

# SUBSTANCE BEYOND ILLUSION

## The Spirituality of Bede Griffiths

*Hans Gustafson*

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH BENEDICTINE Bede Griffiths spent the majority of his life in India in close intimacy with the Hindu people and their culture. His life in India had profound effects on his spirituality and theology. In many ways, he remained a very traditional Benedictine with classic theological views and beliefs. However, his spiritual path reached new insights because of his immersion in Hindu culture and through his dialogue with Hinduism. He writes:

Hinduism is very much a living religion ... because it is essentially a mystical religion. It is not a matter merely of rituals and doctrines ... if one starts with doctrines, the arguments are endless .... But when one comes to the level of interior experience, that is where the meeting takes place.<sup>1</sup>

Griffiths encountered Hinduism through interiority and lived experience and, in this encounter, he was able to find substance beyond Hinduism's claim that the world appears as mere illusion.

I should like to draw out the spirituality that resulted from this encounter and explore its enduring characteristics for the Christian tradition. I shall start by providing some brief biographical context. Then I shall examine Griffiths' spiritual theology and anthropology, and his mode of engaging the presence of God. Finally I shall analyze some enduring aspects of Griffiths' spirituality and their significance.

<sup>1</sup> Bede Griffiths, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 63. Hereafter cited in brackets in the text.

### **Context**

Bede Griffiths was born in England in 1906. He matriculated at Oxford in 1925 and accepted Christianity; moved to India in 1955; founded the Kurisumala Ashram in 1958; took over the Shantivanam Ashram in 1968; and died in 1993.

Early in his life Griffiths had a quasi-agnostic attitude, although he retained an admiration for a type of nature-mysticism which enabled him to catch glimpses of the divine. It was not until he went up to Oxford and met C. S. Lewis that he started thinking more seriously about God. Together they pursued a religious quest which led them both back to the Anglican Church. But Griffiths eventually became a Roman Catholic and shortly thereafter took his vows as a Benedictine monk. After years spent at Prinknash Abbey in England, he began reading sacred Eastern texts such as the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Vedas, the Tao Te Ching and the Dhammapada.

In 1955, Griffiths' abbot gave him permission to go to India to serve the Church subject to a bishop in India. Griffiths explains that his desire to go,

... was due to my meeting with an Indian monk [Father Benedict Alapatt], whose lifelong desire it had been to introduce the monastic



*Gate of the Shantivanam Ashram*

life into the Church of India. As there was no monastery in India he had been professed as a monk in a European monastery, but was seeking someone who would assist him in his enterprise. (49)

In 1958, Griffiths founded the Kurisumala Ashram. The following description, written by a visitor, provides a sense of the place:

About twenty miles outside of Cochin, the road carefully begins to trace the contours of the foothills of the Sahya Mountains, eventually fashioning hairpin turns and precarious cutbacks assaulted by erosion into the steep valley on the left, rubble from the crumbling rock face on the right. Some portions of the road are virtually wiped out, leaving little more than a bed of uneven rocks, victims of the last monsoon. After a three-hour trip, a small cement sign next to a stall selling basic food items, soft drinks, fresh fruit and spices, reads 'Kurisumala Ashram'.<sup>2</sup>

Griffiths would spend most of the rest of his days in India seeking 'a life as close to that of a traditional Hindu *sannyasi*<sup>3</sup> or monk as it is possible for a Christian monk to live'.<sup>4</sup> Ten years later, in 1968, Griffiths moved on to the Shantivanam Ashram with two of his chief disciples, Amaldus and Christudas. His next 25 years at Shantivanam,

... were quiet and focused. He dedicated his time and energies to meditation, the training of his Indian novices, and the welcoming of the guests—mostly from Europe and Australia.<sup>5</sup>

Though he lived in India until the end, Griffiths enjoyed occasional travel to Europe and the United States. His rich life enabled him to develop an equally rich spirituality.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Wilkes, 'A Visit to Kurisumala: Two Conventional Catholics and an Unconventional Indian Ashram', *National Catholic Reporter* (19 May 2006), 11.

