

The Swami from Oxford

Bede Griffiths Wants to Integrate Catholicism and Hinduism

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THE SCENE IS Tamil Nadu in South India. An elderly man with white hair and beard sits in meditative posture in a thatched hut near the banks of the River Cavery. He is dressed in the ochre robe of a Hindu *sannyasin*—an ascetic who has renounced all possessions. Yet this man is not a Hindu guru but a Benedictine monk named Bede Griffiths, originally associated with Prinknash Abbey in England. A former student of C.S. Lewis at Oxford, Griffiths is well-known as a popular interpreter of Hindu wisdom to Western Christians. A convert to Catholicism, Griffiths is a British version of Thomas Merton, who, like his American counterpart, has had a long and abiding interest in Oriental religion.

Griffiths has made the claim that he is "a Christian in religion but a Hindu in spirit." Such an assertion can be understood as his way of adapting the Christian faith to the local culture. But it raises the question of how far a Christian can go in adopting indigenous and non-Christian practices and concepts without giving up Catholic teaching itself.

Since the time of the apostles, the Church has always attempted to adapt the Gospel message to the particular needs and circumstances of diverse cultures. St. Paul expresses his desire to be "all things to all" (1 Corinthians 9:22) and is shown in the Acts of the Apostles preaching to the Athenians in terms they can understand (Acts 17:22-30). In the Patristic Age, Christian writers like St. Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria manifested a deep respect for pagan wisdom and showed a willingness to explain the Christian mysteries in language borrowed from Stoic and Platonic philosophy.

As the Christian faith spreads to different cultures, many indigenous ideas and practices were incorporated into Church usage. The use of priestly vestments, candles, incense, holy water as well as certain holy days and seasons can all be traced to various pagan customs. Such borrowings confirm the observation of Cardinal Newman that the "great portion of what is generally received as Christian truth, is in its rudiments or in its separate parts to be found in heathen philosophies and religions."

The need to respect the practices of the native culture in the evangelization of the barbarians is recognized in the sixth century by Pope Gregory the Great in his letter to Abbot Mellitus, who was about to join Augustine of Canterbury in his missionary work. The Pope tells Mellitus

and Augustine not to destroy the pagan temples but to purify them with holy water and "place altars and relics of the saints in them." Furthermore, the people should not be deprived of religious feasting as long as it is directed towards "the glory of God." Gregory's policy of cultural inclusiveness allowed the Church to absorb many of the local ideas and practices of the Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic peoples who were evangelized and baptized. The emergence of Gothic Europe is a direct result of this creative synthesis of faith and culture.

With the advent of a Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, the issue of inculturation obviously lost much of its importance. Ethnocentrism tended to dominate Christendom at this time, along with a generally negative attitude towards non-Christian cultures (i.e., Jewish and Islamic). There is, though, a type of philosophical inculturation that took place with the adaptation of the newly discovered Aristotelian metaphysics into Christian thought by St. Thomas Aquinas.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the question of cultural accommodation once again assumed prominence. The great pioneers of adaptation appeared during these centuries in missionaries like Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto De Nobili in India, and José Vaz in Ceylon. The Jesuit Ricci can be considered the founder of the modern approach to inculturation. Through his total immersion in Chinese language and philosophy, Ricci won the confidence of many Chinese intellectuals and strove to preserve as many elements of Chinese culture as the Christian faith would allow. Subsequently, he gained approval for the Chinese rites from the Jesuit superior general in 1603, when he convinced his superior that the honors paid to Confucius, as well as the ancestor ceremonies, were social customs not intrinsically connected to any religious superstitions.

These Chinese rites received pontifical approval in 1659 from Pope Alexander VII, who gave this instruction regarding missionary activity in China:

Do not in any way attempt, and do not on any pretext persuade these people to change their rites, habits and customs, unless they are openly opposed to religion and good morals. For what could be more absurd than to bring France, Spain, Italy or any other European country over to China? It is not your country but the faith you must bring, that faith which

does not reject or belittle the rites or customs of any nation as long as these rites are not evil, but rather desires that they be preserved in their integrity and fostered. It is, as it were, written in the nature of all men that the customs of their country and especially their country itself should be esteemed, loved and respected above anything else in the world.

