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# Book Review: "Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths"

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accepted the call to become Christian. We need to learn more about Hindu individuals who did not show interest in Christianity and chose not to convert, and likewise the communal ways in which Hindu communities reaffirmed their identities in the face of Christian missionary efforts. While we are grateful for the published works of scholars and journalists – e.g. Richard Fox

Young's *Resistant Hinduism*, Arun Shourie's *Missionaries in India* – we need many more historical studies which illuminate the resistance and resilience of Hinduism, the other side of the encounters and choices so well presented by Jeyaraj and Lipner.

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***Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths.*** Shirley Du Boulay. London: Random House / New York: Doubleday, 1998, 308 pp.

**BEDE GRIFFITHS** (1906-1993), an English Benedictine monk, went to India in 1955. There, continuing the project of Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux (Abhishik-tananda), Griffiths would become a pioneer in the development of an Indian-Christian monastic life incorporating elements of Hindu monastic life and liturgy. Shirley Du Boulay's excellent biography complements Griffiths' own extensive writings by enabling us to follow, step by step, the unfolding of his life and thought at the frontier of East and West.

Bede Griffiths' central concern with the encounter of religions, and especially with the meeting between Christianity and Hinduism, is evident in the titles of six of his books: *Christ in India* (1966), *Vedanta and Christian Faith* (1973), *The Marriage of East and West* (1983), *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God* (1983), *River of Compassion: A Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, (1987), *The Universal Wisdom* (1994).

Already in the 1930s, Griffiths had grasped the importance of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Daoist Scriptures for the future of Christianity. In India, he said, he sought and found the other half of his soul. Very soon, in the cave sculptures of Elephanta, he recognized what he had come to India to find, the contemplative dimension of life which had almost disappeared from the West, "that hidden depth of existence, springing from the depth of nature and the unconscious and going

beyond into the mystery of the infinite and eternal" (110-11).

Bede rejected both the traditional proselytism of Christian missionaries and a facile syncretism that would ignore the essential differences between the great religious traditions. At the same time he was profoundly convinced of the ultimate unity of religions; he would conceive this relationship more and more in terms of the complementarity of different traditions.

By the 1950s, the "Perennial Philosophy" was emerging at the centre of Bede's thought as the common core of all religions: a unitive metaphysical vision which he found most explicit in the Upanishads, but represented also in the West by Plotinus, Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. In the following decades this "universal tradition" would be more and more clearly identified with nonduality, the *advaitan* reality. A second, closely related, principle of the *Vedanta* became equally central for Griffiths: the search for the "Self", or *Atman*.

By 1971 Griffiths would write to a friend, "To me Eastern wisdom gives the key to Christianity. I cannot conceive of Christ now except in terms of Vedanta". (181). He continued to seek opportunities and to encourage encounters for Hindu-Christian dialogue. At his Saccidananda Ashram (better known as Shantivanam), in Tamil Nadu, thousands of westerners would experience the meeting of the two traditions.

Griffiths' vision is set forth in ten

books and hundreds of articles. Now the living matrix of his thought has been reconstructed with care, skill, and insight by Shirley Du Boulay in *Beyond the Darkness*. This book is already an indispensable

resource for knowing Bede Griffiths.

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***The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission.*** Thomas Thangaraj. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, 167 pp.

**THIS BOOK UNDERTAKES** an ambitious project with remarkable success: rethinking Christian mission “from the ground up” in the light of religious diversity. Thangaraj begins by taking up the new postcolonial, postmodern, and interreligious context for missiology. He then offers a radical proposal: Christian deliberation about mission must be genuinely public reflection which includes persons from other religions. Such inclusiveness is possible, Thangaraj argues, only if the conversation about mission does not begin with narrowly intra-Christian assumptions regarding the nature of God or the authority of Biblical texts. Instead, he proposes that all persons enter into a conversation about “*missio humanitatis*”. Mission, he maintains, must first be understood as “the common task” of all humanity.

Drawing on Gordon Kaufman’s understanding of humans as “self-conscious biohistorical beings”, Thangaraj maintains that human beings are called to a shared mission of “responsibility, solidarity and mutuality” (58). He derives this conception of mission without appealing to any specifically Christian presuppositions in order to formulate a “heuristic device” which can function as a framework for interreligious dialogue on mission. Thangaraj’s understanding of mutuality is particularly noteworthy. Mutuality, for Thangaraj, means that, “[T]here are no longer ‘missioners’ and the ‘missioned.’ All are missionaries in a relationship of mutuality” (57).

The *missio ecclesiae*, on the contrary, is shaped by a particular theological understanding of the mission of God as disclosed in the mission of Jesus. The mission of the

Church is “cruciform responsibility, liberative solidarity, and eschatological mutuality” (64). Thangaraj goes on to stress that eschatological mutuality looks beyond the mission of Jesus and is rooted in a confidence in the Holy Spirit’s presence in other religious communities. “Our being-sent-ness involves listening to other religious viewpoints, learning from other religious and secular traditions, and mutually enriching one another toward the eschaton” (75).

For Thangaraj, this emphasis on mutuality does not rule out the need for evangelism. Furthermore, he acknowledges that evangelism may lead persons to new religious loyalties. However, Christian witness can also lead to other kinds of transformation. Ram Mohan Roy, Gandhi, and others are presented as examples of persons deeply influenced by Christianity without undergoing conversion. Most importantly, Thangaraj contends that if witness is to be a genuine expression of eschatological mutuality, then Christians must also be open to the possibility of being transformed by the witness of other religious traditions.

Thangaraj’s radical openness clearly distinguishes his theology from most previous reflection on Christian mission. He maintains a commitment to evangelism and conversion without falling prey either to triumphalism or “post-Christian guilt” which sees mission as an incorrigibly colonial enterprise. It is precisely this balance that makes Thangaraj’s work an inviting resource for anyone interested in thinking mission through in the context of recent conversion-related violence in India.