

Some Reflections on Bede Griffiths' *Vedanta and Christian Faith* — His Least Remembered Book

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I. Prefatory remarks

1. *Vedanta and Christian Faith* is comprised of 3 lectures:
 - a. "The Mystery of the Godhead"
 - b. "Creation and Incarnation"
 - c. "The Ultimate State of Man and the Universe:"
2. These lectures — given at the University of Madras in 1973 [?] — mark the shift in Bede's reflection from the notion of the study of Vedanta and the intellectual systems of India, to an experiential harmonization rooted in symbolic representations of Vedanta as quintessential experience...
 - a. Background: see also Trapnell, pp. 231 ff; in general, Teasdale, *Toward a Christian Vedanta*,
 - b. Note: Bede does not speak, here at least, of a Christian Vedanta, but only of Vedanta and Christian faith
 - c. Even in his introduction to Wayne Teasdale's *Toward a Christian Vedanta*, Bede never mentions "Christian Vedanta"
 - i. Bede intended no synthesis, but rather a kind of conversation seeking good advice from both sides
3. My hypothesis: that despite his learning, even at the time of these lectures Bede no longer had confidence that the study of the texts as theological compositions would actually be of use in solving the problems of the modern world — particularly in the modern West — he was concerned about
 - a. More deeply, it is not just "the West" that lacks the depth and insight to provide what is needed in a modern, secularized world; East or West, the effort to control reality by primarily rational and conceptual means is at fault — and so even in India, the spiritual depths must be sought;
4. Nonetheless, in these lectures Bede does seem to present an academic guise; in this presentation, I attempt to observe where there is mapped in his three lectures a "shift" away from an effort at an academic, philological (even "Jesuit"*) tradition of the academic study of Hinduism toward a necessarily "non-verbal" and experiential encounter. In its final section I both assess this shift — what was gained and lost — and suggest that Bede's work, thus specified, leaves clearer room for other approaches.
5. Two notes:
 - a. *Full confession: one of the great dimensions of the encounter of Christianity with India may have something to do with how Jesuits went about this encounter, particularly how Jesuits from the West studied India; I am for better or worse part of a great tradition with its own methods and procedures, and it is a different tradition from that of Bede Griffiths, Henri LeSaux and others. My interests and background color this presentation.

b. I am happy to concede that Vedanta is a tradition of great experience, but that experience is deeply verbal, argumentative, exegetical in form; the experience is available through the doorway of the Uttara Mimamsa;

- i. Sankara was, we can assume, a man of intense experience; but he chose to be an erudite, meticulous commentator who chose to say very little about his own experience. He wrote long books, so to speak, that are difficult to read. That he chose to be an exegete and apologist has to be taken into account by anyone who wishes to embrace the heritage of Sankara.

There now follows a more expanded version of these preliminary points.

II. The Lectures

1. *Context for the Vedanta and Christian Faith lectures*: Bede's sense of the Church: that his view of the Church is of course rooted in the perceived secularism of the 1960s and 1970s — and crises such as:

- a. death of God
- b. secularization
- c. materialism, capitalism
- d. dichotomy of matter and spirit
- e. the loss of spiritual language and the need to recover it
 - i. the need to find a proper use of language that opens into, rather than grasps, reality
 - ii. the Bible as deficient in philosophy, and hence the underdevelopment of the Biblical notion of God
- f. the discovery of Vedanta and language, analysis, experience
 - i. as parallel to the Christian experience, and yet too as an antidote to the ailments of the West
 - ii. Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha as writing experiences, not merely commentaries

2. *In the course of the three lectures*, he notices commonalities,

- a. using Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, and a variety of Christian sources, Bede finds a variety of points of contact, such as the following:
 - i. the mystery of the divine Reality ("The Mystery of the Godhead")
 - ii. the use of analogy in "understanding" that Reality ("The Mystery of the Godhead")
 - iii. the importance of divine consciousness (Logos, Atman; "The Mystery of the Godhead")
 - iv. the absolute perfection of the divine Reality – who is still in relationship to this world ("Creation and Incarnation")
 - v. the human destiny as participant in the divine Reality ("The Ultimate State of Man and the Universe")

b. he also (rightly) attends to differences, and notes conflicts, as with these Vedanta perspectives:

- i. in Sankara, pure simplicity — but not the person of God (p. 119)
- ii. in Sankara — the unreality of world, persons, God (p. 125)
- iii. in Ramanuja — compromised perfection/s of God (p. 131)
- iv. in Madhva — eternal souls (p. 132)
- v. in Sankara — a world not distinct from God (p. 133)
- vi. in Sankara — a lack of rationale for creation (p. 137)
- vii. in Sankara, Ramanuja — no body in ultimate state (p. 156)
- viii. the question of the reality of creation (p. 160)

c. he did not resolve the problems he notices — nor did he claim to. Rather, he notes them, nuances them, and then moves on. My impression is that noting the problems was more or less his occasion to observe differences, as marking the fact that there are limits to intellectual exchange, and that on that level there could be no resolution or solution.

