Dom Bede Griffiths and God of the Journey

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Abstract: Bet Green reflects on her recent pilgrimage to Benedictine monasteries in India – Shantivanam, Kurisumala, Prinknash, Pluscarden, Osage, Big Sur – connected to the life and journey of Dom Bede Griffiths. We touch the mysteries of India revealed in its amazing history, geography and approaches to Ultimate Reality explored through Eastern traditions such as advaita and bhakti. Along the way, we meet monks, nuns, ordinary people and an array of mystical, theological and artistic voices who relate to us something of their own journeys and insights. Somewhere on this journey, East and West meet—a favourite Griffiths theme—not only because we live in an increasingly globalized world, but also because there is no ultimate division (the lesson of advaita) between eastern mysticism and western science and because we are called inter-dependently on diverse journeys of love (the lesson of bhakti) towards the one mystery of the triune God.

Key Words: Bede Griffiths; Advaita; Bhakti; pilgrimage; God – imagery; Hindu-Christian dialogue; Indian spirituality

In this article I explore the image of God of the Journey from the perspective of a recent pilgrimage I undertook accompanied by my husband. It is part of a section in my doctoral thesis, Dom Bede Griffiths’ Images of God, the Complementarity of Opposites, and Pilgrimage as a Way to God. I am using Griffiths’ method of differentiating God as transcendent other, with a capital ‘G’ and the ‘gods’ – with a lower case ‘g,’ as symbolic of attributes or manifestations of the One.1

The image God of the Journey is not new; it is celebrated in the Church’s liturgy. However, in the context of Dom Bede Griffiths’ understanding of ‘The Golden String’—as Christ—and his encounter with Eastern religions, the God-journey image can be explored from a new perspective. The hermeneutical process involves a particular interaction insofar as my journey (the author) and yours (the reader) interact at this point to encounter Griffiths’ religious quest in India. While the image is multi-valent it emphasises particularly the interior spiritual journey that encompasses the general idea of humankind’s movement in space and time, historical to cosmic, and the evolution of consciousness. It underlies Griffiths’ belief pronounced with a sense of urgency that only the acceptance of the need for and engagement in religious dialogue at a core level will allow humankind a way forward towards the ultimate goal in God.2

Because it necessarily deals with an exploration of concepts which take in different levels of being the thesis has a heuristic dimension. Thirty years ago I was introduced to the writings of Bede Griffiths through the gift of The Golden String presented to me by my mother who is Anglo-Indian. My parents migrated to Australia in 1948 two years before I


was born. Two years ago mum died and, although my choice of this subject was to all intents and purposes quite objective, this particular gift and the memory of its circumstances has attained a poignant significance. Our journey of discovery is apt to spring surprises...

Relevant then is my ‘walk in the footsteps of Dom Bede Griffiths.’ I conceived the idea in response to my need to better understand the concept of Advaita3 so central to the development of Griffiths’ thought. At the same time, at a subconscious level, I think there was a longing to see with my mother’s eyes, ‘to connect’ with that dimension of her which I believe I share at a deep level of my being. I became aware that—just as for Griffiths—my needs necessitated a geographical shift.

Having completed this pilgrimage last March one is left with sheer gratitude for the friendliness and human concern everywhere encountered in the four countries we visited—no matter what the race, culture or creed—confirming the belief that the Holy Spirit is the same for all times and places. The overarching image is most profoundly Trinitarian and is closely related to another image which became manifest during our travels. This is the image of the Divine Host who in great out-flowing love is revealed as generative relationship, the One who engenders, provides and gathers together in celebration. In light of both of these, the Imago Dei can only truly be understood in terms of community.

Griffiths’ contemplation on the fruits of his engagement with the religion, land and people of India was complemented by his growing appreciation of the sheer age of the sub-continent with its diversity of life. His imagination was nourished through sustained attention to the question of the interrelatedness and interdependency of the worlds of mind and matter. Here, the image of journey is imaginatively stretched to a pre-history which has been the source of industry and excitement for archaeologists, anthropologists and geologists, such as the example of evidence for ‘Gondwanaland’ which existed six million years ago. This one land mass comprising Africa, South America, India, Antarctica and Australia separated five million years later – and India over the next hundreds of thousands of years drifted north to meet the China plate; as they pressed together, from the depths the ground swelled up rising to great heights to form the Himalayas. From these awe-inspiring heights, source of the holy Ganges to the flat rice paddies surrounding Saccidananda Ashram, all breathed a story of a land and people with a vast history. I had stood braced on the wind-scoured Mountain of the Cross4 with its view of the lower terraced gardens of Kurisumala and the breathtakingly splendid sun-kissed ranges of the Western Ghats so loved by my mother and source of the sacred Cauvery River which meanders past Shantivanam. The experience of peace and unity this gave is beyond words.