<sup>3</sup> In Griffiths's own words, 'A *sannyasi* is one who renounces the world to seek for God, but his renunciation goes far beyond what is ordinarily understood by the "world". A *sannyasi* is one who renounces not only the world in the biblical sense of the world of sin, the world which today is so clearly set on the path of destruction. A *sannyasi* renounces the whole world of "signs", of appearances.' (*Essential Writings*, 97)

<sup>4</sup> John Moffitt, 'A Christian Approach to Hindu Beliefs', *Theological Studies*, 27 (1966), 60 (italics mine).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Matus, 'Bede Griffiths, a Universal Monk', in Griffiths, *Essential Writings*, 15.

### ***Spiritual Theology***

Griffiths retained a very traditional Catholic theology—surprisingly for a man who spent so long in India devoted to living out a life as close as possible to that of a Hindu *sannyasi*. However, like all religious people, he emphasized some aspects of his theology more than others and even went beyond the tradition in some key areas. I would like to focus on his idea(s) of God and why they are important for his spirituality. There are four key tenets to his spiritual theology: *Christo-centrism*, *God as Mother*, the *Trinity*, and a *sacramental cosmos* (especially in nature).

#### *Christo-centrism*

*Christ* is the absolute foundation, the figurehead, the deity and the source of Griffiths' theology. For him Christ is the thread, the 'Golden String',<sup>6</sup> that runs through the essence of the world and all religion. Griffiths writes, 'Where is the Golden String to be found? The Golden String is Christ; he is the clue to the centre.' (119)

This understanding of Christ as the centre of all theological undertakings makes itself most evident in Griffiths' 'theology of religions', a field which seeks to account for the plurality of world religions from a Christian perspective. This was understandably of interest to Griffiths as he was living as a Christian in a pluralist Hindu culture. Following Vatican II, Griffiths sought to affirm its statement that 'the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions',<sup>7</sup> seeking 'truth and holiness in all genuine religion' (116). For him the key to this affirmation is Christ. He used the image of the fingers and palm of the hand as an illustration:

... the fingers represent Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and [the thumb represents] Christianity. Buddhism is miles from Christianity, and each has its own position. If you try to mix them, taking a bit of Hinduism or Buddhism and adding it to Christianity, that is syncretism. But if you go deeply into any one tradition, you converge on a centre, and there you see how we all come forth from a common root. (117)

<sup>6</sup> The phrase 'Golden String' is borrowed from William Blake's *Jerusalem* and is used often by Griffiths. It also serves as the title to his autobiography.

<sup>7</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, 2.



*Bede Griffiths*

This 'common root', for Griffiths, is Christ—although this is not explicitly acknowledged by all religions. Discovering the unity of the religions requires a spiritual journey to the source—a journey seeking Christ, for 'Christ is ultimately the source of all religion. He is behind it all.' (117) Had he taken this theology of religions further, Griffiths would probably have ended up with something similar to Rahner's 'anonymous Christianity', which is now, in some ways, traditional Vatican II theology.

Griffiths' theology was deeply informed by his experience in India and the relationships he formed with its people. 'In India sometimes you meet the most Christlike people among the Hindus, and there is no doubt that the Presence [of Christ] is there.' (117) He understood this grace of Christ to be present in all individuals and to be made evident to them primarily through their traditional religion. However, it is important to emphasize that Griffiths did not promote syncretism—the idea that all religion is identical, whether one believes in Jesus, Krishna, Rama or Buddha (118). Rather, he elevates the uniqueness of Christ

above all others (for the Christian) as the constitutive mode for knowing God.

