

Foreword

As we move into our new century, Christians, Hindus, and people of faith within all traditions continue to be perplexed and challenged by the interreligious encounters that are now part of everyday life. In this situation we reach out for guides and mentors to lead us through what some see as the pitfalls and some as the springboards of this new reality. Happily, in the past century giant figures have emerged within most communities of faith as pioneers of positive interreligious understanding. These people were acute theologians speaking with authenticity from within their own traditions and also, wonderfully, were empathetic interpreters of dimensions of religious commitment far different from their own. Such men and women have been voices in a swelling dawn-chorus of a new world-community in which we must all come to speak confidently about what God has been doing for all humanity. One such towering figure was the English Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, who died in 1993. It is beyond doubt that the achievement of this devout Roman Catholic *sannyāsin* will be reflected upon, and built upon, throughout the twenty-first century. Many Christians, some of whom are as yet unborn, will be inspired to follow his example, and commit themselves to “the meeting of East and West” very much as Griffiths described that encounter. Many others will want to offer critiques of his vision and, very likely, to discover quite different paths to the one that he trod.

In this situation we need exactly the kind of judicious overview of Griffiths’s work that is offered in this scholarly and finely crafted book. I think there are at least six kinds of readers who will be particularly touched and helped by this book.

In the first place because this is not a straightforward biography (there are already some excellent narrations of the Griffiths story), it gives us a perspective that sets Fr. Bede within the intellectual history of the twentieth century. Of particular importance is the awareness of the significance for Griffiths of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and the post-First World War poets. This was the period of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which captured the deadly and depressing materialist cityscape of London, where Griffiths was to work in his midtwenties. Accurately assessing Griffiths's Romantic attachment to the English countryside, we see that it was no accident that he studied English literature at Oxford under the guidance of C. S. Lewis, his tutor and, later, his close friend. Lewis started Griffiths on a philosophical path that was to be marked by a search for an adequate relationship between reason and intuition. Throughout the twentieth century there lurked the unresolved conflict between "science" and "religion," between "ratiocination" and "imagination," and between "fact" and "faith." There is little wonder that Griffiths took to himself eagerly the Indian distinction between *vijñāna* (discriminative knowledge) and the "unitive wisdom" extolled in the Upanishads and in the Bhagavadgītā. Later he was to meld them into his own vision of the "new science," as expounded by such writers as Fritjof Capra, Ken Wilber, Rupert Sheldrake, and David Bohm. In the deeper background of Griffiths's intellectual pilgrimage lay, on the one hand, such figures as Susanne Langer and Paul Ricoeur and, on the other, Carl Jung and Teilhard de Chardin.

Part of the intellectual history of our century is its complex theological development, and this book explains those Catholic traditions that nurtured Griffiths and that made him open and confident in the face of *advaita* Hinduism. Protestant readers like myself will note the influence of Thomas Aquinas, Henri de Lubac, Pierre Johanns, Raissa and Jacques Maritain, and later Karl Rahner. But Catholics as well as Protestant thinkers will also find much to reflect upon in Griffiths's own idiosyncratic version of Logos theology.

A third class of readers will be formed by those who find Griffiths a stimulating Christian thinker but who may readily acknowledge that they are seriously limited in their knowledge of the Indian traditions. These will find this book to be a gentle and lucid guide that offers judicious and accurate comments on Hindu thinking, particularly of its *advaita*, nondualist aspects. Of great value, too, are the commentaries on such figures as Roberto de Nobili and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, as well as Griffiths's immediate predecessors Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktānanda). This shows us that not even a pio-

neer like Griffiths is a missiological Melchizedek, “without father, without mother, without descent.”

This book explores Griffiths’s work as a “culture bearer” and indeed as a potential transformer of culture. Both scholars and general readers will be helped by the analysis of the subtleties involved in Griffiths’s culture critique, in his epistemology, and in his mystical theology of symbols. It is suggested that the difference between a convert and a cultural bridge builder lies in the deliberate attempt of the former to sever continuities between the old and the new whereas the latter finds a way to use language and symbols that cross over two different sets of paradigms. Thus Griffiths worked on expressing a Christian *advaita* in which the traditional symbols of the Trinity and Christ, communion, love, and Logos are seen in the light of the contemplative vision of India. By these means the previous symbols are revived within a new religious paradigm in which intercultural and interreligious dialogue is accepted as a powerful method for disclosing what is true.

Those of us who teach missiology (a fifth class of readers) will find such discussions of the discontinuities and transformations of cultural and religious symbols an invaluable resource to which to direct both our students and colleagues. All students of Christian liturgy, for example, need to ponder Griffiths’s efforts to incorporate elements of Hindu ritual into the celebration of the mass or his efforts to harmonize Hindu temple architecture and symbols with Christian themes in the ashram at Shantivanam.

But perhaps Griffiths’s real legacy to the twenty-first century lies in his wholehearted embracing of the task set out by Henri de Lubac in words addressed to Jules Monchanin: “To rethink everything in terms of theology, and to rethink theology in terms of mysticism.” This book demonstrates the interdependence of spiritual experience and theological reflection throughout Griffiths’s life, and thereby throws a great light on Griffiths’s actual conclusions about the *advaita* that lies at the heart of mystical experience, and therefore at the heart of all religious traditions. In his own person Griffiths united two great symbols of the life of prayer, devotion and surrender. The English Benedictine *sannyāsin* in his Indian ashram became for many people a living symbol, through which they could sense what it might mean for followers of different religious traditions to meet “in the cave of the heart.”

To be sure Griffiths was no plaster saint, and one of the great merits of this book is that it neither hides nor glosses over the distress and ambiguity of his final months. Trapnell’s close reading of all Griffiths’s extant writings as well as the taped records of their many conversations disclose other inconsistencies, many of which are discussed in chapter 7. As

Raimundo Panikkar remarked at a memorial service in Chicago in 1993: "We can find fault with many of his ideas in which the presentation was not up to the point. That was not his forte. That was not his mission. The importance of Fr. Bede which we should never forget, for us, was his person . . . was his being there." Perhaps the most important aspect of this book is that it enables Fr. Bede to "be there," once again for us.

KENNETH CRACKNELL