

# Hope in the Midst of the Mess: Dom Bede Griffiths, Inter-Religious Dialogue, Contemplative Prayer and Implications for Practical Theology

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**Abstract:** *Inter-religious dialogue is nothing new in the field of theological exchange. Moreover, it is accepted as particularly relevant in the area of 'Practical Theology.' Neither is contemplation, the goal of the spiritual or rather Christian life, new in the field of theological exchange, although some may argue it has less relevance in the particular domain labelled Practical Theology. This paper supports the proposal of Dom Bede Griffiths OSB Cam that, for our era, inter-religious dialogue is a Christian duty, not an option. He also insists that the contemplative experience is a necessary dimension of Christian life, indeed all human life. If this is true, what are the implications for theology and, in particular, a practical theology?*

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**Key Words:** interreligious dialogue; contemplation; practical theology; Bede Griffiths; metaphor; metonymy; synecdoche; irony

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Recently Barry Jones<sup>1</sup> was interviewed on *The 7.30 Report* in regard to his latest book. He inferred (as others no doubt have) that the nightmarish image in Yeats' apocalyptic poem, *The Second Coming* is evocative of our present times.

Griffiths'<sup>2</sup> ideas are comparable but he describes a hope for the new epoch into which he sees humanity moving through the chaos, dislocation and seeming disintegration of these times of transition. The vision on which this hope rests is presaged in the growth of a global consciousness that hinges on an altogether new global openness to 'the other'. In religious terms, Griffiths sees dialogue between exponents and devotees of different religions as critical, as vital for growth and development. The life of faith presupposes a thinking position.

Karl Rahner described all people of Christian faith as theologians in that having faith induces intelligent reflection on that faith which continues through life. My understanding is that people are designated 'theologians' when this takes on a public, professional direction. 'Practical theology' is to be understood in this public, professional sense. Some

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.alp.org.au/people/jones\\_barry.php](http://www.alp.org.au/people/jones_barry.php). Barry Jones, teacher, lawyer, politician, writer and broadcaster, in 1950 joined the ALP and was national president from 1992-2000. He is author of *Sleepers, Wake!* (1982), *Dictionary of World Biography* (1998), and his autobiography, *A Thinking Reed* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Dom Bede Griffiths was born Alan Griffiths in 1906 and died in Shantivanam, Tamil Nadu, Southern India in 1993.

may find 'practical theology' a redundant idea, considering all theology has its practical dimension. It's understandable. Schneiders recommends a synthesis. Speaking of Christian spirituality as a 'moment integral to theology', she quotes Rahner, 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all...only a theology...rooted in the spiritual commitment of the theologian and oriented toward praxis will be meaningful to the Church of the future.'<sup>3</sup> Pointing to the foundation of all theology in the experience of the Divine Mystery, Bede Griffiths notes that far earlier, the 4th century Christian monk Evagrius taught that all true theologians are contemplatives and all true contemplatives are theologians.<sup>4</sup> This understood, I believe it is quite legitimate to have this organization which emphasizes and focuses its theological deliberation on the specifically 'practical' dimension of theology. My topic is relevant for this area because it underlies the concrete building up and details of daily living out Griffiths' mature vision for lay contemplative communities.

This vision came more and more to under gird Griffiths' strong hope; but he predicted that if people of faith (in particular the Catholic Church) did not enter with courage into dialogue with other religions and make necessary changes in structures, the results would be catastrophic on a global level.

As regards change in Church structure which Griffiths sees as vital, (though not necessarily inevitable), more than a decade after his death, one is aware of difficulties. For example, seeds of conflict in direction strangely seem to be embedded in the conciliar documents as unexamined and obviously unresolved inconsistencies. At the ACTA conference recently in Adelaide, Fr Ormond Rush proposed, 'some distinctions in terminology for interpreting the 'contradictory pluralism' of *Lumen Gentium* and its juxtaposition of classical and innovative theses regarding the various participants in the teaching office of the church'.

Such pressing needs of our times bear on the argument presented here that is part of my 'work in progress', the thesis being Dom Bede Griffiths' Images of God, elaborated from the Pilgrim God, and Griffiths' mature theology of Complementarity. In defining Griffiths' concern, I explore his wider image of 'journey' using the dialectical application of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony.

### *Metaphor*

Firstly, Metaphor is engaged in applying 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage' to the journey to/into God in direct reference to Griffiths' '*Christ is the golden string.*' This image is constitutive of his evolving theology throughout his life.<sup>5</sup>

Griffiths assumes this metaphor as being symbolic of his life, from the 19th century poet and mystic William Blake.<sup>6</sup> For Griffiths, Christ, 'the golden string', is most fully present in the Sacraments to the Christian person who is 'on the way.' The gate is faith, but

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra Schneiders, 'Spirituality and the Academy' in Hanson, B.C. *Modern Christian Spirituality Methodological Historical Essays* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Leutkemeyer, *Osage Monastery*, Sand Springs, OK 1994. (As a Benedictine monk, Griffiths would have been well aware of the influence of Evagrius on Benedict).

