraging when the efforts of peace workers all over the world were unable to prevent this war that has proven so disastrous. God's mercy eventually led me back to the refuge of the religion of my upbringing and youth, Catholicism, through participation in daily Mass with the sharing of bread in the Eucharistic celebration. I also began to retreat in monasteries, first and foremost New Camaldoli Hermitage, sharing in the lives of monks, sisters, and oblates. For this, I am eternally thankful. I do believe that when, in the face of tremendous opposition, we realize the immensity of our weakness, this moment becomes the turning point at which Grace enters our lives.

So in my quest not only to find answers but to rediscover the peace and love of God, again and again I

(Continued on page 10)



The Golden String

Hermitage Reflections*(Continued from page 9)*

return to the Hermitage for seclusion and retreat. Now, however, I am struggling in the silence. Without the distraction of work and obligations, I feel pain in my heart. The world's destructive and violent tendencies in the quest for power and control at the cost of human lives, as well as the ecological impact, glare unceasingly in my thoughts. I cannot run from what I see, for there is no television, no phone, and no computer. Once again I turn to Jesus and Mary for the consolation of God.

I glance through my journal again and am surprised to come upon these words from a monk who lives in a Benedictine monastery at the foot of the Mojave Desert:

God rescues us by offering us opportunity to be the light of the kingdom of the world, whether we see the results or not in this lifetime.

God is merciful, again. Especially in these chaotic times, I must continue to rely on the inner voice of God, for humanity's sake, for the children, including my own. My son will see and remember, and maybe, just maybe, in his lifetime . . . ■

Visit

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

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