

# BEDE GRIFFITHS AND THE REBIRTH OF CHRISTIAN WISDOM by Bruno Ba

*(A talk given at the commemoration of the seventh anniversary of Bede Griffiths' mahasamadhi, at Osage Monastery, Sand Springs, OK, USA, by Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam, May 21, 2000. The talk has been abridged, and almost all the quotes from Bede's writings removed, to stay within reasonable space limits)*

This evening I would like to speak about Bede Griffiths and the Rebirth of Christian Wisdom. You might call this Bede's central concern. Wisdom, I believe, is what is symbolized by the 'golden string' that marked his lifelong quest. Again and again, Bede writes of a universal tradition, a 'perennial philosophy' that has vanished from the modern West. When he migrated to India, it was in search of a wisdom which he could not find in the western world.

It is very interesting to trace the stages by which he pursues his goal of wisdom. Reading Shirley du Boulay's biography (1) of Bede, you can trace the series of awakenings that mark his development. Bede was very clear in articulating these experiences. While he lamented again and again the sapiential vacuum which he experienced in the modern West - the absence of a contemplative (or unitive) consciousness and culture - Bede gradually became aware that something new and important was happening within this apparent spiritual void. He was still studying this positive historical dynamic as he neared the end of his long life.

The question before us is how to continue the work of Bede. How do we pick up the golden string where Bede let it fall at the end of his life? I think that it may be largely a matter of bringing Bede's intuitions back home. There is a first movement of breaking open the container and moving out, exploring the other world: Bede is one of this first generation of explorers. Then follows a second movement of integration - of bringing the new consciousness back home to the central Christ-mystery and to the situation of a Christian in the modern West. Part of our challenge is to understand what Bede has done, and the other part is to make it ours, to integrate it with the experience of faith and of life that is ours, in this world of our own.

The materials of Bede's personal synthesis seem to fall into four categories, and these different sources also mark successive stages in the development of his thought.

The first influence is romantic poetry: a tradition which he identifies immediately with his own spiritual initiation: his experience of the divine in nature, as he recounted it at the beginning of his autobiography, *The Golden String*. He identified his teachers, then, as Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. The spirit that breathed in their poetry became Bede's personal religion.

The second turning point, or pivotal moment, was Bede's discovery of Christianity. This was a very different experience. God was in this in a way which seemed to cut across his first experience. It turned Bede around radically so that he became totally committed to his faith in Christ. Yet when he wrote about it in his autobiography, the focus was less upon Christ than upon Christianity, upon the Church and upon the way that all meaning came together for him at this point. Bede's response was total: he became a Christian and a Roman Catholic and a monk almost at the same time.

The third great pillar in Bede's religious structure would be Hindu Vedanta. For years before he moved to India in 1955, he had been reading scriptures of the Asian traditions. But seeds had been sown in this fertile soil much earlier. While still a boy, he had read the Bhagavad Gita, the Dhammapada and the Tao Te Ching. When, at last, Bede went to India, it was once again as if he had suddenly discovered himself. Indeed, in each one of these successive experiences, Bede seems to awaken as if for the first time and exclaim: now I have come home, this is who I am. What he found in India, however, was very different from what he had embraced in the highly institutionalized Roman Catholic Church of the early 1930's! He stepped off the boat into a world in which men and women were one with the earth and all its living creatures. Here, pursuing further his studies of the vedic texts in their own milieu, he would continue to

uncover what he felt to be the unitive root of the universal wisdom, the primal oneness.

A fourth discovery, after twenty five years in India, began to turn him around once again. This was western science, but of a new kind: what is often called the 'new paradigm' science. Rupert Sheldrake, the revolutionary biologist, spent a year at Shantivanam writing his book, and discussing each chapter with Bede. Then Bede started reading Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, and then David Bohm, and finally Ken Wilber. He was fascinated by Wilber's vision of the evolution of consciousness through different stages all the way to nondual consciousness. For the first time since moving to India, Bede was turning back towards the West - and to western science, which he had rejected categorically. But This was no longer the science of Descartes and Newton, nor the technology of the twentieth century West. Bede was discovering here a new consciousness which saw an organic unity in all being and which, in Capra, intuited a deep resonance between contemporary physics and the mystical philosophy of the Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist traditions.

