

BEDE GRIFFITHS'S ADVAITIC APPROACH TO RELIGION

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IN HIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY from Benedictine monk to Christian swami, Bede Griffiths attempted to accommodate the Hindu Vedic tradition within Christianity. Part of this Vedic teaching is the philosophy of non-duality or *advaita*, which Griffiths adopts and modifies in his theology. This non-dualistic vision of the whole cosmic reality enables Griffiths to appreciate other religious systems and eventually to view them as complementary to Christianity. While he affirms the differences in religions, he also perceives them as united in the one Spirit at the deepest level achieved only through contemplation of the divine mystery. This advaitic approach to understanding the Absolute led Griffiths to believe that eventually all religions would converge without losing their distinct identities.

Towards a Christian Advaita

Developed by the Hindu philosopher Śankara in the eighth century AD, *advaita*, or non-dualism, 'expresses a relationship between God and the world or between God and the soul'. This relationship is understood in terms of 'non-reciprocity, dependence, non-separatedness, non-otherness and distinction' between God as cause (*Brahman*) and creation as effect.¹

¹ See Kuruville Pandikattu, *Religious Dialogue as Hermeneutics: Bede Griffiths's Advaitic Approach* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), 60–61. Pandikattu explains these terms: 'Non-reciprocity: There cannot be a relationship of mutuality between the cause and effect Creatureship is intrinsic to creatures but creatorship is only extrinsic to [the] creator. Dependence: Effect has no existence apart from the cause Non-separatedness: ... is due to total ontological dependence on the cause Non-Otherness: ... denies otherness strictly understood, that is, mutual foreignness, heterogeneity and ontological independence from its cause Distinction: Though Śankara insists on the nondifference of Cause and effect, he denies at the same time their absolute identity If absolute equality and identity were insisted on, the relation of cause and effect would be done away with.'



Bede Griffiths, in the robes of a sannyasi

Bede Griffiths sought to articulate a refined Christian version of *advaita* in his attempt to construct a Christian theology that is relevant to India. It is not a theoretical construction based on speculation but evolved from his personal experience through years of study and meditation. It sprang from his practice of the ascetic life in the tradition of the Indian *sannyasi*, or itinerant holy men. Even before he went to India, during his childhood, Griffiths had a vague intuition of *advaita* on an evening walk when he felt at one with nature.²

For Griffiths, *advaita* is a mystical intuition of being one with the divine reality; his experience of non-duality in his encounter with God is equivalent to the experience of the soul in its very centre, beyond images and concepts. Hindus and Buddhists may express this non-dual reality differently, but Griffiths believed that their experience of the non-duality of the divine is fundamentally the same. Christians have a lot to learn from Hinduism and Buddhism in their quest for the Absolute. At the same time, Christians also have a lot to offer to Eastern religions in terms of refinement and reinterpretation of the advaitic experience. This involves seeing the Hindu notion of *advaita* in the light of the Christian understanding of creation, the notion of the person and the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Rejecting the monism of pure *advaita*, which affirms the absolute identity between *Brahman* and the soul, Griffiths describes a Christian *advaita* characterized by intuitive knowledge, love and an affirmation of the reality of the world. He believed that individuals do not lose their identity, even in deep communion with God. Relationship with God does not abolish the individuality of the soul. The relationship cannot be one of total identity or complete absorption. Griffiths writes:

² See Judson B. Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue* (Albany: SUNY, 2001), 13.

For the Hindu and the Buddhist ... in the ultimate state there is an absolute identity. Man realizes his identity with the absolute and realizes that this identity is eternal and unchangeable. In the Christian view man remains distinct from God. He is a creature of God, and his being raised to a participation in the divine life is an act of God's grace, a gratuitous act of infinite love, by which God descends to man in order to raise him to share in his own life and knowledge and love. In this union man truly shares in the divine mode of knowledge, he knows himself in an identity with God, but he remains distinct in his being. It is an identity, or rather a communion, by knowledge and love, not an identity of being.³