- i. in this regard, his work is so very different from that of Fr Johanns, who meticulously noticed differences and then used a Thomistic framework to explain and overcome differences, in a way that suited his Catholic perspective; it differs also from the work of Fr DeSmet who, to my knowledge, did not worry about the kinds of comparative problems presented by Bede here.¹

3. *On the whole, and despite moments of detail, Bede's reflection on Vedanta focuses on its spiritual heritage* — after he has noticed, but found little hope in intellectual engagement

a. a turn to Vedanta as experience, and to Sankara's reading of Vedanta:

- i. Sankara as a quintessential master of experience...
- ii. Sankara as writing from experience
 - and thus, Sankara embodying the experiential wisdom of the Upanisads
 - thus, talking about Sankara, with only the vaguest reference to Sankara's works — just one unidentifiable quote...
 - he cites, though only briefly, Ramanuja...
- iii. are we seeing, implicitly, Bede's own turn to his own experience?

4. *At the end of each lecture:*

a. my sense is that in all three lectures, the whole is less than the sum of the parts; no solid conclusions are drawn, nor directions indicated; or, perhaps, there is a kind of insight gained that is more intuitive, juxtaposed with but not really drawn from the preceding reflections on the theme in Christian and Vedanta sources.

¹ Had we time, we could take all or any of the three lectures for closer study: i. assess the question under consideration; ii. how Christian and Vedanta insights are brought to bear; iii. what kind of resolution is offered; iv. what would have been gained by more resolutely engaged textual study; v. we could also draw comparisons on any of the three themes with other approaches: e.g., something by Johanns or DeSmet or Sara Grant

- consider, by way of entry, the last paragraph of any of the lectures. I have included among my 'texts' below the opening paragraphs of lectures 1-3, and also the ending of lecture 2 — together, in my view, these suggest that there was little prospect that the intervening study could actually come to a conclusion.
- b. after some cognizance of common ground and differences, and without borrowing Vedanta solutions, Bede rather offers
 - i. a new position and new take on his Christian heritage, somewhat affected by Vedanta
 - ii. broader, general appeals to Sankara, Ramakrishna, Ramana, Aurobindo as witnesses to experience
 - iii. and to Teilhard and Dionysius
 - Dionysius is a kind of hero (in lecture 1)
 - iv. question: couldn't Bede, for his purposes, simply have settled for a reading of Pere Teilhard and Sri Aurobindo? Why appeal to the Vedanta and to Sankara, if not exemplifying the importance of actually reading them?
- c. As mentioned, Bede is not attempting a Christian Vedanta, but reflection 'beyond' the traps and troubles of modern theological thinking
 - i. he appeals for mutual openness and understanding, but does not propose specific syntheses
 - ii. so we can ask, how was this, or might this be, this a profitable conversation between traditions? what are the new, viable criteria?
- d. why do these lectures mark an ending?
 - i. Bede is very impressed with experience
 - ii. Bede seeks a truth beyond words and concepts
 - iii. Bede seems in each lecture to reach a stopping point, at which the intellectual process of comparison and contrast comes to a slow halt
 - iv. for such reasons, which are in a way circularly self-affecting — committed to experience he seems to want to peer through the Vedanta to the experiences of the authors — he leaves himself with no reason to study actual Vedanta texts
 - oddly, his lectures may mark an ending to the study of Vedanta by a certain kind of Christian scholar
 - for he also does not believe that the problems of modernity he had focused on can be relieved by study

III. Concluding Observations

1. the lectures are a benchmark of sorts, after which he moves differently, at his own pace; his later works will be increasingly removed from the actual study of Vedantic texts
 - a. Bede lectures on Vedanta, but does not show that he has read the Vedanta texts
 - i. contrast Richard DeSmet, Sarah Grant, and others... — though again without saying that he should have written as they did, etc.