#### *God as Mother*

Griffiths' understanding of *God as Mother* informs not only much of his theology, but also his spiritual anthropology. This is, perhaps, one element from India that Griffiths borrowed and incorporated into his own Christian theological perspective. According to Griffiths,

... in India the mother image has always been stronger than the father image. Indians use both and will quite spontaneously speak of God as 'my mother, my father'. (78)

He strongly believed that Western civilisation needed to discover (or rediscover)<sup>8</sup> the feminine element in order to survive. 'It is in the Holy Spirit that the feminine aspect of the Godhead can be most clearly seen.' (80)

There is a well-known account of Griffiths' experience of having a stroke in 1990:

Apparently I was unconscious for a week. No, I was conscious, but I did not speak, and I have no memory of it all .... I thought I was going to die, and I ... let go of the soul and body into the hands of God .... Then somebody came and massaged me, and I came back to normal. A very important experience then happened. I felt rather restless and uncertain, and an urge came to me to 'surrender to the mother' .... It was like waves of love. (75)

This 'surrender to the mother', according to Griffiths, was a psychological breakthrough into the reality of the feminine side of God. And, as I shall explore later, it led to an anthropological development in understanding humans as containing both masculine and feminine sides.

#### *The Trinity*

The *Trinity* plays a crucial role in Griffiths' theology, in that it provides a conceptual framework (if an inadequate one) for understanding God as communion. He understood the Father as the 'Ground and Source of

<sup>8</sup> Certainly the understanding of the Christian God as Mother is nothing new. For instance, Julian of Norwich, in her *Showings*, spoke often of Jesus as 'our mother'.

being', the Son as 'the Word or Wisdom that reveals the Godhead', and the Holy Spirit as 'the Energy of Love, the feminine aspect' (79). Trinitarian language is required because it allows for distinctions within the Godhead. These distinctions make it possible to understand God as communion, which eventually leads to the discovery that God, as Trinity, is love. According to Griffiths,

... in the ultimate reality there is revealed not merely an identity, but a communion. The final Christian revelation is that the Godhead itself, the ultimate reality, is a communion of persons, a communion of persons in love, and that gives a further dimension to our understanding of reality. (120)

This is a crucial point to grasp for understanding Griffiths' theological foundation, and how and why he differs from Hindus. The tendency in Hinduism is to understand God as purely monadic, as in Islam. Griffiths points out that if this is the case, then the Godhead 'cannot be love in himself' (120), for only in a relational or communal understanding of the Godhead can God be understood as love. The Trinity succeeds in doing this: 'the Godhead, the divine being itself, is constituted by relationship' (124), and this relationship has further implications for the cosmos in that it reconciles the sacred with the profane. 'The world is not divided; there is no separation between God and the world.' (124)



Before Abraham Was I Am, by Frank Wesley

*The Cosmos as Sacramental*

This unification of the world and God is demonstrated most clearly in Griffiths' understanding of the *cosmos as sacramental*. Even before his return to the Christian tradition, he had always had an affinity for nature-mysticism which 'positioned him intellectually and intuitively to assimilate India's great discovery of the cosmic revelation'.<sup>9</sup> Referring to the ideals of Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, he writes:

... when I came to India ... I discovered that what in Europe had been the inspired intuition of a few poets had been the common faith of India for countless centuries. (35)

Thus it is not surprising that in India Griffiths's intuition was confirmed and affirmed:

The whole universe is a sacrament, which mirrors the divine reality ... Every hill and tree and river is holy, and the simplest human acts of eating and drinking, still more of birth and marriage, have all retained their sacred character. (31–36)

At the very heart of the cosmos, and of its revelation, lies the root of all religion and being. This is Christ who serves as the primordial sacrament, reconciling the sacred with the profane in and through his *incarnation*. This fundamental theological tenet not only has sacramental implications, but also implications for what it means to be human (anthropology) and for Griffiths' prescribed mode of engaging God's presence (spiritual practice).

***Spiritual Anthropology***

Crucial to understanding any spirituality is its underlying anthropology—the aspects of personhood that allow humans to connect with the Divine. Griffiths' spiritual anthropology, although borrowing from India, is deeply embedded in traditional Christianity. This is most evident in his view of human nature depicted in the classical Eden story of *paradise*, *paradise lost* and *paradise regained*. 'All of us once upon a time, when we were in the womb, were in perfect

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Teasdale, 'Bede Griffiths as Mystic and Icon of Reversal', *America*, 173/9 (1995), 22.



harmony with nature; we were part of the great Mother herself.' (82) Living in attunement with nature is to be understood as living in *paradise*. Griffiths points out that some tribal cultures express something similar to this,

... the Pygmies in central Africa, who live very close to nature, feel themselves to be one with nature. They have an intuitive awareness of their bonds with the plants and animals and live in the cosmic harmony of day and night, summer and winter, birth and marriage and death. (82)

The traditional Christian myth depicts this as the first man and woman (Adam and Eve) living in perfect harmony with God in the Garden.