When Griffiths, ever interested in welcoming guests, first saw the site for this isolated mountain Ashram, he reflected: ‘Who will come here?’ But the seeming inaccessibility did not deter the crowds of inquirers who came in his time and and still come today. The Abbot explained to us they need to take strict measures to control the numbers of visitors.

In India the beginnings of religion can be traced to pre-historic times. There are ancient paintings in rock caves near Bhopal which appear to be between 10,000 and 40,000 years old – though human life itself on the continent goes back 400,000 years. The intricately carved quartz, agate and carnelian arrowheads found at Rajasthan suggest a

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3 The Sanskrit term for the concept dealing with non-dualistic apprehension of reality.
4 The Mountain of the Cross is the English translation of Kurisumala.
possible ceremonial purpose, and there are stone hammers from the Palaeolithic age – 30,000 years ago. The people became hunters, gatherers and traders. In 5,000 BC, there were herds of humped cattle and in 3,500 BC pottery wheels and mud-brick granaries. There is evidence that this great civilization with its stone temples on the heights, and stone seals (still existing though indecipherable) and affinities with the Sumerian and Elamite cultures, is the forerunner of the Southern Dravidian culture. This Indus civilization died out – most probably pushed aside by the war-like semi-nomadic Aryan invaders with their horses and chariots coming over the mountains round 2,000 BC from the Iranian plateau, or southern Russia. The warrior chief, the raja, had Brahman priests and it was they who later produced the oral Vedic Sanskrit verses. The ‘Aryans’ or ‘noble people’ were fair; the Dravidians, dark. The introduction of the caste system was colour-based. In due course, elements of Dravidian worship were subsumed into the Hindu religion as it developed from the Vedic root. For example, the dark ancient Dravidian god Shiva, associated with violence and death, becomes a more benevolent Hindu deity and on temples and paintings in Tamil Nadu still retains the dark blue colour.\(^5\)

Ninian Smart describes Hinduism as ‘the trunk of a single mighty tree; but its past is a tangle of most divergent roots.’\(^6\) The Vedic myth in the form of verses of hymns for worship was transmitted secretly and orally – the sruti. The religion became ever more esoteric, with life dictated by the rigid caste system: the priests or Brahmins; the Kshatriyas or warriors; the Vaishyas or craftsmen; and the shudras – the dark workers – not of Aryan stock; and, finally, a fourth class was added – the untouchables. Earliest priestly cultic practices were joined with the contemplative insights from therasis or ‘forest dwellers’ with their first-written Sanskrit text about 1,000 BC. Some 200 years later when alternatives to the Vedic religion arose in the form of Buddhism and Jainism which had no caste system, a new form, Brahmanism absorbed sramanic ideas of reincarnation, liberation, yoga and tapas (self-mortification) all found in the Upanishads. Later, great epic symbolic narratives were created. One book in particular, the Bhagavadgita or ‘Song of the Lord’ (the smriti or tradition), from the Mahabharata around 300BC, inspired belief in the value of ordinary life combined with loyal relationship (bhakti) with a loving deity (Brahman) and commitment to ethical principles of right living (Dhama). On this was built the Vedanta or philosophies and it is to the Advaita or non-dualist school to which eighth century Sankara belongs. The school introduces the question of the illusory quality (maya) of the world of multiplicity.