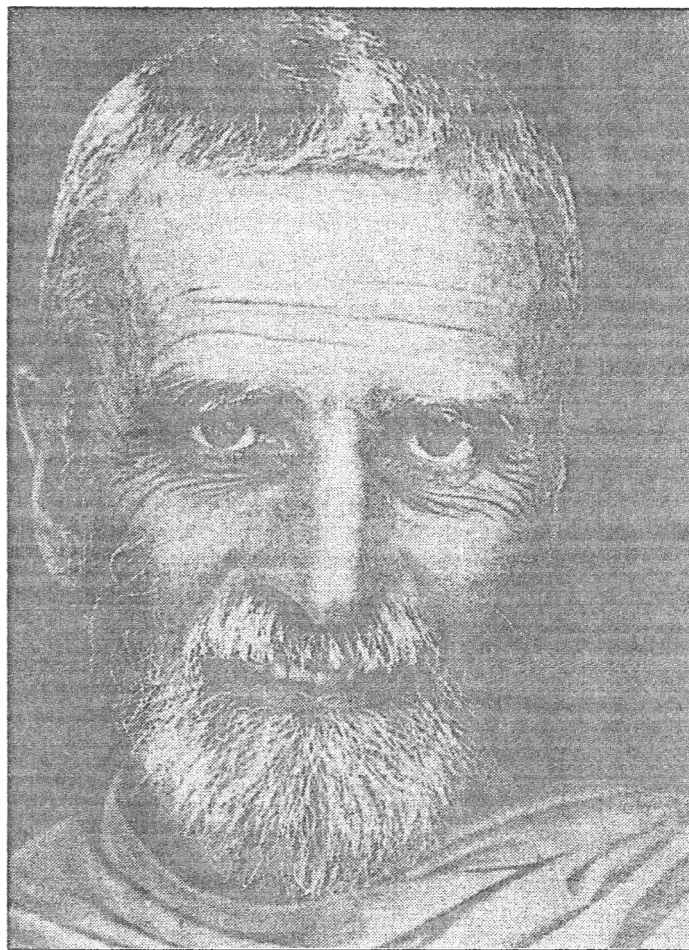
Ricci's approach to inculturation, though, was eventually challenged by Charles Maigrot, the Apostolic Vicar of Fukien, in 1693. The issue was ultimately brought to the Holy See. After several years of investigation and discussion, Pope Clement XI issued a decree in 1704 which prohibited the honors paid to Confucius and the ancestral ceremonies. The Pope's reasoning focused on the practical impossibility of separating these rituals from the superstitions that surround them in the popular Chinese mind.

Ricci's fellow Jesuit, Roberto De Nobili, applied the same methods of inculturation in India. De Nobili not only studied the native languages, he also dressed in the long robe and wooden clogs of a holy man and teacher. After a Hindu Brahmin was converted to Christianity, a controversy ensued over whether such converts must give up the white thread and single plait of hair that mark them as Brahmins. From 1610-1623 the issue was debated until Pope Gregory XV finally decided in favor of De Nobili's methods. The controversy, though, greatly hindered De Nobili's missionary efforts since he was forbidden to baptize while the case was being discussed.

The Oratorian José Vaz was able to carry out his missionary work in Ceylon free of such ecclesiastical controversy. He did, however, face persecution from the Dutch Calvinists and escaped arrest only by disguising himself as a beggar. By the time of Vaz's death, there were over 70,000 converts to the Catholic faith in Ceylon.

In the twentieth century, great efforts have been made to support the practice of missionary adaptation. In his 1919 Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, Pope Benedict XV strongly encouraged the formation of a local clergy to carry out the pastoral care of the native populations in missionary lands. From 1935-1939, a number of papal decrees were issued which allowed for the celebration of rites and ceremonies honoring Confucius and the ancestors both in China and Japan. In his 1951 encyclical letter *Evangelii Præcones*, Pope Pius XII made it clear that when the Gospel is accepted into different cultures "it does not crush or repress anything good or honorable and beautiful which they have achieved by their inborn genius and natural endowments." In 1965, Vatican II's *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church* encouraged a "more profound adaptation" in which "Christian life can be accommodated to the genius and dispositions of each culture."

Bede Griffiths was born in 1906 in Walton-on-Thames, England. He received an outstanding education at Christ's Hospital and at Magdalen College, Oxford. Although nominally an Anglican throughout his life,



Father Bede Griffiths in 1963

Griffiths' Christian faith was awakened at Oxford by his tutor, C.S. Lewis. Upon graduation, he went to live in a country cottage with some friends; they occupied themselves by reading and holding intellectual discussions. After reading the Bible and church history, Griffiths became more interested in Catholicism. He was finally led to Newman and made up his mind to enter the Catholic Church. A month after being received into the Church, he also entered Prinknash Abbey. Ordained a priest in 1940, Griffiths always remained an avid reader. In addition to his studies in church history, he began to read the classical texts of Indian and Chinese philosophy that were available in translation.

In 1955, Griffiths accepted an invitation to move to India, and within a few years he helped to start a Christian monastery or ashram in Kerala, South India. Griffiths' ashram was patterned after a previous Christian community founded in 1950 by two French priests, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, named Shantivanam. In 1968, Henri Le Saux, also known as Abhishiktananda, decided to live in a hermitage, and Griffiths was invited to assume leadership of Shantivanam.

