



MONOS

A newsletter for those seeking spiritual growth
"Blest are the single-hearted for they shall see God" —Matthew 5:8

Vol. 6, No. 9

Oct/Nov 1994

BEDE GRIFFITHS—A Personal View

By Fr. Patrick Eastman

I suppose that it is hardly surprising that I have always felt an affinity for Father Bede. Although there is quite a difference in our age, we were both born in Southern England to middle class Anglican parents. We both had the great fortune to study at Oxford, although Bede's focus was philosophy and literature with mine being theology.

Bede had the good fortune to be able to sit at the feet and study with C.S. Lewis later counting him as a personal friend. C.S. Lewis died just a year or so before I went to St. Stephen's House, the Anglo-Catholic seminary, in Oxford for my studies for the Anglican priesthood. The best I could do in that area was talk with Walter Hooper, Lewis's secretary and companion, who was a frequent visitor to our dining room in St. Stephen's House.

Fr. Bede, as I'm sure you know, was received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church shortly after his graduation from Oxford and entered the Benedictine Monastery at Prinknash. Again, there was a point of contact for me. Back in the early part this century Dom Aelred Carlyle restored the full Benedictine monastic life in the Anglican Church with a monastery on Caldy Island off the South Coast of Wales. In the early 1920's Dom Aelred and most of the community joined the Roman Catholic Church, establishing their monastery at Prinknash. Those who remained within the Church of England eventually came to Nashdom Abbey and I was associated with that community as a Benedictine oblate.

If these links seem rather tenuous to you, they certainly were points of affinity that I felt with Fr. Bede. However, after those points of contact Fr. Bede's life soars away to far greater distinction. Reading Bede's own autobiography *The Golden String*, I was made

very aware of what a special gift from God this man was by not only his incredible scholarship and voracious reading, but also in his spiritual experience. Fr. Bede recounts it like this:

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all the year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked on I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness

before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.
—(Griffiths, 9)

Bede Griffiths was a marked man. Clearly, his vocation could be seen at this early age as God prepared him to lead us on the pathways of God's own wisdom. The scholar, student and mystic searcher was drawn powerfully by a desire for God. It



was a passion that drew him in the tradition of all the great mystics of the past. The writings of the early christian spiritual writers, including Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers speak of the longing of "eros" to a "gnosis" of God. Their theoretical speculation is incarnated in the witness of Fr. Bede's life. It was a deep and direct experience of God combined with an intellectual rigor and honesty. Such a thirst for truth drew Bede to drink deeply from the wisdom of our ancient spiritual tradition; to taste the sweetness of scripture and to be moulded and inebriated by the sacraments, all set within the context of a community of faith. Yet this was not enough. In 1955 Fr. Bede had established himself as a Benedictine monk of great promise and a highly respected scholar. As Prior of Farnborough Abbey in England, he had a very prestigious position in the Catholic Church. But the desire for Divine truth, the all-pervading longing for union with God drew him to forsake all this respectability and at almost 50 years old to travel to India. Bede's own words give the reason for this momentous and sacrificial move:

I had begun to realize that there was something missing in the Western Church; we only live out half our soul; the conscious rational side. We still have to discover the other half, the unconscious, intuitive dimension. I wanted to experience during my own lifetime the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and the intuitive, the masculine and the feminine. —(Quoted by Roland Ropers in Universal Wisdom, 557)

Perhaps there is another affinity; both Bede and I left our country of birth even if for radically different reasons. But the affinity comes alive again in the fact that the move to the United States of America put me on the doorstep of Osage Monastery founded by Sr. Pascaline Coff, OSB. I cannot believe my good fortune at coming to Tulsa so close to an ashram founded under the inspiration of, and with the same principles as Fr. Bede's in India. Neither can I begin to tell you the profound way in which Osage Monastery has influenced my life. Through the community, guests and visitors, the richness of Bede's own experience has touched my own life. When I first encountered O†M I had not experienced anything of the non-Christian Eastern religious tradition, and I described my initial reactions as feeling "very uncomfortable" and "very condemning" (see **MONOS** Vol 4:1 "Is Dialogue a Sell-Out"). Little did I know how much the whole experience was to deepen and enrich my own spirituality. My awareness of the contemplative tradition in the Christian Church has been deepened and kindled into a 'living flame of love' in my heart. Ultimately, I owe a debt of gratitude

to Fr. Bede for that. I only hope that the poverty of my response does not fail to do justice to the great gift that Bede has provided. Being able to act as part-time chaplain at O†M however, does ensure that Bede's influence continues to work its way in my life.