Following the Classical Age (300 to 650 CE), regional fighting and Islamic conquests (from the eighth century) preceded the great Moghul empire of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Portuguese Christian missionaries arrived in the sixteenth century at Goa and, in the seventeenth century, the British variant of Christianity arrived with the East India Trading Company. Finally, led by Hindu Mahatma (Great Soul) Gandhi, India broke with British Imperialism and won over its independence in 1947 simultaneously with the partitioning of India. During the mass cross-migration which ensued, it is estimated that over two million people were massacred. Gandhi, an adept of non-violence (ahimsa), wept over this bloodshed. Unsurprisingly Griffiths was deeply impressed by this man who based his life on the teaching of compassion in the Bhagavad Gita and maintained devotion to Jesus as an exemplar of love and forgiveness.

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More than half a century has passed since Independence. It was not India’s espousal of Western science and technology, but the tendency to separate science and religious faith which disturbed Griffiths.7 The passage of time has mitigated negative attitudes from painful memories of the British Raj. As we noted during our Indian pilgrimage, English is ‘in’—along with vast multi-lane highways and fast imported cars. Elsewhere, far from such improvements and despite unbelievable driving conditions—completely deficient in road rules except perhaps for the biggest having right of way—, we did not encounter one example of road rage for the two and a half weeks we were in Tamil Nadu. In Kerala, with its greater Western influence, better education, generally higher standard of living and more cars—mostly cheaper, smaller new Asian makes—we had our first encounter with such aggression (but only once or twice). One suspects this aggressive action is exponentially related to material acquisition. Griffiths was concerned about the erosion of the kind of personal dignity and graceful ways of the poor of Southern India due to post-Independence Western capitalistic influence. He saw the impasse and its solution in global terms, namely, through the religious traditions returning to their founding inspirations. He believed this was the true basis for authentic dialogue.

Can the dichotomy which Griffiths observed between science and religion in India be arrested? Just as social justice issues in the West are being responded to by the Christian churches, the situation was plain enough to our eyes during our recent Indian pilgrimage. In religious terms, India represents an even more pronounced division between the material and the spiritual which is being played out globally.

On the first level of engagement, the journey held the promise of satisfying my needs as a scholar and creative artist. For one with mixed-race immigrant parents, and born and bred in the West, it should demonstrate my readiness for and commitment to the kind of intellectual transaction which would be certain to effect inner change. As well, I sensed what we were undertaking was a pilgrimage which, indeed, it became.

This can be analysed physically, intellectually, psychologically and spiritually: to strip away the inessentials; to physically ‘walk’ Griffiths’ way and track the developmental stages of his thought and access distant archives; to understand my style of thinking; to risk change, expect conversion and overcome fear of the unknown; to encounter the East; to enter into ‘conversation’ with ‘the other’ and to seek and accept my roots; to form networks of support and mutual interest; to uncover unexpected questions and/or anomalies and to move into the area of creative freedom.

As theology is ‘god talk’—concerned with understanding, communicating and sharing ever-growing and deepening knowledge of the Author of creation and the presumed relationship thereby initiated—, this ‘trip’ reflected, albeit in infinitesimal way, the ‘calculated risk’ that the perfect Exemplar of Creative Freedom took in the divine act of creation and the bestowal of free will. In any ‘calculated risk’ there is the excitement of desire along with the possibility of reward and the probability of growth. In regard to the calculated risk of the One who is Three, though the source and return of all is Love, there appears to be a lot of messy bits in between. Similarly, the risk with such an adventure is to suspect that, despite the best of all plans, things that are certain go awry at times and expectations are disappointed. Who knows what might happen!? Yet, the desire, hope and expectation of growth remain. Presumed is the ‘otherness’ within ‘same’/self. The divine Other is both self-revealing and indwelling ‘...known by participating in the

7 Griffiths, Cosmic Revelation, 116.
movement which he (sic) is\(^8\) as 'Being in love' and apt to surprise, the spirit 'blowing
where it will.'\(^9\) Theology, after all, can be seen to be 'a response to the dialogue which God
initiates.'\(^10\)

Such a pilgrimage is also indicative of 'the homeless Christ's inner freedom before
the Father'\(^11\) which is a reminder to Christians not to be dependent on 'place' but to be
always aware of the need for the exercise of detachment. Every place and every moment
speaks equally of God to those who learn how to discern and witness to the 'seeds of the
Word,' the signs of the in-breaking of the Kingdom.\(^12\)