These four turning points in the development of Bede's consciousness remain as continual sources for his his thought and, finally, for his synthesis. You may have noticed that three of them are on close terms with one another, and the fourth seems to stand at some distance. Between the romantic tradition and the new paradigm science of a Fritjof Capra there can be traced a direct historical continuity. The vision of an organic universe in which every part is intercommunicating with every other part, constituting a single living being - as in the 'gaia hypothesis' - resonates strongly with the vision of the English Romantic poets. The 'hard science' of the modern West - physics, chemistry and the like - derives, on the other hand, in a direct line from the Enlightenment. Further, Romanticism and this new scientific vision harmonize very well with the holistic perspective of Hinduism. It was not difficult for Bede to move from one to another of these three. Christian-

ity, on the other hand, while it defines Bede's identity and commitment, does not sit quietly with the others. It makes its own distinctive assertion, and creates difficulties of its own in Bede's project of synthesis.

Now let's move forward to consider Bede's personal contribution to the rebirth of Christian wisdom. I am convinced that this rebirth is finally beginning to take place, after a very long interruption - a sapiential parenthesis or desert journey which has continued for centuries. It seems that we had to lose one wisdom, the 'old wisdom', in order to discover another wisdom. Meanwhile something has been emerging. What is emerging, I believe, is the human person. By this I mean both the individual and the communal person, the personal 'subject' as conscious, free and differentiated - differentiated even from the matrix of the old wisdom.

The old wisdom - even in Christianity - tended invariably to enclose itself once again within the structures of the old cosmic order, to return to a containment within the static, a historical architecture of archaic religion and classical thought. The human person returned to its condition of prisoner within the iron order of the 'great chain of being.' But remember what Paul says of the poor elements of this world, in the light of the Christ-event. When Jesus came into the world, the old structures, the cosmic order, surrendered their sovereignty to the Son of Man - and thus to the human person. The Incarnation generates a new creation according to its own intrinsic principle.

Something new is happening, and that something new is the birth of the human person. That's what we see in Jesus and that's what we see in the history of the western world, crazy and perverse as it may often seem. With the coming of the Gospel and the gift of Pentecost the human person is freed right at its center. And then this human person becomes a creative center within the world. The world is being recreated out of the human person. This is the wisdom of the West, of which the West is unaware. If we are to have a new wisdom in Christianity, it must

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incorporate this dynamic, this expansive and creative energy. Here is the reason why we are reluctant to put ourselves once again into the old clothing of tradition - even a Christian tradition, even at its best.

The human person cannot be adequately held within any container. We cannot commit ourselves totally to any old tradition, even the best and the deepest of them. Bede was wrestling with this problem throughout his life. Towards the end of his life when he turned back towards the West, this newness was stirring within him once again.

I. Bede's first contribution to the rebirth of Christian wisdom is wisdom itself: his quest of the 'golden string.' It is his conviction - and his ability to communicate that conviction - that there is another way of knowing, which is deeper than the ordinary way that we think. There's a fuller consciousness, and you recognize its music in his voice as he speaks, as he writes.

Recently I found a wonderful little text (2) from Johann Sebastian Bach. He is talking about what he considers to be the finest kind of music (and he imagines it being played on a keyboard). In this supreme sort of music, the left hand, Bach says, plays what is written. Meanwhile the right hand improvises, playing assonances and dissonances upon what is written. Isn't that great? It's a splendid metaphor for many things, but especially for the kind of wisdom Christianity that we have been discussing. So much Christianity is played with only the left hand - what is written. This is true of every fundamentalism, each in its own way. It is true of Roman Catholicism in the centuries before Vatican II. But suppose we are creatures endowed with two hands. Suppose we are made not only to be imitative but to be creative. Suppose that faith is not only belief and submission, but also a creative act that brings forth something new. One aspect of the difference between ordinary knowledge and the wisdom of which we are speaking - and particularly the new wisdom

that which is written - the letters on the page, the musical score - and the music itself, that which comes to be in the moment.