Eventually, however, *paradise is lost*, for,

... as reason develops, and they eat of the tree of knowledge, a division grows between human beings and nature .... [And] the world becomes their enemy. (82–83)

At this point, there is no going back—there is no returning to Eden. For once human consciousness has sought power and control over nature and its forces it becomes alienated from nature. Alienation from something is the product of exerting power over it. Griffiths refers to this as sin. He writes,

In Paradise, human beings had been in harmony with nature, with themselves, and with God. Sin had brought division between human beings and nature, between man and woman, and between human beings and God. (83)

According to Griffiths, the only way that humankind can return to a harmonic existence with nature is to seek 'communion with nature at a deeper level of consciousness' (83).

*Paradise is regained* as a marriage between humankind and nature in and through the attainment of this deeper level of consciousness, which can also be understood as a communion within the person between the rational mind and the intuitive mind. The 'rational mind' and the 'intuitive mind' are taken as corresponding to the masculine and the feminine respectively and play a crucial role in Griffiths' spiritual anthropology. It is here that India has had one of its most profound influences on his spirituality.

One of Griffiths' best-known sayings is that he went to India to discover 'the other half of his soul'. This statement gains clarity in the light of his spiritual anthropology, especially of his idea that the human person contains both male and female halves. Griffiths asks:

Who and what is the woman? Woman represents the intuitive power in human nature, while man represents the rational mind. These are two complementary aspects of human nature, and a human being is only complete when these two functions of human nature have been 'married'. (76)

These two aspects exist within every human and both are equally necessary for him or her to attain and exhibit complete personhood. When the two halves of the person are unbalanced, 'then disaster follows. Reason without intuition is intelligent but sterile; intuition without reason is fertile but blind.' (77) Both reason and intuition (masculine and feminine) need to be present and operating in harmony for the person to avoid a disastrous fall into sin. For example, sex has the potential to become corrupted (sinful) when there is an imbalance of these elements. 'Sex is an animal instinct which, when the woman surrenders to the man and the man to the woman, becomes the means of their communion in the Spirit.' (77) In the marriage of these two halves, domination by the male and seduction by the female are avoided, and both halves are equal and made whole.

There is certainly room for a feminist critique of Griffiths' generalisations about the masculine and feminine. At the same time, his spirituality has much in common with some feminist accounts. Griffiths' spirituality advocates the fusing of two distinctive ways of knowing God, which are similar to what Anne Carr terms woman's spirituality and male spirituality.<sup>10</sup> She maintains, 'there are clear differences between the sexes in basic style of understanding and relationship' and thus 'recognition of difference, while admitting real equality, need not entail subversive notions of complementarity that really means subordination or inferiority of one in relation to the

<sup>10</sup> According to Anne Carr, 'in contrast to male spirituality, women's spirituality might be described as more related to nature and natural processes than to culture; more personal and relational than objective and structural; more diffuse, concrete, and general than focused, universal, abstract; more emotional than intellectual, etc.' (Anne Carr, 'On Feminist Spirituality', *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, edited by Joann Wolski Conn [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986], 53).

other'.<sup>11</sup> For both Carr and Griffiths real differences exist between the sexes, and it probably follows that their respective spiritualities differ as well, but this does not entail qualitative difference. Though generally (but not absolutely) distinct from one another, masculine and feminine spiritualities exist in both sexes, and drawing on both entails a more complete spirituality in a single individual.