In his Christian interpretation of *advaita*, Griffiths was influenced by Meister Eckhart's mystical experience: 'As Eckhart says, God only speaks one Word, and in that word the whole creation is contained. In God the whole Creation exists externally in identity with him.'⁴ For Griffiths, *advaita* is the intuitive power of the mind that Eckhart described:

This power has nothing in common with anything else, it knows no yesterday or day before, no morrow or day after (for in eternity there is no yesterday or morrow); there is only a present now; the happenings of a thousand years ago, a thousand years to come, are there in the present and the antipodes the same as here.⁵

In Eckhart's view, 'in God's own knowledge of himself in his Word there are no real distinctions In this sense it is true to say that the knowledge of God is "advaita", without duality.'⁶

Another important influence on Griffiths was Thomas Aquinas, who also speaks of the unity of God:

He is supremely undivided inasmuch as He is divided neither actually nor potentially, by any mode of division; since He is altogether simple Hence it is manifest that God is 'one' in the supreme degree.⁷

³ Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India: Essays towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (Springfield: Templegate, 1984), 36.

⁴ Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West: A Sequel to the Golden String* (Springfield: Templegate, 1982), 84.

⁵ *The Works of Meister Eckhart: Doctor Ecstaticus*, translated by C. de B. Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1952), volume 1, 228, quoted in Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, 168.

⁶ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 204.

⁷ *Summa theologiae*, 1. 11. 4.

But in this oneness of God there are three Persons to be understood in terms of relationship and procession—that is, the way in which one divine Person originates in another. This brings us to Griffiths’ understanding of the Trinity.

The Trinitarian God

Griffiths applies his understanding of *advaita* to the divine mystery of the Trinity, first in the relationship between the Son and the Father:

We could then speak of God as *Saccidananda*—Being, Knowledge, Bliss—and see in the Father, *sat*, Being, the absolute eternal ‘I am’, the ground of Being, the source of all. We could then speak of the Son, as the *cit*, the knowledge of the Father, the Self-consciousness of eternal Being, the presence to itself in pure consciousness of the Infinite One.⁸

Here we see Griffiths interpreting Jesus’ relationship with the Father in a modified advaitic sense: Jesus experienced himself as one with God the Father, and yet distinct. It is an ontological unity that nevertheless preserves the identity of Jesus so that he can relate to the Father as a distinct Person. As we have seen, Griffiths rejects a pure *advaita* that erases distinctions completely. He clearly explains his understanding of *advaita* in the context of John’s Gospel:

But there [in John’s Gospel], Jesus reveals this inner mystery of His openness with the Father. This to me is the climax of it all, that this Son of Man, this man knows Himself in this unity with the Father. He can say, ‘I and the Father are one’. And that is the mystery of *unity-in-distinction*. This is the point that is generally missed Jesus does not say, ‘I am the Father’. That would be pure *advaita*, pure identity, but says rather, ‘I and the Father are one’, which is *unity-in-distinction* And He also says, ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me’. That is the proper way of expressing *advaita* in Christian terms.⁹

The focus here is on the human consciousness of Jesus Christ as Son to the Father—this is ‘unity-in-distinction’.

⁸ Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, 190.

⁹ Bede Griffiths, ‘The Personal God: The Trinity’, lecture given to the Ojai Community, 17 September 1983, quoted in Wayne Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought* (Woodstock, Vt: Skylight Path, 2003), 116.

For Griffiths the Holy Spirit is 'the eternal uncreated energy of God the Father and the Son as well'.¹⁰ He says that the Spirit,

... manifests itself in the energies in matter, in the energies of life, the energies in our whole human being The Spirit is the Love of God acting in us as an energy, bringing us into being, and calling us back to Himself. Love is working in us to return.¹¹

In sum, the love between the three persons of the Trinity is deep and mutual, but they are neither merged into one nor separated as individuals. It is their mutual interdependence that gives rise to a wholeness that is greater than the sum of their parts. This is the fundamental idea behind Griffith's formulation of the Christian *advaita*.