Do you sense a relationship to the duality of Word and Spirit here? Better, do you find this same contrast between the word alone - literal word or law - and the divine Word which is alive with the Holy Spirit? Remember the movement from law to gospel, as Paul presents it. The law, in Paul's sense, is what is written; it is the left hand. What Jesus does is to liberate the right hand - with the gift of the Spirit - so that we can play the music with both hands, as he does in the gospels. The New Testament is written for two hands. It is both continuity and actuality, truth and life. The container is opened up, and - to put it crudely - God is acting from within us instead of from outside of us. God is acting through your own freedom, your own creativity, your own intelligence, rather than through a fixed external code that requires your exact conformity. Bede is very impatient with containers, because he knows that right hand very well. He knows that freedom of the Spirit.

Bede's work is an expression of the freedom of the Spirit and an appeal to recover that freedom within Christianity. Very often, however, he is looking back to traditions of spirituality which precede the gospel and Jesus' fresh revelation of the human person, and they carry within themselves much of the 'old order.' A task that remains, if we are to discover a Christian wisdom which is truly new, is to integrate that 'perennial philosophy' - and particularly the doctrines of non-duality and of the nondual self, or atman - with the liberation of the human person in this world which is initiated by Christ and which has manifested itself in the modern West.

II. Bede's second contribution to a new Christian wisdom is that principle of non-duality, or advaita, and of a unitive absolute, the One. When Bede immerses himself in the thought of the Indian scriptures - particularly in the Upanishads - he discovers a perspective in which everything is one rather than mul-

within a single, ultimate reality. When Bede speaks of the perennial philosophy or the primordial wisdom or the universal wisdom, he can include within each of these expressions several levels of meaning - or several concentric spheres of meaning. The core meaning, however, is that unitive reality, or unitive absolute. The next, larger sphere of meaning is, I think, the three levels of body, soul (or mind) and spirit: that three - level integrated view of the human person and of the universe. A third, still more general meaning of these expressions is simply the undifferentiated or integral human life which he finds expressed in the world's religious traditions prior to modern times. Generally, however, when Bede speaks of the perennial wisdom in his later years, he means the principle of advaita, or a single nondual reality, Brahman-atman.

That absolute Reality, or unitive principle - which lies at the core not only of Hinduism but of Buddhism and Taoism - becomes the heart of Bede's vision. Identified with 'God' or 'Father' the Source and first divine Person, it becomes a key for opening Christianity to its depths. What remains to be done, in continuing Bede's work, is to integrate that principle with the divine Word, or Christ-mystery. The nondual Absolute becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, and the process of its embodiment continues in those who are baptized into Christ. The New Testament can be re-interpreted from this perspective.

III. The third contribution of Bede is the unitive self, or atman. As soon as Bede has written about the nondual Absolute, he usually moves to the atman, because it is through the Self that the unitive ground of all reality is experienced. The search for the Self, Bede writes repeatedly, is the heart of the Vedantin way. In this focus upon the Self, Bede joins Thomas Merton and Abhishiktananda.

What is the further step that is called for here? How do we, as Christians, bring this back home? Here is the critical question for Christian spirituality, in its dialogue with the East. The point of intersection with Christianity is baptismal initiation, I believe. That is the point in Christian

spirituality where we are dealing with the self, the person, as a totality. Most of our spiritual tradition - analytical, in the fashion of the West, rather than holistic - restricts itself to the language of intellect and will, knowing and loving. But what is beneath and prior to knowing and loving and any other faculty or activity? It is the person as a whole, your own self. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus, '...unless you are born anew, you cannot see the kingdom of God.' It's a matter of the whole self, which is sacramentally reborn in baptism. Abhishiktananda, in his last years, became very interested in the baptism of Jesus; he saw that as the moment, at the beginning of the gospel, where the divine 'I AM' was realized in the human person. His intuition, I believe, was correct.