Putting aside material goods normally taken for granted—packing only essentials—
strengthens resolve and gives a general sense of purpose; it also witnesses to friends and
family on whom one must rely for support over a period of many years that the purpose is
also mission. 'Christians are committed to the practice of breaking the borders by
constantly departing for “elsewhere” in imitation of the homeless Christ.'\(^13\)

Preparation for this pilgrimage necessitated clarifying one's objectives, widening
one's interests and strengthening one's life-purpose. It also involved establishing contacts
overseas where Griffiths' archives are kept. Important too was the need to develop an
increased exercise programme. A few places of special family interest were included in the
itinerary. In this way, a much wider circle of family and friends became interested in the
project (as faith and scholarship orientated) than if it had been limited to the academic
dimension.\(^14\) It is reflective of the interdependency and networking so central to Griffiths'
theological vision of the life-journey.

I hoped the engagement of the imagination and the senses in this most
experientially-immediate way would prompt more questions and further avenues for
intellectual exploration. The mere preparation had prompted questions about the effect of
geographical change on human consciousness. How deeply was Griffiths' consciousness
affected by such movement? Alan Griffiths had no idea that his journey to India would
necessitate a greater degree of asceticism, nor that his simple Benedictine robe, writing
desk, and eating utensils would separate him from solidarity with the really poor. His
choice to become a *Sannyasi* was directly a result of the geographical move and the
immediate effect of the changed environment.

It is indicative of the sincerity and dedication of Griffiths' journey with/to God in
dialogue with Hinduism that it came to be set in the context of an Ashram through his
identification as a *Sannyasi*. He shares profoundly his contemporary Raimundo Panikkar's
conviction that, 'without in some way sharing in (other people’s beliefs),’ we become
involved in ‘the inauthentic hermeneutical device of interpretation by proxy,’ that in

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\(^9\) Ibid, 229.


\(^11\) Ibid, 253.

\(^12\) Ibid, 252.

\(^13\) Ibid, 250.

\(^14\) In Chenei we met Indian, Fr Simon Thomas (really Thomas but his mother always called him Simon). At his
parish church of the Presentation (prior to Vatican 11 - The Purification) he produced for us beautifully
covered registers of funerals and baptisms dating back to the early eighteenth century and here we discovered
many of our Diqe ancestors including the Baptism of Dad’s father, Stephen – all French and living for
generations at Royapetta. They were not royalists as had been thought but followers of Napoleon – Republicans in fact.
assuming a particular ‘paradigm of intelligibility’ we practice condescension. Like Francis Mahieu, arriving in India Griffiths had learned Sanskrit but in Kurisumala they adopted the West Syrian Malankara rite which was practiced in Kerala and which used the vernacular.

Our stay at Shantivanam came early in the pilgrimage; by journey’s end we were more out-going. We have been changed in other ways too. I think we have developed more sensitivity towards those committed to building Christian community; in particular, we were sensitized to the poor. Even though at Shantivanam we became more acutely aware of the challenge of the non-dualistic (Advaitic) spirituality which flows from an urge/longing for unity with God, paradoxically for us the beauty of diversity has achieved a special poignancy. We arrived to find that Brother (John) Martin was leading the community in the temporary absence of the prior, Fr George. Martin was one of those present in Griffiths’ time. He is one might say the ‘resident guru,’ though he has given talks on invitation in other countries, an eloquent speaker of great theological profundity, as humble as he is wise. The details of delightful diversity extend of course to other personalities such as Father Augustine, also of Bede Griffiths’ vintage, who assured me that, in regard to Francis Achyra (Mahieu – of Kurisumala) and Griffiths, ‘they disagreed on almost everything.’ We also ‘met’ Brother George (the most silent person on earth) and I will always be disappointed that I wasn’t ready with my camera when he left so quietly in the bullock cart laden with heavy sacks—as I later discovered, to distribute the monthly rice donation to the poor. Sister Sara Ananda was a hive of information. A French Benedictine, she’d lived in the women’s Ashram across the road nearly all her monastic life and was an exponent of Francis Achyra’s views. We also met Dr Peter Tandon in Shantivanam who had known Bede Griffiths. Indian by decent, but a West Australian, he annually recruits Australian doctors (this time he had 16 others with him) to accompany him in a wholly philanthropic movement – Equal Health – to work for six weeks in the area. Present there too making a retreat was a quiet monk from San Francisco. He was a member of the Camaldolese congregation of which Shantivanam had become part.