Towards a Convergence of Religions

Griffiths's reflections on *advaita* as an experience of the divine mystery also allow him to have a vision of how different religions can converge, how they can complement and cooperate with one another, moving beyond mistrust and rivalry. Such convergence, based on advaitic experience, does not diminish the importance of the differences among the diverse religious traditions, but joins them in a 'unitive pluralism'.¹² This phrase describes the harmonization of religions based both on the acceptance of differences and an advaitic commonality. He writes, stressing the importance of religious integration:



Marble relief of the Holy Trinity from Sé Cathedral, Goa, early seventeenth century

¹⁰ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 119.

¹¹ Griffiths, 'The Personal God', quoted in Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 119.

¹² Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center* (Springfield: Templegate, 1976), 24.

On this depends the union of East and West and the future of humanity. We must try to see the values in each of these revelations, to distinguish their differences and to discover their harmony, going beyond the differences in an experience of 'non-duality', of transcendence of all dualities.¹³

While acknowledging that in each religious tradition there is an experience of the transcendent reality, Griffiths also respects their diverse interpretations or expressions of that reality.

It is important to note that Griffiths does not say that all religious experiences are experiences of the same thing, but that they converge in the transcendent mystery. At the same time, he believes in the presence of a vision of non-duality occurring at some point in these various religious experiences. This means that the universal mystical experience in all authentic faiths possesses this one advaitic insight.

Complementarity

After many years of study, reflection and meditation at the Shantivanam Ashram in India, Griffiths began to realise that the cosmic revelation found in eastern religions is not a mere preparation for the gospel but actually complements Christian revelation. In *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, he writes:

The divine Mystery, the eternal Truth, has been revealing itself to all men from the beginning of history. Every people has received some insight into this divine mystery—which is the beginning of human existence—and every religion, from the most primitive to the most advanced, has its own unique insight into the one Truth. These insights, in-so-far as they reflect the one Reality, are in principle complementary.¹⁴

It was Griffiths's understanding of advaitic mystical experience that eventually led him to understand the complementarity of religions. He believed that,

... to share in the vision of God means ... to pass beyond all concepts of the rational mind and all images derived from the sense. We must pass into that world of non-dual, in which our present mode of

¹³ Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, 177.

¹⁴ Bede Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith* (Clearlake: Dawn Horse, 1973), vii–viii.

consciousness is transcended In this view of the ultimate mystery of being, which is the beginning and the end of all our human aspiration, Hindu and Christian unite not only with one another but also with the Buddhist and the Muslim.¹⁵

For Griffiths, this experience is universal in the mystical tradition of all faiths, and our study of all the different religions will lead us to a deeper understanding of the divine mystery.

Griffiths's thought underwent a radical shift from his early 'fulfilment theory', according to which other religions found their completion and fulfilment only in Christianity, to a belief that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to convert but to understand the other. Thus Christians must be open to listen to the Word that is present in other faiths. He claims: 'It would seem that in time to come it will become impossible to be Christian in any complete sense, if one is ignorant of the measure of wisdom and knowledge to be found in the traditions of other religions'.¹⁶ Accordingly interreligious dialogue must play a significant role in Christian mission. In our effort to foster an 'integral Catholicism', Griffiths insists that Christianity must integrate the insights of all religions into a comprehensive vision of Christ. This final integration, however, will only take place in the *parousia* when we will realise God as God is.

**Not to
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In dialogue the differences between religions can be explored more deeply. Griffiths insists that dialogue is not a compromise but a common search for the truth that revealed itself in different religions:

Each religion has to hold the fundamental truth in its own tradition and at the same time to allow that tradition to grow, as it is exposed to other aspects of the truth. Thus we begin to realize that truth is one, but that it has many faces, and each religion is, as it were, a face of the one Truth, which manifests itself under different signs and symbols in the different historical traditions.¹⁷

Griffiths asserts that, at the deepest level of religious experience, there is nothing incompatible among the different religious traditions. The deeper you go into Buddhism and Hinduism, the more you will realise their

¹⁵ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 162–163.

¹⁶ Bede Griffiths, 'Where World Religions Meet', *The Tablet* (1 April 1972), 315, quoted in Pandikattu, *Religious Dialogue as Hermeneutics*, 167.