2. *By my hypothesis, these University of Madras lectures mark the “highpoint” and also the “end” — the beginning of the end, the omen of the end — of Bede’s academic study of Vedanta;*
3. and after these lectures, I suggest, Bede turned increasingly to the experiential mode, intuition, etc. — but am I correct in saying this?
 - a. I wonder whether Bede really ever *wanted* to give lectures at a University
 - b. these lectures are not particularly interesting in terms of their insights into Vedanta; but they are interesting in terms of understanding Bede’s shifting intellectual project
 - i. nor does he, after this, show real interest in the reading of Vedanta; despite attention to the Gita in *River of Compassion*
 - ii. lest his position be mistaken for a normative position about the meaning/s of Vedanta, we need also a reconsideration of the intellectual issues involved:
 - would a closer reading of some Vedanta text have changed his views or altered his future commitments?
2. *Where we might find a way possibly to build on Bede’s work*
 - a. obviously, for many, it is attractive to continue his work as a turn to the intuitive and experiential;
 - i. the turn to experience is, after all, very attractive
 - while reading sastraic Sanskrit, such as Sankara wrote, can be tedious
 - b. and then, re-assessing the crises in the Church and world in 2006
 - i. did he get the 1960s and early 1970s right?
 - ii. where we think we are intellectually and spiritually
 - iii. we must also ask what those living in India now — Indian or not — are thinking about, and what those who are not in India are thinking with respect to India
 - the new political and social situation
 - skepticism about ashrams
 - a reconsideration of how Indian Hindus and Indian Christians read Vedanta
 - c. we might then seek to rethink Vedanta in light of 30+ years of scholarly advances;
 - i. how ought we to read Vedanta texts, denying neither their erudite nor the experiential sides?
 - ii. the various critiques of Vedanta
 - valuing both traditional and new learning
 - iii. the challenge of the highly verbal, articulate nature of Vedanta erudition
 - iv. the problem of experience
 - d. using *Vedanta and Christian faith* for other projects, for example, retrieving the intellectual study of Vedanta in a more rationally confident comparative project
 - i. e.g., by way of projects correlated to the three lectures:

- “The Mystery of the Godhead:” God — into comparative theology
 - “Creation and Incarnation:” creation — into process theology; incarnation — in liturgical theology
 - “The Ultimate State of Man and the Universe:” into soteriology and views of “salvations” (Heim)
- e. how to read *Vedanta and Christian Faith*?
- i. are these lectures utterances written from and of experience?
 - ii. what effect did Bede hope to have on his listeners when he lectured at the University?
3. so what am I missing as I read the lectures as transitional, interesting but failed experiments?

IV. Selected passages

My sense is that passages such as these serve to exemplify why the study of Vedanta not only was not, but also could not be, urgently important for Bede Griffiths.

Lecture I

pp. 102-3 The Hebrew conceived of God as above all a Person, a moral Being, who is known by his action in history, his providence over the life both of nations and of individuals. It is true that he was forbidden to form any image of God and conceived of him as a "hidden God," dwelling in cloud and darkness; but he never hesitated to speak of him in human terms, ascribing to him human passions, of anger and repentance, of love and desire, of hatred and revenge, of joy and sorrow.

Unfortunately the Hebrew has no power of metaphysical thought — he thought in images, not in concepts — so that this representation of God, which is legitimate if it is properly understood, was never analyzed philosophically. Even the conception of God in the New Testament suffered from this defect.

p. 104 To my mind this is the supreme achievement of India that at the very beginning of her history she was able to break through the veil, not only of the senses but also of the intellect, and to discover the hidden mystery which lies beyond speech and thought...

[The Upanisads] are not philosophical treatises or speculations about the nature of God or the universe like the writings of the contemporary Greek philosophers. They are the record of an experience and they are intended to lead to the same experience...

p. 108 It is this intuition of Being, of the fundamental mystery of existence, which underlies all Hindu thought and finds expression in the Upanishads and the whole tradition of the Vedanta. But this mystery of Being is apprehended not merely as a concept as in Greek thought but as an experience.

p. 116 It is at this point that Hindu thought seems to mark the greatest insight of the human spirit. For the Hindu sage has always claimed to have reached this intuition of the Self.

pp. 121-122 Thus Christian faith discovers within the abyss of the Godhead, that divine darkness of which Dionysius speaks, a mystery of personal communion, in which all that we can conceive of wisdom and knowledge, of love and bliss, is contained, and yet which infinitely transcends our conception. The terms we use of being, knowledge, love, nature, person, relation are all terms of analogy. The Godhead remains that unfathomable abyss, which transcends all human thought, of which Hindu, Buddhist and Christian mystics alike speak, and yet in that abyss are contained, though in a transcendent way, all that we can conceive of being, truth, goodness, beauty, grace, love, wisdom and immortality. This is the mystery which continues to haunt us, ever drawing us towards itself and challenging us to go beyond all human concepts and experience and to ascend above the whole creation into the depth of the divine darkness. [end of lecture I]

Lecture II

In this lecture, a careful consideration of differences regarding creation, beginning with some comments on the necessarily beyond-rational nature of creation,

p. 123 ... This is the mystery of creation, and it is well to emphasize that it is and remains a mystery like God himself. It is only when we recognize that we are dealing with a mystery which transcends the understanding that we can begin to make sense of creation. All merely rational explanations of the universe are inadequate; at best they can point towards a reality which they cannot explain.