Thus far I have spoken about the indirect way in which Bede has influenced me. Although this is really significant over a considerable period of time, nothing can express the impression made on me by meeting Fr. Bede first in 1990 on his visit to O†M. Nothing I had read or heard about him prepared me for that first encounter.

At the first instant I knew I was in the presence of a holy man. The eyes are said to be "the window of the soul." Fr. Bede's eyes were unabashedly open and frank, they looked deep into one's own being whilst hiding nothing of the inner integrity of their owner. They penetrated deep, not with an uncomfortable judgment, but with a gentle acceptance and love. The body was thin and fragile and yet in its weakness it seemed strangely invincible. The soft touch of the hand, the bow in greeting, the softness of voice, spoke in a way that a thousand volumes could not of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Many of the early church writers spoke of the 'divinization' of the human person. In Fr. Bede I felt touched by the Divine. His presence spoke eloquently of the possibility of this divinization that until meeting Bede had been but a theoretical possibility. The memory of sitting at Bede's feet, of concelebrating Holy Eucharist with him, will last forever. The photographs that remind me of it have pride of place on the wall at our Center and each time I pass them I am touched by Fr. Bede. What more can I say?

When Fr. Bede died, it was a sad loss of someone whom I held very dear. I can only say that his departure to heaven took something of me with him. But the real joy has been that something of Bede seems to have come back. Remember Jesus saying "Unless I go I cannot send the Spirit." Perhaps we share in that experience that in union with Christ something of ourselves is taken into heaven when a dear one dies and yet something is given back so that we continue to be united.

The affinity I feel with Bede is but an affinity all of us have with one another. It is the affinity of the mystery of our own being uniting as a oneness of being in union with Christ.

Griffiths, Bede 1954, 1980. *The Golden String: An Autobiography*. Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers.

Photo: Fr. Bede and Fr. Patrick celebrating Mass at O†M 1992

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

of Fr. Bede's Life

- 1906** Born December 17th to a middle class British family and baptized Alan Griffiths as an Anglican.

He became aware of a sense of the 'holy' and the "inner source of life" towards the end of his time in Oxford where he became friends with C.S. Lewis, who was his tutor.

After University he spent some short time experimenting with a very simple and rustic community life with some like-minded friends. The sense of the sacred grew then to an acceptance of the Christian faith.

- 1933** He was received into the Catholic Church and within a month he entered the Benedictine Abbey at Prinknash.

He remained a monk in Britain for the next 24 years taking solemn vows in 1936 and being ordained to the priesthood in 1940.

- 1955** At the invitation of Fr. Benedict Alapatt, an Indian Benedictine, he went to establish a Benedictine monastery in the Bangalore region of South India.

When this experiment failed Bede joined with a Belgian Cistercian named Fr. Frances Mahieu in establishing Kurisumala Ashram at Kottayam in Kerala. Bede was there for 10 years.

- 1968** Bede accepted an invitation to take charge of Shantivanam—Forest of Peace—a monastery in Tamil Nadu. This had been established by Abhishiktananda and Fr. Jules Monachin in 1950. Fr. Jules died in 1957 and Abhishiktananda (Fr. Henri de Saux) retired to a hermitage in 1968.

Shantivanam was a Christian Benedictine Ashram. The faith was completely Christian but the lifestyle totally Indian. Under Fr. Bede's leadership the community flourished and there were many Indian vocations.

- 1980** Fr. Bede officially joined the Camaldolese Benedictines and in 1982 Shantivanam became part of the Camaldolese order.