¹⁷ Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, 25.

fundamental unity with the Christian faith. In this comparative study of religion, Griffiths gains further insights into the non-dual nature of the divine reality. He stresses the need to understand the passing forms of this world through the transformation of our present mode of consciousness into a deeper level of consciousness: to transcend,

... the dualities external and internal, subject and object, conscious and unconscious, and become one with the non-dual Reality, the *Brahman*, and the *Ātman*, the Tao, the Void, the Word, the Truth, whatever name we give to that which cannot be named. It is this alone that gives reality to our lives and a meaning to our human existence.¹⁸

Griffiths advocates cooperation and dialogue, which he understands as mutual enlightenment rather than compromise, as it is no longer



Christ the Saviour, Mughal, c.1630–1640

possible for religions to exist in isolation. He warns against the danger of an exclusivism that neglects the unifying foundation of all faiths. Recognising the relative values of rites and dogmas, Griffiths holds that each religion springs from a profound experience of the Spirit, which is expressed differently in each tradition. We seek dialogue with other religions in order to recover this original inspiration of the Spirit. It is by returning to the source that different religions can find their unity.¹⁹ This meeting of religions cannot even be based on a shared belief in God, since in Buddhism and some other faiths there is no such concept. It can only take place on the basis of *advaita*.

¹⁸ Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith*, edited by Felicity Edwards (Springfield: Templegate, 1990), 226.

¹⁹ Griffiths, *New Vision of Reality*, 103–104.

Unsurprisingly, this complementarity of religions has not been generally accepted in the Roman Catholic Church, and thus Griffiths has received widespread criticism. He was accused of uniting incompatible teachings regarding Christian theology, Indian mysticism, philosophy and monasticism without any systematization. Some accused him of fostering syncretism, but he vehemently denied this:

We are not seeking a syncretism in which each religion will lose its own individuality, but an organic growth in which each religion has to purify itself and discover its own inmost depth and significance and then relate itself to the inner depth of the other traditions. Perhaps it will never be finally achieved in this world, but it is the one way in which we can advance today towards that unity in truth, which is the ultimate goal of mankind.²⁰

Against syncretism, Griffith's theological approach stresses convergence, which is based on openness to various traditions. It is an openness that allows 'an organic, natural assimilation of all that is of value in other traditions and that somehow enriches and illumines the Christian mystery without contradicting its essential meaning and value'.²¹ In Griffiths's advaitic approach to religious experience, both differences and similarities between various faiths are clearly maintained. And he tries to create a distinction between the original experience and the effect of its historical conditions.

Thus, as we have observed, Griffiths's understanding of other religions is characterized by complementarity, avoidance of syncretism, and dialogue based on contemplation which springs from his advaitic approach. Nonetheless, his preference for Christianity is obvious. Griffiths appreciated the importance of creation and the notion of the person taught in Christianity, which he found lacking in Eastern religions. He hoped that in the future all religions would converge on their source, returning to the original mystical vision that they have lost through modernisation and secularisation.

Criticisms

There are critics who dismiss 'ashramic spirituality' of the kind that Griffiths promoted as an 'irrelevant bit of religious colonialism' packaged

²⁰ Bede Griffiths, 'The One Mystery', *The Tablet* (9 March 1974), 7.

²¹ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 70.

for middle-class Western tourists.²² The Hindu swami Devandanda asks by what authority Christian priests wear the robe of the *sannyasin* and celebrate Mass using Hindu symbols and customs. Devandanda thinks that Griffiths had no real grasp of Indian mentality and was meddling with the souls of the people by his experiments at Shantivanam. Calling him a 'spiritual colonialist', the swami accuses Griffiths of perverting Hindu symbols and traditions for the purpose of converting the local people to Christianity. Griffiths defends himself by asserting that great individuals such as Gandhi and Ramakrishna appreciated Christianity without changing their own faith. He also claims that his religion is Christian but his spirit is Hindu.²³