Overall, as in Kurisumala later, we were inspired by such conscientious commitment to inculturation as the incorporation into the liturgy of Eastern prayer and symbols, both Syriac Christian and also Hindu, Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist and Taoist. In our country we have barely begun to mine the vein of gold which is the Gospel expressed in Australian culture and language.

At Kurisumala, we met one whom I regard as a living saint, the Abbot, Dom Jesudas Thelinel who impressed me with his total dedication to inculturation, the primary goal of his Ashram. He was joyful and humble. His English was not good. Dressed in a rough, cotton saffron tunic, he was small, slender, energetic, and from the one interview he gave me, assuredly an astute thinker. Simple and gentle in the extreme, never having ventured far from the high mountains of Vagamon in the Western Ghats between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, he asked had we perchance met his niece in Sydney for whom he had no address—she was Indian and so probably easier to notice and proceeded to describe her to us... Meeting Dom Jesudas (servant of Jesus) and worshipping in his Ashram was a particularly beautiful encounter. It was an emotional farewell from this isolated mountain place and he held our hands as the car drove away—leaving us with an indelible memory of his face with the long hair and beard and soulful eyes framed in the car window—inventing us with great kindness to return again one day.

Encapsulating the whole of the thesis in the image of ‘journey’ drew attention to the underlying paradox invited by the subject ‘Dom Bede Griffiths’ Images of God.’ Griffiths’ insistence on the ultimate *advaitic* experience of simple unity that demands transcendence of all conceptualisation proceeds through the avenue of relationship and communication with others by means of images which serve to describe the worth and the end of such an endeavour. It drew others to learn his insights and motivated him to share his experience. The way guests were drawn to converse with him in Prinknash and Farnborough was a prelude to the role of *Sannyasi* in an Indian Ashram and his continuing interest in the kind of monastic life which reached out to the wider community in an original way. An experiential knowledge of the transcendent is for Griffiths profoundly Trinitarian. It acknowledges spiritual interdependency, the reality of communion. The idea of breaching new frontiers in the journey to/into ‘That which is at once wholly Other and the deepest centre of self, is grounded in a celebration of difference, in the belief/understanding that the Word profoundly present in all creation and uniquely enfleshed, confers value on all life.

On the flight between Chenei and Frankfurt I met a German lawyer, who was engaged both in such ‘outreach’ and ‘celebration.’ Due to retire this year and anticipating a new role as advisor to the United Nations in Ethiopia, he had just completed yet another interesting ‘holiday’ project. His extra-curricula interest was visiting various countries (his favourite being Burma) where he gathered shots of cultural and religious interest with an old-fashioned (though according to him particularly good) camera. On his return to Bavaria, he would spend three weeks writing up an analytical reflection of his experience. Then he would call together his customary interested party and give his report. As he shared with me some detailed (also impassioned and poetical) descriptions, I envied his marvellous retention of fact and fine detail. (My video camera supplies for my lack in this area). In our conversation he impressed me as a deeply religious man, generous to a fault, with a well-tuned sense of humour. He shared with me the kind of insight he took back to his ‘group.’ He described his observation of the Hindus who gathered for the extraordinary celebration when the ‘gods’ are taken out of the Temple and placed in ‘vehicles’ (huge wagons) to be paraded through the streets with great pomp and spectacle, accompanied by camels and elephants and so forth for the sake of the worshippers. At this time he could ‘feel’ the energy being received by or entering into the Hindus fully focused on the deity and wholly engaged in their chanting. One can imagine how this ‘nourishment’ would satisfy them when they resumed their ordinary lives. My adventuresome friend left me his card and, as with so many others we met on the pilgrimage, I hope to resume contact sometime.