Griffiths published his autobiography, *The Golden String*, in 1954 while still in England. Since moving to India in 1955, he has studied Sanskrit and has continued reading about Hinduism. He has published a number of books which have tried to relate Hindu concepts to the Christian faith. Among these titles are *Christ in India*, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, *Return to the Center*, *The Marriage of East and West*, *The Cosmic Revelation*, and *River of Compassion: A Christian Reading of the Bhagavad Gita*.

The main message of these writings is not what Christianity can contribute to Indian culture but what Christians must learn from Hinduism. Indeed, Griffiths' wish is to transform the Gospel into a message which is Christian and Hindu at the same time. However, while Griffiths is willing to show the deepest respect for the Hindu spiritual tradition, in recent years he has shown far less respect for the Vatican. In journals like *The Tablet* and the *National Catholic Reporter*, he has published several sharply worded critiques of Vatican documents like the new Oath of Loyalty and the instruction *On Christian Meditation*. In his May 20, 1989, article in *The Tablet*, he actually called upon the *magisterium* to repudiate publicly doctrinal teachings, including a solemn declaration of the Council of Florence. More recently, he has called for a "proposition-less Christianity."

In light of the popularity of Bede Griffiths as a type of Christian Oriental guru, we need to ask whether he represents either authentic Hinduism or authentic Christianity. This question is illumined by a controversy with a traditionalist Hindu named Swami Devananda ("Lord Blissful-in-God") in which Griffiths recently became entangled. Griffiths, no less pompously, takes the title of Swami Dayananda ("Lord Blissful-in-Compassion"), and so both Blissfuls exchanged some letters which have since been published.

The Hindu Swami Devananda displays an unrelenting hostility towards Griffiths and Christianity in his letters and thus does a disservice to what otherwise appears to be a valid case. Vituperation and raillery apart, Devananda makes two arguments. First, he says that one religion must not be permitted to subvert the symbols of another. In Hinduism, the ocher robe stands for the Hindu ascetic, and the sacred symbol OM for the essence of the Vedic Scriptures. Christianity, too, has its symbols, the monk's robe for monasticism, and the cross for its basic message. Now Griffiths has taken over the ocher robe and fixed the OM to the cross. For Devananda, this is a subversion of Hinduism, much as a Hindu's wearing of a Franciscan habit to preach his faith (and adopting the cross as a symbol of that faith) would be a subversion of Christianity.

Devananda also contends that the usage of Hindu symbols is not valid unless sanctioned by representatives of the Hindu tradition. Hinduism is a hierarchical religion, and the continuity of its institutions and the authenticity of its symbols depends upon the supervision and vigilance of its

hierarchy. This is true of Catholicism also. As Devananda says, "The Church does not recognize a priest outside the apostolic succession of Peter, and we do not recognize a *sannyasin* [ascetic] outside the Hindu *paramparas* [traditional congregations]."

Griffiths responds to both points by invoking the principle of the unity of religions. "Our search today," he proclaims, "is to go beyond the institutional structures of religion and discover the hidden mystery which is at the heart of all religion." This idea, he continues, "is the prevailing view among Hindus today." Other Hindus who subscribe to this view, he observes, are Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharishi, and Mahatma Gandhi. He then makes this strange pronouncement: "I consider myself a Christian in religion but a Hindu in spirit, just as they were Hindus in religion while being Christian in spirit."

Dubious Integration

What does Griffiths mean by all this? Being a "Hindu in spirit" and a "Christian in spirit" either mean the same thing or mean different things. If they mean the same thing, then Griffiths is preaching the theosophical unity of faiths and cannot be considered a Christian, at least in the orthodox sense. If they mean different things, then Griffiths, who says that he is a "Hindu in spirit," is not a Christian by his own confession. Griffiths seems to place "religion" in opposition to "spirit." Yet, in all his writings, he constantly uses Christian language to interpret Hindu concepts and Hindu language to interpret Christian concepts. What, then, does Griffiths represent? Is he promoting a Christianized Neo-Hinduism or a Hinduized Neo-Christianity? Apart from the question of labels, though, is the more fundamental issue: does Griffiths succeed in his effort at religious integration or does he create a theological hybrid which is neither authentically Hindu nor Christian?

It can be argued that Griffiths' understanding of Hinduism is limited. The Hindu sources he usually speaks of are the very ancient Vedas, Upanishads, and Gita (all translated), or the very modern and westernized Hindu sources such as Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda, who usually write in English. He shows little familiarity with the vast majority of Hindu theologians of the intervening two millennia.