For Griffiths, these 'two fundamental dimensions' (90) form the basis not only of individual human nature, but also of geopolitics. He identified the wisdom of the East and of India with femininity, and argued that global harmony had been lost during the Renaissance, when the dominant and aggressive masculine mind took over and ruled in the West. The feminine was subordinated and silenced. The ideals of Western science, rational phenomenological analysis, democracy, the value of the individual, equality, and freedom, are valuable. However, the dominance of the West has also led to abuses (89). Griffiths saw in the reintegration of feminine and masculine, East and West, a possibility of restoring the global balance.

The balance can be restored only when a meeting takes place between East and West. This meeting must take place at the deepest level of the human consciousness. (90)

Griffiths is not immune to both theological and political critique here, for it may be that he over-romanticises and idealizes not only the geopolitical relations of East and West, but the ease with which the theological traditions of Christianity and Hinduism fit together. Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, for instance, point out that 'the dubious quality of Griffiths' attempt at Hindu-Christian integration is revealed in his attempt to explain the Trinity in Hindu terms'.<sup>12</sup> They believe that Griffiths goes too far in his attempt to recast the Christian idea of God as Trinity in Hindu language, and in so doing shows a limited understanding of Hinduism. But despite this, and despite the need for a serious critique of his geopolitics, we should not lose sight of Griffiths' spiritual message, which is that this vision of global balance mirrors what takes place within the individual. And this interior reorientation

***This vision of global balance mirrors what takes place within the individual***

<sup>11</sup> Carr, 'On Feminist Spirituality', 51.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, 'The Swami from Oxford', *Crisis* (March 1991), 24.

also forms the basis for Griffiths' spiritual practice, which speaks to the human experience of engaging God's presence.

### ***The Human Experience of Engaging God's Presence***

The path towards engaging the divine for Griffiths takes shape, not surprisingly, as a *yoga*—an integrative union of all aspects of personhood. He writes, 'the steps by which we approach union are also yoga. The union is primarily union with God, but it involves the uniting or integrating of all aspects of our being.' (85) Griffiths draws on Hindu yogic traditions and develops a form of Christian yoga. One of the goals of yoga is to work towards a transformation of body and soul by the action of the



spirit. The classical Patañjali yoga seeks to disentangle the masculine principle of 'pure consciousness' (*Purusha*) from the feminine principle of 'nature' (*Prakriti*). The goal of Patañjali yoga is liberation from the suffering and despair that result when the two are entangled, 'so that consciousness becomes free from every movement of nature and enjoys the bliss of pure contemplation, untouched by

any taint of mortality' (86). This goal ultimately stems from the idea that all nature is illusion (*maya*), and thus, getting beyond pure nature, one reaches pure consciousness and is liberated.

However, Griffiths' Christian yoga does not claim that all nature is illusory, although it affirms the need for an experience of being rooted in pure consciousness. Apophatically, Griffiths recognises the goal of yoga as,

... an experience of the Ground or Depth of Being in the centre of the soul, awareness of the mystery of being beyond sense and thought, which gives a sense of fulfilment, of finality, of absolute truth (86).

'But does this mean', he asks, 'that all other modes of consciousness are illusory, that nature has no reality, that the experience of God is also an illusion?' (86) For Griffiths, the experience of God is not illusory, but very real and substantial. The goal of Christian yoga is to recognise the reality of God in nature (substance). Going further, in Christian yoga, the body and soul are transformed by the work of the spirit and, 'transfigured by the divine life', come 'to participate in the divine consciousness' (87). Instead of viewing nature as illusory, Griffiths understands nature (substance) as having obtained the spirit which has descended into it, transforming and transfiguring it into a mode of presenting God in a whole and real way.