While the idea of ‘journey’ suggests activity and geographical shift, the objective is the ‘still point.’ Griffiths would have agreed with Pascal’s observation: ‘All man’s (*sic*) troubles stem from a single cause: his inability to sit quietly in a room.’16 The ‘still point’ though is not to be confused with the idea of a vacuous emptiness. It is stillness-in-fullness, the place in the mind, heart and soul where all journeys meet, where all that is experienced as multiplicity ‘exists’ in potential and in cumulative transcendent ultimacy. This underlies Griffiths’ vision of a new global consciousness grounded in a revolutionary understanding of the vital necessity of the contemplative dimension in everyday living together with related insistence on the quality of community interaction. Dom Bede’s message, ‘always to transcend our divisions—religious, social, psychological, linguistic—the fragmented state of humanity—and recover the wholeness . . . the unity behind

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diversity'\textsuperscript{17} can be compared with Panikkar’s ‘cosmotheandric vision’ of ‘the three irreducible dimensions of the divine, the human and the earthly’ which, existing as one in relation, ‘expresses the ultimate constitution of reality... constitutive of the whole, but flash(ing) forth, ever new and vital, in every spark of the real.’\textsuperscript{18}

In all there is a mutual indwelling: the earthly serves and is served by the human; the human serves and is served by the Divine. There is a rising to a greater complexity culminating in utter simplicity. Christians believe that this utter simplicity is love itself, the source and end of all. \textit{Bhakti} teaches a divinity which is loving but not ultimately love itself. For Indian theologians, \textit{Bhakti} exponents are sometimes suspicious and, particularly in the case of justice/ethically-oriented \textit{dalits}, even contemptuous of exponents of \textit{Advaita} which they regard as idealistic and elitist on account of its acceptance of the caste system. However, in terms of Griffiths’ and Panikkar’s theological views, these two areas of Hindu belief are no more lacking in promise of mutual positive effect than the world religions themselves. Griffiths proposes that ‘unselfish love’ is ‘one of the keys ... which can open up (the) deep centre... deep Self’ and that meditation, demanding surrender of the ego, is the way to unselfish love. This approach to communication with the transcendent is, for Griffiths, the way ‘to happiness and peace.’\textsuperscript{19}

We encountered both approaches on our journey. We made our way to Shantivanam Ashram taking in \textit{en route} Indian temples of great antiquity. This provided insight into the movement of the Holy Spirit among ancient peoples. We noted the magnitude of the entrance to impress upon the worshippers (as it was explained) that they were entering a place concerned with a greater reality. In comparison, we had to bend to enter the \textit{Ghatabriha},\textsuperscript{20} the inner sanctum, where the priests dispensed cultic blessings and chanted prayers of advocacy for the Hindu adherents who were present. Griffiths points out that this symbolized the inner ‘cave of the heart,’ the entry to which is humility. On the other hand, later at Udagamandalam we encountered on one walk along the mountainside (not far from the luxury of our hotel which 100 years ago served as a summer hill-station home for one ‘Lady Maby’) the direst poverty we experienced in India. In this freezing cold place—in early March India is still coming out of its winter—perched on the side of the hill was a small village set amongst piles of garbage down one side of the track, huts of rough wood gathered from the nearby forest, kids barefoot and lightly clothed running out to get us to take their photos, and a young dad coming quietly out of the forest with a load of firewood on his shoulders. Correspondingly, here I was most sensitive to the quintessentially human faith in a transcendent reality that I subsequently experienced. Moreover, I also experienced the devotional faith of the people, \textit{Bhakti}, expressed in gracious trust and friendliness. We entered the forest where the late afternoon light was dim, filtered through dense stands of the imported Eucalyptus trees and native shrubs and firs. As we walked, my eyes were attracted to a bright colour. On a wide flat rock beside my feet next to the path, tiny marigolds had been arranged in a pattern like concentric circles and, just as I noticed the little picture of Shiva propped up above the marigolds at the edge of the rock and registered this was a shrine, there was a movement of colour among the trees and a woman appeared. Any shyness or embarrassment I might have felt was dispelled at

\textsuperscript{17} Shirley Du Boulay, \textit{Beyond Darkness} (London: Rider, 1998), 252.


\textsuperscript{19} Doug Conlan, \textit{Wisdom of a Prophet}, 4.

\textsuperscript{20} The Sanskrit word for ‘womb-house.’
once by her gracious friendly smile. I greeted her hesitantly, and we moved away leaving her dignified and graceful, clad in a yellow and red sari, to continue gathering wood. I was deeply touched—surely this poor mother gathering firewood, with her gentle manner and welcoming smile standing beside her place of worship was profoundly held in the embrace of a loving God.