The dubious quality of Griffiths' attempt at a Hindu-Christian integration is also revealed in his attempt to explain the Trinity in Hindu terms. In his book *The Marriage of East and West* Griffiths equates the Trinity with the Hindu triad of Being-Consciousness-Bliss (*sat-chit-ananda*). As he writes: "we could then speak of God as *Saccidananda* . . . and see in the Father, *sat* . . . we could then speak of the Son, as the *cit* . . . we could speak of the Spirit as the *ananda*."

While there might be some apparent similarities between the Christian Logos and Hindu Consciousness and between the Christian Spirit (who is Love) and Hindu bliss,

the differences between *Saccidananda* and the Trinity are so pronounced as to discount any attempt to equate them. For Hinduism, the triad of Being-Consciousness-Bliss refers to nothing other than three aspects of the same reality which are distinguished only in concept but not in reality. There is no question of any of them originating from either or both of the others as in the Christian Trinity. These Hindu qualities are better identified with scholasticism's three transcendental attributes of being—unity, truth and goodness—to which they largely correspond. If Griffiths persists in equating the Trinity with the Hindu *Saccidananda*, then he is either distorting the meaning of the Hindu triad or he is promoting a view of the Trinity which is unacceptable in Christian orthodoxy.

Griffiths is also guilty of theological distortion in his attempt to identify God the Father with the Hindu concept of *nirguna brahman*, the Qualitiless Absolute, and God the Son with *saguna brahman*, the Qualified Absolute. Thus, he describes the Father as the "infinite abyss of being beyond word and thought" and the Son as the "Self-manifestation of the unmanifest God." However, from the Hindu viewpoint, the Qualified Absolute is an inferior aspect of the deity, an illusory deformation of it projected by an ontological ignorance. If Griffiths is serious about his equation, he has made the Son less than the Father in a way destructive of Christian orthodoxy.

While we cannot form a judgment about Bede Griffiths' personal sanctity or the depth of his spiritual experience, we can form a critical judgment about his theology. He does not seem to represent a pure Christian inculturation of Hinduism since his ideas about the Indian tradition are in many ways shaped by Western scholarship and the Neo-Hinduism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When Roberto De Nobili entered India, he had to preach the Gospel in terms totally taken over from classical Hindu sources. Bede Griffiths' Hinduism, though, is a hybrid version shaped by modern Indian thinkers like Vivekananda, who have been influenced by Western philosophical ideas.

The purpose of true Catholic inculturation is to express the richness of the Gospel and the Catholic faith through concepts and symbols which reflect the native culture. Anything that is "good or honorable and beautiful" within the culture can be adapted or absorbed by the Catholic faith—be it a gesture, mode of dress, or spiritual concept. Bede Griffiths, however, appears to offer a form of Neo-Hindu Christianity which obscures rather than enriches the Catholic faith. A close examination of his theology reveals a superficial attempt to give Hindu concepts Christian meaning or Christian concepts Hindu meaning. The result is a system which is neither truly Hindu nor Christian.

Our underlying intuition is that Griffiths reflects a theosophical rather than a Christian point of view. Theosophy here can be discerned by three common characteristics. First, it posits that there is a transcendental unity behind all religions, and that their doctrinal and institution-

al features are only accidental. Second, it generally expresses itself in Western European languages, rather than Asian ones, and employs a vague and mystical sounding vocabulary to describe vaguely understood concepts of religions identified as "oriental." Third, it displays an ambivalence to what it calls "dualism," which it professes to despise while constantly employing dualistic polarities like East/West, rational/mystical.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Griffiths' attempt at inculturation is that it can obscure true efforts to create an Indian Christian theology. Within Hinduism, there is a preparation for the Gospel which is extraordinary in its theological and spiritual depth. Indeed, Vatican II openly acknowledges that "in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery." Moreover, it was in Hinduism that some mysteries which Christian theology recognizes as wholly supernatural were first enunciated. In the ancient Hindu writings we find the concept of the mysterious plurality of beings in the unique and transcendent being of God; the assumption by this being of creaturely form (the incarnation); the intimate personal union with this being as constituting man's supreme happiness (the Beatific Vision); and the unattainability of that Being except through his favor (grace). It is arguable that some of the mysteries distinctive of the Christian revelation can be found in the Hindu scriptures.

We can only hope that in the future India will produce her own Catholic theologians who can create a more authentic version of Indian Catholic Theology than the Englishman Griffiths. Drawing upon the theological and spiritual genius of the Indian mind, such a theology will be

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truly Catholic in its faithfulness to Scripture, tradition, and the *magisterium*, and truly Indian in its cultural and linguistic expression. Only in this way, can the riches of India give expression to "the unfathomable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8).

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