In the history of the Vedanta there have been different answers to this question of the nature of the universe and its relation to ultimate reality. This seems to me to be one of the most interesting problems raised by the Vedanta and the point at which a comparison with Christian doctrine can be most revealing. To my mind the Vedanta has never found a completely satisfying answer to this problem, and this may well be the point at which Christian faith could add something to the understanding of the Vedanta and at the same time at which Christian faith could also learn to express itself more adequately in terms of the Vedanta.

and concluding with a long paragraph appealing for a mystic ground:

pp. 143-44 May we not find in this conception of the restoration of mankind, and with mankind of the universe, to unity through participation in the life of God, an example of the convergence of ancient religious tradition and modern thought. In all the great religions we find this conception of an original unity in which man is at one with nature and with God, the supreme reality. It is found in the *Tao* of Lao Tsu, in the *Buddha-nature* which all men share of Mahayana Buddhism, in the *Atman* of Hindu tradition, and in the Universal Man of Islam. In the past it has been customary to look upon this original unity as something realized in the past, from which man has fallen.

Today we think rather in terms of the ascent of man towards a unity for which he constantly aspires. Both Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin, as we have said, see in the evolution of the universe the gradual convergence of matter and life through consciousness in man to the experience of the divine life and consciousness. Modern man has explored the world of matter and life and consciousness with a thoroughness and exactitude which has never been known before. But in doing so he has lost the knowledge of the divine life and consciousness, which alone give any final meaning to life and consciousness in man. It is there that the ancient religious traditions are needed to bring back to mankind that knowledge of the divine life and consciousness, which have been the goal and aspiration of every great religion.

But in so doing the different religions have to take account of the knowledge of matter and life and consciousness, which modern science has given us, and so make their message relevant to modern man. The mysteries of God and creation, of sin and redemption, of incarnation and final restoration are no less relevant to human life today than they were in the past. May our comparative study of these doctrines in Hindu and Christian tradition help all of us to realize more deeply their implications in our own lives, and lead us to a closer understanding and a great unity with one another. [end of lecture 2]

Lecture III

p. 146 In the Vedanta there have been three main schools — *Advaita*, *Visishadvaita* and *Dvaita* — of which the last may appear the most realist; yet if we examine them closely we shall find that there is a firm basis of realism in them all. Undoubtedly the system

which presents the greatest challenge to the realist mind is the *advaita* doctrine of Sankara...

Sankara has seen with extraordinary penetration that the human mind cannot rest on any image presented to the senses or on any thought presented to consciousness. It has to go beyond both image and thought, if it wants to teach the ultimate reality, the ultimate truth, which cannot be thought or imagined. [147] This is the most penetrating thought of which the mind is capable. It pierces through all appearances, all the projections of the mind and the senses, to the ultimate truth.

And this intuition, Sankara maintains — and with him all Hindu tradition — is a matter of experience. When the mind has reached this intuition of reality, of the Self, it knows with the certainty of direct experience. It is this quality of lived experience behind Sankara's thought, like that of all the masters of *advaita*, that gives it such extraordinary power. This is not mere philosophical speculation or the product of religious enthusiasm. It is the experience of the mind itself in the plenitude of Self-consciousness, an awareness of being which is nothing but a reflection of being on itself...

One can feel in all Sankara's writing this sense of a truth that must be known, of a beatitude which leaves nothing to be desired.

p. 148 The advaitic experience is simply the culmination of this human experience of transcendence.

pp. 150-151 St. Thomas, then, is in agreement with Sankara that the Divine Nature is absolute simple, "without duality," and that the divine mind, which is simply the consciousness of being, knows all things in an absolute identity with itself. There can be no doubt that Sankara and Aquinas have together reached the most fundamental understanding of the ultimate nature of being and consciousness.

p. 162 But this means that all differences, as we know them, will disappear. Here we begin to see the full significance of Sankara's *advaita*. In God all differences which appear in nature and all distinctions known to the human mind are transcended.

p. 163 And yet such is the witness of every great religious tradition: in this Void, in this Darkness, in this Silence, all fullness, all light, all truth, all goodness, all love, all joy, all peace, all happiness is to be found. May our study of the study of different traditions of religion lead us all to a deeper understanding of this Divine Mystery and to share in a greater measure of this Divine bliss. [end of lecture 3]