Griffiths has been accused of 'dubious integration'. If his spirit is truly Hindu, he cannot be considered a Christian in the orthodox sense: he seems to be opposing religion and the spirit. Griffiths 'constantly uses Christian language to interpret Hindu concepts and Hindu language to interpret Christian concepts'.²⁴ To his critics, he is creating a hybrid that is neither Christian nor Hindu, and his interpretation of the Trinity in terms of Hindu categories is distorted and misleading. In addition, his understanding of Hinduism is limited, because he read the *Vedas*, *Upanishad* and the *Gita* in English translations by Vivekananda and Ramakrishna, who were influenced by Western philosophy. Shaped by neo-Hinduism and Western scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Griffiths's understanding of Indian tradition is bound to be one-sided. There seem to be some similarities between the Christian logos and Hindu consciousness, between Christian *agape* and Hindu bliss, but these are not exactly the same, they loosely correspond with each other. In the end, for some, Griffiths only succeeds in distorting both Hinduism and Christianity, and his spirituality is theosophical rather than Christian.²⁵ According to his opponents, Griffiths's writings lack the rigour demanded by serious theological study; the critical mind needed to analyze religious theories is absent. For them, his approach to Christianity and Hinduism is indeed merely syncretic.

²² Michael Barnes, 'From Ashrams to Dalits: The Four Seasons of Inculturation', *The Way*, 41/1 (January 2001), 62.

²³ Victor M. Parachin, 'Bede Griffiths: Christian Guru', *Spiritual Life*, 56/4 (Winter 2010), 227.

²⁴ José Pereira and Robert Fastiggi, 'The Swami from Oxford: Bede Griffiths Wants to Integrate Catholicism and Hinduism', *Crisis*, 9 (March 1991), 24.

²⁵ Pereira and Fastiggi, 'Swami from Oxford', 25.

Another criticism of 'ashramic spirituality' is that it is addressed only to the Brahminic culture. It is elitist and ignores the social reality of India. The Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris, for example, takes a quite different approach to interreligious dialogue by focusing on the ethical basis of Buddhism.²⁶ Critical of Western obsessions with Eastern mysticism, which is actually foreign to the indigenous religious experience of the people, Pieris insists that theology must take into account poverty and religious pluralism, two dominant characteristics of the Asian landscape. Not denying the value of contemplative theology, he argues that the shift in Indian Christian theology should be towards dialogue with the non-Sanskritic religion of the dalits, the broken and poor people who live on the margins of India's caste system. The focus should be on the liberating praxis of the gospel, which is relevant to these people.



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*Crucifixion, Rural Theological Institute,
Tamil Nadu*

Liberating Openness

There are those, however, who think that the experience of the Christian ashram has also been a liberating one. Bede Griffiths impressed people by his humility, warmth and hospitality. His success in his attempt to assimilate Indian culture into his spirituality was due to his gracious nature and openness to others. Griffiths understood that the Christian faith could not be explained in the language of another culture without being deeply rooted in human relationship.²⁷ Griffiths possesses experiential depth and what emerges in his writings is a refreshing view of the world. He is able to capture and convey the enchantment that is missing in our daily existence, providing his readers with an inspiring vision

²⁶ See Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

²⁷ Barnes, 'From Ashrams to Dalits', 62.

and a new orientation through his ability to adapt, absorb and integrate ideas from Christianity and Hinduism.

With the hindsight of Vatican II and new insights into missiology, it is easy to criticize Griffiths's attempt at inculturation. But this is not fair. Griffiths was among the first to attempt to bring Hinduism and Christianity together, in the 1950s, and we should look at his sincere effort to make the gospel relevant to people in India. Impressed by Griffiths's holiness and honesty, many followers and admirers, Christians and non-Christians alike, from India and all over the world, flocked to his Shantivanam Ashram to learn from him.

Long before Vatican II, Griffiths understood that the future of the Church in India lies not in the exclusive claims of its beliefs but in the dialogue with other religions. Thus the Church cannot isolate itself or remain ignorant of the faiths and cultures of other people. It has to appreciate and respect the validity of other religious systems without sacrificing the truth of Christianity. Griffiths remained faithful to the belief in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, the Trinity, sacraments and the historical importance of the Church. At the same time, he sought change and adaptation in the liturgy, ecclesial structures and theology by incorporating Hindu customs and categories so that Christianity would not be an alien religion in India. Like the early fathers of the Church, Griffiths, in his advaitic approach to religion, was a pioneer in inculturation and accommodation in modern times.

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