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Book Review: "Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue"

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BOOK REVIEWS

Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue. Judson Trapnell. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001, xvii + 279 pp.

JUDSON TRAPNELL'S interpretation of the life and thought of Bede Griffiths in this intellectual and spiritual biography appears already in the structure of the book. Following Bede's late schematization of his own development (cf. p. 5), God in Nature (Part I), God in Christ and the Church (Part II), and Nonduality (*Advaita*) (Part III), the work's three parts extend from Griffiths' first spiritual awakening (1924) to his conversion to Catholicism (1932) through the monastic years both in England and in India until his move to Shantivanam (1968), and onward through the final 25 years until his death in 1993. Each of these three parts is then constructed according to another threefold scheme, Griffiths' vertical paradigm of body, psyche/mind and spirit. Each biographical chapter is followed by a chapter treating the corresponding intellectual developments (particularly in Bede's theory of consciousness and understanding), and a third chapter of each Part recounts Bede's spiritual journey and his understanding of that journey. A shorter section, looking at the respective period from the point of view of dialogue (one of Trapnell's key interpretive concepts), concludes each of the three Parts.

Griffiths is presented as a "culture bearer," one of those transitional figures who through their upbringing and education fully "bear" the surrounding culture within them and yet "lose trust" in the very ideals of that culture. Such persons then experience a fundamental disorientation, no longer able to rely upon their culture

to guide their life journey. In reorienting themselves by establishing an ideal that goes beyond yet integrates existing values, such individuals serve to transform the culture itself. (8)

While Bede Griffiths' own cultural passage was oriented principally by his dialogue with the Asian traditions, this interaction took place largely within Bede's own experience and reflection; his efforts to promote actual Hindu-Christian dialogue bore little fruit.

The book's main axis is the development of a *theory of knowing*, and this study of knowing converges upon the mediating role of *symbols*. Bede Griffiths' relationship with the Divine is seen as mediated first by nature and then by Christian symbols, to conclude in the final period beyond the symbols of the religions. Bede's relation to religious symbols, therefore, was ambivalent. He would insist that, while they are necessary in their role as mediators between human consciousness and God, they intrinsically point beyond themselves to an immediate - indeed nondual - union with the divine Reality. Karl Rahner's conception of a real symbol serves, for Bede, to reconcile these two poles of mediation and nonduality. In a final step, with the help of this same idea of real symbol, the author opens Griffiths' theory of symbolism toward an anthropology, a general conception of the human person. The ultimate real symbol is the divine *Logos*, and that *Logos* incarnate in Jesus Christ. At this apex symbol becomes person, and every human person is

potentially a symbol of the nondual divine Absolute. The author proposes Bede Griffiths as such a real symbol of the divine Mystery. So, potentially, is every one of us.

If the real symbol mediates between the nondual Absolute and this conditional world, the culture bearer mediates between the past (fixed in particular cultural forms) and the future. As both personal real symbol and culture bearer, Bede Griffiths bridges these two dualities as well as a third, between his individual person and the society (or church or humanity) within which he lives and works. Trapnell's concluding summary brings together the themes of his study, broadening the focus from Bede's story to that of every culture bearer. Here it is a question of the relation between individual spiritual transformation and cultural change. The final word is *surrender*. Through surrendering to the Spirit, the individual becomes a living symbol of the change which the Spirit is working in that culture.

Here is the lasting witness of Griffiths' life: that true spiritual surrender brings transformation not only in the individual but also through that individual in the world; and that such surrender demands our being fully the limited life-as-symbol that we were created to be. (207)

Judson Trapnell's themes are well chosen to bring out the significance of Bede Griffiths and his work. The focus on Bede's *consciousness-theory* (and on his relation to *religious symbols*) makes more accessible one of his principal contributions toward a new sapiential Christianity, freed from the aging conceptual containers of the western mind. An even more important contribution, Bede's central conception of *advaita*, or nonduality, is amply discussed. *Dialogue* characterizes the critical threshold across which Catholicism steps with the Second Vatican Council, as well as the context in which a new Christian vision must develop. The accent on Bede's role as *culture bearer* brings into relief his place in this larger historical transition. *Surrender* - Bede's

defining spiritual attitude at his critical turning points - emerges as the principle of orientation and forward movement at a time when the familiar landmarks can no longer be seen.