Serenely set amongst shrubs and vines at Shantiwanam there are four tombs side by side. Here one can reverence the last resting place of l’Abbé Jules Monchanin, Père Henri le Saux (today better known as Abhishiktananda),21 Dom Bede Griffiths and Swami Amaldas. Together they symbolise the interdependent relationship between the everyday devotional dimension of Christian and Hindu faiths and the interior one.

While Griffiths was somewhat disappointed in Abhishiktanda’s seeming disinterest in the Ashram and eventual complete absorption in the Hindu experience of Advaita, Jacques Dupuis points out what he considers to be the real value of this man’s radical living out in himself ‘the symbiosis of the two traditions, the Hindu and the Christian, in so real a way that both became part of himself.’ The experience of what Abhishiktananda calls ‘two forms of a single ‘faith’,’ Dupuis understands to be a prophetic witness to the kind of existential encounter possible in inter-religious dialogue in the “marriage of East and West” and ‘in full respect of their differences and without lurking ambiguity.’22 It echoes Gautama Buddha’s sentiments on ‘travel’: ‘in order to travel the path, you must become the path.’23 Although it can be seen to be interpreted differently in respect of personality and situation, it is the underlying principle for ‘pilgrimage.’

My research includes the grasp of Derrida’s concept of ‘radical hospitality’ whereby ‘the other’ is welcomed no matter how, what or when as the goal to strive towards. It is more than a matter of ‘ethics’—a striving ‘within justice for a better justice’ which is a movement beyond set morality containing always the sense of incompleteness.24 It is this kind of a challenge which Griffiths encountered following the Golden String. His journey involves a personal intuition that what is perceived as ‘other’ will be discovered to be not radically so.25 Can he be said to be the kind of theologian Barnes is referring to when he speaks of ‘the task of telling the Good News of God’s own act of welcome and hospitality… in all its complexity and most unlikely manifestations?26

It is relevant to point out that The Rule of St Benedict written one and a half centuries ago includes ‘this happy state’ of humility, and hospitality whereby each

21 Meaning, the bliss of Christ. [Fr. Monchanin is buried in France. Someone has brought some objects used by Monchanin, and it is what is put in the so called tomb of Monchanin. Fr. Bede is buried here. Swami Abhishiktananda’s body was buried in Indore, but the body was brought from there and buried here.]
23 Gee, Journeys.
25 It is interesting to note that as far back in 1790, in his anonymously published ‘In Vindication of the Hindoos,’ ‘Hindoos’ Stuart, an Englishman employed by the East India Trading Company had written, ‘Whenever I look around me, in the vast region of Hindoo Mythology, I discover piety in the garb of allegory: and I see Morality, at every turn, blended with every tale, and, as far as I can rely on my on my own judgement, it appears the most complete and ample system of Moral Allegory that the world has ever produced…(the Vedas were)…written at that remote period in which our savage ancestors of the forest were perhaps unconscious of a God; and were, doubtless, strangers to the glorious doctrine of the immortality of the soul, first revealed in Hindostan,’ in William Dalrymple, White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India (London: Flamingo, 2003), 48.
26 Barnes, Theology and the Dialogue of Religions, 21.
stranger ‘should be received just as… Christ himself’ as traits recommended for practice for our earthly pilgrimage that are perfectly exemplified in the Divine Pilgrim.

Shantivanam exemplified this kind of hospitality. It would be the prototype I think if one were considering founding such a place of contemplative prayer in a country other than India. It is inclusive and yet outward focused, with a number of projects flowing from the life of prayer to benefit the local poor. So the spiritual energy which is generated through contemplative prayer benefits many others in practical ways besides what is ‘hidden in God’ on a spiritual dimension. One actually becomes vaguely aware of this as one drives closer to Saccidananda Ashram: there is a certain elevation in morale; the houses are better kept and painted; the people walk with fresh energy…

The journey joined me in agreement with the artist, Ken Done: ‘When you travel, your mind can too. When all the world can travel, the world will be a better place.’ This in itself could be considered as an ethical question and a point of justice!