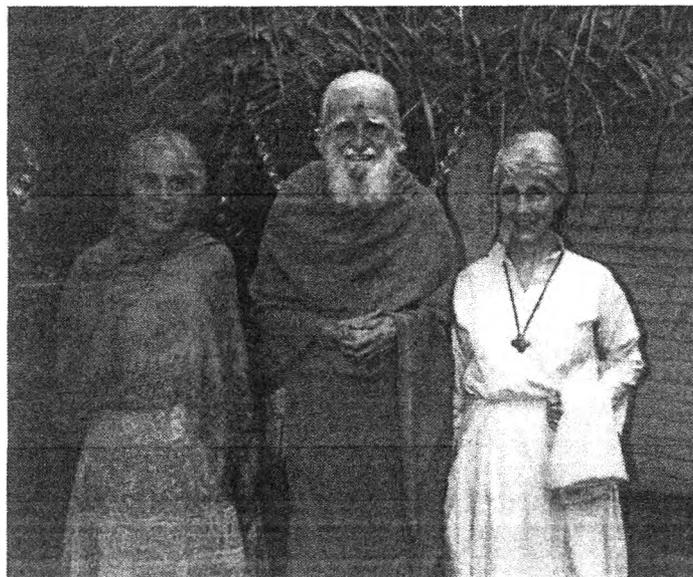
The community at Shantivanam was described a few years ago by Wayne Teasdale in these words:

Under his leadership, Shantivanam has completely "inculturated." Inculturation, a fruit of Vatican II, means the attempt to express the Christian life and mystery in the form of the particular culture in which a community finds itself. Shantivanam assumed Hindu forms in style of life, such as vegetarianism, sitting on the floor or ground, eating with one's fingers, living in simple huts with little furniture, and following utter simplicity in all things, free of the telephone, the radio, and the television. The monks wear kavi, the saffron color of the sannyasi, the monk of India. Some Sanskrit prayers from the Veda and the Upanishads have been incorporated into the public worship, though not into the Eucharistic liturgy itself, and the chapel is built in the classical style of the Hindu temple. Shantivanam, in these ways, has become both Christian and Hindu, but in a very profound sense which defies description or analysis.

—[Philosophers' Exchange 1991, p. 5]

Fr. Bede travelled widely throughout the world speaking on mysticism, the contemplative life and inter-religious dialogue in the last few years of his life.

- 1993** Fr. Bede died May 13th at Shantivanam Ashram having left us a rich and challenging heritage.



From left: Judy Walter, Fr. Bede, Sr. Pascaline. -Shantivanam

*In January 1993 Fr. Bede was given the prestigious international John Harriot Memorial Award for excellence in religious communication. Because of his health he could not go to London to receive the award in person. He dictated his acceptance speech in his ashram which was read by his friend Roland Ropers. The text was printed in **The Tablet**, January 16, 1993 and we re-print it here with their kind permission.*

The new consciousness

Bede Griffiths

We are entering a new age. The European civilisation which we have known for the past two thousand years is giving way to a global civilisation, which will no longer be centered in Europe but will have its focus more in Asia, Africa and South America. Christianity will no longer be a separate religion but will be seen in the context of the religious traditions of humankind as a whole.

As we enter this new civilisation the meeting place of East and West, and of the nations of the world, will be science. The changes in contemporary Western science have provided a new outlook on life for humanity as a whole. The central point is the new understanding of the universe, which is no longer perceived as consisting of solid bodies moving in space and time, but rather, according to quantum theory, as a field of energy pervaded by consciousness. Western scientists, for the first time, have seriously faced the fact that if they want to understand the universe, they have to understand their own consciousness. A leader in this development was David Bohm for he was one of the first scientists to take seriously the place of consciousness in scientific understanding.

The new understanding of science and consciousness provides, as it were, a platform on which religions can meet. We are beginning to see that we can now interpret the religious traditions, particularly the myths and symbols of all the scriptures, within the context of a world where science and consciousness interrelate.

In this new global civilisation Christianity, as I understand it, will be seen in relation to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Suffism and the primordial religious traditions—the Australian, the native American, the African, and so on. A new consciousness is emerging, moving beyond the rational mind with its awareness of separate entities and its dualistic approach. We are beginning to

discover the unitive consciousness which goes beyond dualistic awareness.