For most of us, baptism is not even a memory, since we were baptized as infants. So the challenge that faces us is, how do we get back there? I think that this is basically what silent meditation is about for a Christian. And this is also the point at which meditation converges with lectio divina. When you read the New Testament, awakened to this baptismal reality, you find it everywhere. The baptismal event is the great change which is the constant and implicit referent in Paul's letters. The first part of one of Paul's letters is likely to be a mystical unfolding of this event, and the second part is an instruction on how to live out that which you have received, that which you have become. Meditation and lectio, in this light, are two ways of entering into that which we are, this new person. A third way is the communal prayer for baptism in the Holy Spirit which is practiced in the Charismatic Movement. The fourth, essential, way is living from this new person. That is what the practical teaching of Jesus and the apostles is about.

IV. Bede Griffiths' fourth contribution to a recovery of Christian wisdom is his recognition of the divine dimension of the feminine. Bede writes some remarkable things about the feminine. Repeatedly he identifies the Holy Spirit with the 'feminine side' of God. This is a very important point. This 'feminine' Spirit is the divine

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energy which is the mother of creation, which brings forth all life, which moves the process of evolution. It is also is "that divine life latent in the universe from the beginning, latent in nature, and becoming conscious in us....The Spirit is this energy of love in us, the power of the divine. It is the Source of our real being, by which we become conscious of the divine life in us and know ourselves as sons and daughters of God..." (3)

Here again, however, there is a further step before us, if we are to have a new wisdom. Bede always identifies the feminine as mother. Is it possible that this maternal feminine is still an undifferentiated feminine? There is another way in which we can understand the Spirit as feminine. We can imagine the Spirit in interaction with the Word in a way which is reflected in the interaction of woman and man. Recall our image of the keyboard, and imagine, once again, the left hand as Word and the right hand as Spirit. The music comes from the interaction of these two. Word and Spirit are different, and yet they are one in their Source. Together, they generate something new, this new and living unity which is the music. May there be a 'divine Feminine,' differentiated more clearly both from the nondual Source and from the Word, which is not expressed in the images of source or womb, which is not merely receptiveness, or that which lies behind, but which is the very spirit of that which is to come and which has not yet emerged? Bede will often speak of the Spirit in this dynamic way, and it goes beyond his own maternal metaphors. He realized too the momentous implications of conceiving the divine Spirit as feminine, with regard to the position of women in the Church.

V. A fifth contribution of Bede to the rebirth of Christian wisdom is something we have already noted briefly: the vision of total integration which Bede conceives in terms of the three levels of being: spirit, soul (or mind) and matter (or body) - or, roughly speaking, God, humanity and the universe. That's a structure that you find everywhere in the great traditions. The human person is not only

the spirit is the unitive dimension which reconciles or integrates the other two.

A further step here - I confess to a personal investment in this one - would be opening up the three levels of body, soul, and spirit, to a fourth dimension. This happens when, once again, there is a differentiation and interaction of masculine and feminine, or mind and soul, or Word and Spirit. The geometry is transformed into the centered form of a mandala. This 'horizontal' differentiation - Word and Spirit, mind and psyche, masculine and feminine - has much to do with the dynamism of the Christ-event and of Christianity itself. It has much to do with the progressive movement of history.

Bede's contribution is a synthetic vision in which the One, the unitive Reality, expresses itself in an articulated way through all the dimensions of being. It is not a long step to integrate this vision with the mystery of Christ (or the mystery of the cross) as we find it emerging in the New Testament.

1. Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths*, New York, Doubleday, 1998.
2. Daniel Boorstin, *The Creators*, New York, Random House, 1992, p.438-9.
3. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, Ch. 18, p.129-130, inclusive language added.

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