This Christian yoga, I suggest, is the key to understanding the whole of Griffiths' spirituality. He calls it:

... the cosmic drama, this transformation of nature, of matter and the body, so as to become the outward form of the divine spirit, the body of the Lord. And this transformation takes place in our own bodies. (87)

Thus this sacramental transformation does not only take place in nature; more significantly, it takes place within human persons. This yoga is made uniquely Christian by the constitutive operation of Christ's *incarnation*. Therefore any attempt to separate this form of yoga from Christ will fall short. 'Christ came to recapitulate all the stages of human history, to sum up in himself the destiny of humankind.' (118)

For Griffiths, Christ constituted the conditions necessary to open up this way to divine union for everyone. For the same reason, Griffiths places Christ at the centre of his theology of religions. This is absolutely crucial in grasping what he is up to in all of his theology and spirituality. For instance, in his spirituality it is Christ who makes possible one's union with the divine. According to Griffiths, this union,

... has to take place in the centre of our own being, in the darkness of the interior where alone we can encounter God who is hidden in the depths of the soul. We have to pass beyond all the images of the sense, beyond all the concepts of the mind, beyond ourselves, if we are really to find God. (119)

This apophatic path, however, cannot be travelled on one's own, for 'we have lost the thread in the maze' (119). It is in and through Christ,

who opens up the hidden depth of the soul and serves as the clue to the centre. In Griffiths' preferred phraseology, 'The Golden String is Christ ... The sacrifice of Christ is the central event of human history; it is the event which alone gives meaning to life.' (119)

This experience of unity, then, is an experience of the divine Godhead, the Trinity. It is a taste of ultimate reality—a communion of persons in love. It is an experience of paradise regained, a reconciliation of the feminine and masculine, and a return to the harmonic cosmic unity between self and God, humans and world. In a way reminiscent of Hegelian sublation,<sup>13</sup> Griffiths describes a necessary process in which,

... we are recovering that unity beyond duality. Humanity had to go through dualism, to learn the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error. It is necessary to go through that stage of separating and dividing, but then you have to transcend it. (121)

This transcendence is made possible by way of Christian yoga in the form of an apophatic mediation which brings one back to understanding the world in sacramental unity with the divine. In Griffiths' words, 'when you stop the mind, you discover the unifying principle behind everything' (122).

### ***The Enduring Significance of Griffiths' Spirituality for Today***

At the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 2007, a session took place entitled 'Christian Spirituality and Multiple Religious Belonging', which examined the possibility of practising more than one religious tradition simultaneously. Along with figures such as Louis Massignon, Thomas Merton and Raimundo Pannikar, the session focused on Bede Griffiths and his quest to live as a Hindu *sannyasi* without compromising his Benedictine vows and Catholic faith. This recognition is already a positive consequence of his life and spirituality, although Griffiths admits that he was unable 'to

<sup>13</sup> One of Hegel's main philosophical concerns was reconciling the dualisms, bifurcations and fragmentations that existed in his world (for example subject versus object, finite versus infinite, reason versus faith, intellect versus feeling, etc.). To do so he proposed a method of sublation (*Aufhebung*), which negates external relationships (denies their isolation from one another), transcends them (recognises their internal connections), and preserves their internal associations (retains commonalities). The goal is to preserve the unity within a duality.

reach this extreme degree of detachment' (42) to which the *sannyasi* is called. Undertaking such a task is still worth doing, even if done imperfectly, as Francis X. Clooney, a presenter at the session, recognised.<sup>14</sup>

Clooney pointed out that immersion in and study of another tradition provides new words, ideas, images and practices, and a new indebtedness. Furthermore, it brings a 'new vitality to be and remain Christian'—or Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, etc.—while understanding one's own tradition in a 'newly informed and deepened fashion'.<sup>15</sup> These insights can be applied to Griffiths and his attempt at maintaining a 'multiple religious belonging'. I shall conclude by considering some of the enduring characteristics of Griffiths' spirituality in offering a deeper understanding of the Christian tradition in the light of his Indian experience. Most specifically, I shall examine the idea of nature, and human nature, as sacramental.