David Bohm speaks, as a theoretical physicist, of unity and interconnectedness in what he calls the implicate order, prior to the world of separate entities which is our normal experience. The implicate order is constantly unfolding, giving rise to the explicate order of particular forms and structures. This is where the new scientific understanding of the universe meets with the non-dualist traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. As we move beyond the present religious forms and structures we begin to see that, behind and beyond their diversity, there is an underlying unity. All the religions are expressing symbolically something which cannot be expressed in rational terms.

Any attempt to express fully that which is beyond expression is bound to fail. The aim is illusory because the *content* of the Catholic faith, in common with that of the other great religious traditions, transcends all rational, discursive thought. When he had finished his great theological work, the *Summa*

The meeting-place of East and West, and of the nations of the world, will be science.

A new consciousness is emerging.

Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas realised that all he had written was as straw in comparison to his mystical experience. He was fully aware that no image or concept is remotely adequate to the fullness of the faith.

Within Christianity the focus will be on the mystery of faith, which Jesus called the mystery of the Kingdom of God and St. Paul called the mystery of Christ. A mystery cannot be expressed rationally or logically but it can be symbolised. All scientific theories and all religious doctrines are in fact symbolic structures. In each religion the symbolic structures work by opening the human mind to the transcendent Reality, to the truth. The symbolic structures within the religions each have their unique value but all have limitations because they are socially and culturally conditioned.

The unique value of Christianity is its profoundly historic structure. That to me is a key point. Christ is not an *avatara*. The Incarnation is a unique historic event and Jesus a unique historic person. In gathering all things, all of humanity and all matter into

one in himself, he transforms the world, bringing the cosmos, its matter and its processes, back to its source in the transcendent Reality whom he called Abba, Father. This is unique. At the same time, one of the main limitations of institutional Christianity is its exclusivism, which stems from its cultural background in ancient Judaism. This exclusivism particularly will have to be transcended as we move more and more deeply into the mystery of Christ. We are in a position now to be open to all the religious traditions of the world, being aware of their limitations but also, most importantly, realising their unity in the depth-dimension which underlies them all; and that, of course, is the mystical dimension.

Many people today are discovering the mystical dimension in religion. In Christianity, once we get beyond the doctrinal systems, we have a long tradition of mystical wisdom beginning with St. John and St. Paul, going through Clement of Alexandria, Origen and the Greek Fathers, and on to St. Augustine, and later St. Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart. And now we can relate that to the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism and the other great religions.

The Christian Gospel as originally proclaimed was; "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." At that time the old structures were breaking down and the kingdom of God was emerging. The Apocalypse would put it, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The old heaven and the old earth had passed away. And a Voice said, "Behold, I make all things new." That is always happening.

I think that is exactly where we are today: The breakdown of the old civilisation and of the whole order which we knew, and, within that, the rebirth of meaning, penetrated by a new consciousness. Science today recognises that all order comes out of chaos. When the old structures break down and the traditional forms begin to disintegrate, precisely then in the chaos, a new form, a new structure, a new order of being and consciousness emerges.

The old is always dying and the new is emerging, and that which is new socially and culturally transforms the old. This is really an apocalyptic age. Within this context we can take the forms of Christian symbolism, but we can also take forms like the coming of the Buddha Maitreya or the last *avatara* of Kali. Every religion looks forward to a time when the end will come and the new birth will take place. So in a very wonderful way we are at the birth of a new age and a new consciousness. □



DAYANANDA

(The Compassionate One)

Seeker of the hidden mysteries
You moved among us as spirit
a sign of the Eternal
clothed in the
transient garb
of the sun.

Known in your earthly form as
Father Bede
Guruji
Dayananda—the compassionate one...

Now in your absence we ask:
"Who was this man
who lived among us
so familiar,
always accessible,
a gentle presence,
whose eyes were a horizon
of the beyond?"

Words softly spoken
yet resounding in the ear of the heart
speaking of inner mysteries,
inner treasures...
You found the Pearl of great price
and became an East-West pilgrim
to share the inner riches of your heart.
Archetype of Wisdom,
Ancient, transparent frame
through you we glimpse
the birth of a new
Transcendent Age
a deeply mystical breakthrough
into the very Heart of Reality.

—Judy Walter, May 1994-Shantivanam