A further task toward which this study points is a theological critique of Bede Griffiths' vision from the fresh perspective (of the central Christ-event) which has been opened to us in the era of the Second Vatican Council. How does his entire theory of consciousness and knowledge relate to the epistemological primacy of faith and of the incarnate divine Wisdom, to the essential sacramental dimension of life in Christ, to Paul's "word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:17-25)?

Bede's thought, on the other hand, challenges Christian theology to a depth of understanding of this very Christ-mystery which may be called revolutionary, though it is implicit in many New Testament texts. The theological project of a *Christian advaita* holds within itself this promise.

The clearest example of Griffiths' renewal of key religious symbols is his work on articulating a Christian *advaita* in which the traditional symbols of the Trinity, Christ and Logos, communion, and love are recast in light of a contemplative vision, a reshaping that brings these symbols into creative dialogue with the spiritual philosophies of the Eastern religions. (202)

The principle of nonduality is a key which opens Christian scriptural interpretation, theological reflection and spirituality toward the mystery's intrinsic fullness and power. In the time of Aquinas, Eckhart and Ruysbroeck, the key was turned part way round in the stubborn lock. Today our encounter with Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism encourages us to turn the key full circle and open wide our Christian consciousness and understanding to the unitive divine light that pours from within the New Testament. This will require an understanding not only of the relation between *advaita* and Trinity - an explicit theological goal of the founders of Shantivanam (Jules Monchanin,

Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths) - but of the advaitan meaning of *Incarnation*.

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Hindu-Christian Dialogue. Theological Soundings and Perspectives (Currents of Encounter, Vol.18). Mariasusai Dhavamony. Amsterdam-New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2002, 222 pp.

THE title of the book explains specifically what it is all about. It has 12 chapters, besides the introduction and conclusion, dealing with several themes from the Hindu-Christian perspectives. Major themes are the idea of God - which includes the creative word: Siva-Sakti and Logos, Trinity-, revelation, salvation, monasticism, prayer and meditation, which offer scope for comparison, citing parallel texts from both the traditions. They are treated as Christian approaches to Hinduism evaluating from the Christian standpoint.

The author of the book has been teaching Hinduism for the last 40 years at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and the readers will be familiar with these themes from his major publications like *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta* (1971), *Classical Hinduism* (1982), *Hindu Spirituality* (1999). But now what is new in this work is the perspective, namely, looking at the themes from the point of view of inter-religious dialogue. In fact he devotes his whole introduction to explain what is meant by dialogue and as a result the tone of the book and the emphasis change. The meaning of dialogue is presented by referring to the classical authors on the topic like Reuel L. Howe, Martin Buber and A.D. Lindsay.

Prof. Dhavamony has been a member of the pontifical counsel for inter-religious dialogue for two decades and one can notice this from his language; it is the theological perspective that initiates dialogue. In fact he begins his book by saying that "the gift of God in Christ, the Gospel message, is meant

for all people and the Church is sent to the entire world to communicate this message."(p.7). There has been a series of documents brought out among the Christian communities to clarify to themselves the need and the goal of dialogue. For a Christian dialogue is the way of discovering God's mystery at work in other faith traditions and cultures and the spiritual encounter with believers of other religions is meant to help them discover deeper dimensions of Christian faith and wider horizons of God's salvific presence in the world. This is an important clarification to be kept in mind in order to avoid any misunderstanding about the Christian approach.

Hence this book makes it clear that inter-religious dialogue is not merely an intellectual joy of discovery by scholars nor a detached venture of the comparativists from different disciplines, but a faith commitment of believers who search for the mystery of truth revealed in different traditions. Obviously this would call for further reflection on integrating one's tradition with that of others. It is an ongoing process before a common horizon of understanding emerges. These days several publications are seen with the desire of crossing the borders, with the cross-cultural or intercultural outlook both in philosophy and theology and they are only indications of a search, though it looks at the moment that the search is asymmetrical, since not all traditions appear to be equal partners in dialogue nor fully participating in this process for obvious reasons.