Before we set out I had singled out a few other points of inquiry. What was the situation in Shantivanam now that its charismatic guru had been gone these past ten years? How does this relate to Osage Monastic Ashram (known as ‘Shantivanam of the West’) in Tulsa, USA, shaped by the Shantivanam experience of its foundress, Sr Pascaleine Coff, a Benedictine Sister of Perpetual Adoration? How do they relate to Kurisumala Monastery? How different were they from the English and Scottish Benedictine Monasteries which had a key formative role in Griffiths’ life as a monk? Would I have the opportunity to compare the Camaldolese Monastery at Big Sur? What do these places of contemplative prayer have in common? Could they possibly hold a key to the present puzzle of contemporary Christian communities? It was a puzzle Griffiths was trying to solve right up to the time of his death.

There is opportunity here to reflect on a few things learned. In Osage monastery the most profound connection significant for this study is the image of the Osage Indian Sundance Circle. This symbol, so central to the beautiful worship space and its community life in general was integrative; it made me more clearly aware of the possibilities of Bede Griffiths’ vision for communities of people, lay and ordained, for different peoples and cultures. Also relevant is the habit common to all the monasteries of corporate silence during the day, including certain meal-times. We found that there is something intimately communitarian in the monastic habit of taking meals together in silence. Others on retreat commented that friendship seems to be deepened through such a communitarian experience.

At Prinknash monastery, the Abbot demonstrated a deep appreciation for Griffiths’ contribution when, in referring to his ‘special calling,’ he called Dom Bede ‘a bridge.’ By this he acknowledged Griffiths’ classic work, The Marriage of East and West, and his later engagements with the new science and the lay church. On the wall of the chapel of the new abbey was a large painting of the Resurrection with Christ framed in the spread feathers of a peacock. It was painted by Fr Gabriel (a much loved member who had died just a year ago and who had also designed the chapel stained-glass windows as well as a set at Pluscarden depicting ‘The Visitation’). We discovered that the peacock is a symbol with universal significance particularly for immortality. In Hinduism it is the vehicle of one of the deities. In India I had bought a small oil lamp—made for domestic use—and at the top is a brass peacock. I was immediately drawn to this picture in an English monastery which demonstrates how such symbols can be a means for inter-religious dialogue.

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27 Gee, Journeys.
Plascarden monastery was Griffiths’ final residence in Great Britain. Here he was sent as novice master for two years prior to his departure for India. It was here—just at the start of this Benedictine foundation and the great work of restoration with so much energy put into projects such as roofing, restoring windows and planting gardens—that Griffiths wrote *The Golden String*. To come out of the cold from a snowy landscape and kneel in the apse of the medieval stone chapel warmed by the refracted light from large brilliantly coloured windows and the soft haze of incense is a joy. CD’s produced here witness to their devotion to liturgy and continual celebration in the Gregorian Chant. For the few days we were there, this daily liturgical celebration was a feast. It is hardly a ‘museum piece’ as someone later suggested! Many people come, individually and in groups, for retreats or simply to regularly celebrate week-day and Sunday Mass. This monastery has managed to bring out, shine up and share with great generosity something ‘good,’ though ‘old’ out of the ‘store-room’ of the Christian prayer tradition.

In California, on account of the hospitality extended to us by the Salesians in the Don Bosco house in San Francisco, we were able to visit the Camaldolese monastery of the Incarnation—which is strictly cenobitic—and the isolated eremitic counterpart on the mountain at Big Sur. At Incarnation Monastery we met Arthur, a priest-artist well known for his paintings which are an integration of organic and transcendent—to me suggestive of Van Gogh, pointillism and Aboriginal dot paintings. At Big Sur in response to my question whether the incorporation of Shantivanam into the congregation had been negative in any way, Dom Robert Hale spread his arms and smiled widely, saying, ‘Oh, no, Shantivanam has enriched us.’

I had received ethics approval to make a video during the pilgrimage which could accompany the completed thesis. It is experimental but should prove to be a resource for sharing later on. Central to this video are the English, Scottish, Indian and American monasteries inspired by St Benedict, and also the Salesian house in Berkeley, which graced us with their hospitality and converted us more deeply to Christian community and the way of contemplative prayer as befits the lay vocation. Just as Griffiths emphasised the ‘dynamic network of interdependent relationships’ reflected in the new science and its relevance for a cosmic theology, the recognition of which can be a source of healing, so this journey has been a way of experimenting with and even incorporating in some measure into our own life a concept basic to Griffiths’ mature work.

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