Griffiths' affinity for nature is, in many ways, what ties together the whole of his spiritual vision. It is what brought him back to religion, what moved him to study Hinduism, what led him to immerse himself in India; and it sustains a key point of contact between Christianity and Hinduism. Griffiths' mystical vision of nature is very much centred on finding God truly and substantially in all things. Even from a young age, before his return to any form of religion or spirituality, he recalled a turning point in his life when an overwhelming experience of nature had a profound effect on him:

... now that I look back on it, it seems to me that it was one of the decisive events of my life. Up to that time I had lived the life of a normal schoolboy, quite content with the world as I found it. Now I was suddenly made aware of another world of beauty and mystery such as I had never imagined to exist, except in poetry. (28)

In nature Griffiths began to discover the hiddenness of God, as a new way of experiencing natural beauty. Regarding that day as a schoolboy, he wrote,

<sup>14</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2008). His goal is to 'read the *Essence* and the *Treatise* with attention to their performative power, noticing how comparative, inter-religious reading intensifies rather than dissipates the fundamental values at stake in each tradition'.

<sup>15</sup> These quotations are from a handout written by Francis X. Clooney and distributed at the Annual Meeting of the AAR in San Diego on 17 November 2007.

It was a beauty of a different kind from anything which I had known before, a beauty not of the natural but of the supernatural order. The presence of God had been revealed to me on that day at school beneath the forms of nature, the bird's song, the flowers' scent, the sunset over the field. (29)

In India, Griffiths found concretised in the culture what had only been an idea for him back in England. However, where classical Hinduism sees the natural world as illusory, Griffiths understood it as containing and communicating profound truth and substance. Like the Hindus, he was able to find God pervasively in everything around him, but he still maintained his Christian identity and theological foundation. What enabled him to do this was a vision of nature as *sacramental*.

A sacrament can be crudely understood as a *theophany* that demonstrates a particular part of the relationship between God and human beings. A sacrament is a moment that renders Godself present substantially and sensuously in the world—be it through nature, person, or ritual, etc. Through sacramentality, the sacred is united with the profane, the heavenly with the earthly, the infinite with finite, the divine with the human, and so on. For my purposes here a simplistic and brief explanation of sacramentality can be given in terms of the *incarnation* of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Through the incarnation the cosmos became saturated with sacramental potential; the cosmos became pan-sacramental, in that all things received the potentiality to render Godself present in a real and substantial way. Jesus is understood as the 'primordial' sacrament, in that his life and death were constitutive for the salvation of all people, but were also constitutive of a pan-sacramental cosmos. Thus, the sacramental theologian Hebert Vorgrimler makes it clear when he writes about Christ, 'His whole life, but especially its high points or the great moments, are real symbols of the concrete presence of God'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, just as the person of Jesus of Nazareth made God present in time and space, so do sacraments.

The understanding of nature as fundamentally sacramental allows Griffiths successfully to position himself as a Christian within a Hindu culture and cosmos. By recognising the cosmos as pan-sacramental,

<sup>16</sup> Hebert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical, 1992), 30.





*Statue of Christ at the Portuguese Church, Kumarakom, India*

Griffiths found a point of reconciliation for Hindus and Christians. His insight is also important for Christians because it allows for the world to be seen in a positive light. That is, it allows Christian theology to make sense of the world not as being at odds with God, but rather as a sacramental presentation and mode of being for God, the creator. Still further, the implications of this pan-sacramental cosmology have enduring importance for the way Christians understand human nature. Like the natural world, human beings can be seen in a positive light. As creations in the image and likeness of God, humans also contain the potential for sacramentality. This is important because it retains a positive view of human nature and does not ignore the doctrine of *imago dei*—people as creatures in the ‘image and likeness of God’.

Griffiths sought, above all, a way to unity and communion with God through nature and through other people. This has been reflected in his writings on nature, on love and especially on the Trinitarian view of the Godhead. In an essay littered with excerpts from Griffiths’ writings it is

only fitting to end with another, which points to an enduring characteristic of his spirituality:

We are made 'partakers of the divine nature' .... The world is not divided; there is no separation between God and world. (124)

*Hans Gustafson* holds master's degrees in both Theology and Philosophy and is currently completing a PhD in Religion at Claremont Graduate University, California, USA. His theological interests include sacramental theology, spiritual theology, and philosophy of religion. Hans also served as a Jesuit Volunteer in Juneau, Alaska.