<sup>5</sup> He chose this image, *The Golden String*, as the title for his first book, an autobiography. In this sense, metaphor is used in its wider meaning, as demonstrated in Mary Veling's 'Classic and Contemporary an Hermeneutical Exploration of Trinity', *AEJT, October, 2006*, citing Bernard Lee, "mediates experience in the very moment of the origination of experience."

<sup>6</sup> The image is from Blake's poem, *Jerusalem*.

once inside 'the heavenly city' all this is left behind, dogma, rules and sacraments are no longer necessary in the direct experience of God.<sup>7</sup>

Griffiths' heavily nuanced use of this image shows journey as pilgrimage both as exterior and interior movement involving the soul in states and stages of transcendence. Multivalent, it describes on the one hand a movement in space and time at an individual level or a communal level but in any case with a communal dimension; on the other hand it means entry into states of being which ultimately are beyond place and time. Physical journey, particularly the journey of pilgrimage, effects change, at the very least opens the mind and heart to the possibility of change.<sup>8</sup> Physically making a pilgrimage requires an initial dispossession of material goods and pre-conceived notions along with a readiness for and expectation of change in the hope of encounter with the sacred, and spiritual transformation.

While for a religion such as Buddhism, pilgrimage is central, Christian Benedictine spirituality, on the other hand has 'stability', virtually remaining in the same monastery, being a core principle of their way. This introduces an anomaly in Griffiths' particular monastic career, an entrancing and provocative ripple or crinkle that hints at a hidden pull, something unexpected and surprising that offsets any tendency towards stasis and perhaps throws light on his constant reiteration of the need always to 'go beyond'.

This is thought provoking when we consider that journey is integral to the foundation myths of the world religions. We read in the Hebrew Bible, 'my Father was a wandering Aramean,'<sup>9</sup> that can refer both to Abraham and Jacob. We know of the wanderings of Siddhartha Gautama before his enlightenment under the Bodi tree and further wanderings of the Buddha throughout India and thence to the classical Buddhist heart-land of Sri-Lanka. With Mohammad, the key event of Islamic history begins with the 'flight' (*hijrah*) from Mecca to Medina and the triumphant later return to Mecca where resides the canonical centre of all Muslim pilgrimage, the black rock enclosed in the Kaba. In Hinduism, there is the initial Aryan journey, and then the risis departure into the forest and the journeys of the Mahabarata. Finally there is the sending forth of Christ from the Father, whose will encompasses Jesus' fatal journey to Jerusalem, his resurrection and return to God in glory. Nor can we omit the missionary journeys of Paul whose own transformation came about while on route to Damascus. These journeys are co-extensive with spiritual transcendence, and change of consciousness.

There is something about going on a journey that taps primordial well-springs in the human psyche. Early on, Griffiths had had a keen interest in these subterranean store-houses and the writing of Jacques Maritain with its explication of the 'poetic intuition' and the superior authority of non-rational knowledge was familiar to him from his Oxford days. An early numinous experience sparked more than a little interest in the philosopher's assertion that

'(f)ar beneath the sunlit surface...are the sources of knowledge and creativity, of love and supra-sensuous desires....(is) the existence of an unconscious or preconscious which pertains to the spiritual powers of the human soul and to the inner abyss of personal freedom.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bede Griffiths. *The Golden String*. 2nd ed. (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1982), 185, 186.

<sup>8</sup> Bet Green, 'Dom Bede Griffiths and God of the Journey', *Australian Ejournal of Theology, Pentecost 2006 Special Edition*. [http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_7/green.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/green.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5. This verse was recited from ancient times at the presentation of the first fruits in the Temple.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (London: Harvill, 1953), 94.

The awakened interest in the spiritual in nature and continued inquiry into the deepest recesses of the human spirit fuelled long conversations with tutor and mentor, C.S. Lewis.<sup>11</sup> Round this time, Griffiths had walked off with two student friends into the wilds of the Cotswold Hills as an experiment in alternative living. There he began to experience how these same depths, the sacred territory moulded and engraved through the multiform touch of sensory experience also mediated contemplative experience.

To begin with, it was an intellectual resistance to the ravages of industrialization that motivated the three young graduates, and their search was profoundly philosophical. Having ventured out into the isolated hilly countryside the developing intensity of their return to basics and related asceticism became increasingly instinctual and prayerful and with the discovery of the power of the Word of scripture, the whole came to be remembered and savoured as a unique kind of pilgrimage. Later Griffiths observes of ancient symbolism for 'our life in this world (which) is a journey towards God', '...always there is the laborious approach to the sacred place where the encounter with the divine mystery is to take place'.

Such transformative experience related to a journey and evocative of pilgrimage can be seen in various types of literature. For example, in 1963 an illustrated account in Italian (later translated into English) was published of a 1958 journey to the Hindu Kush by a group of explorers and mountaineers. It was written by one of the party, Fosco Maraini. He describes their final encounter with the remnants of a once strong Kafir culture<sup>12</sup> in a hidden valley the entrance being through a high gorge. He writes:

By the end of any expedition one is, almost inevitably, reduced to the condition of a wandering beggar. A cooking-pot lost yesterday, a pair of socks today, a pocket-knife tomorrow...you end up by living rather as do those Indian *sadhus* whose only possession is a begging-bowl. What is more, this progressive liberation from the burden of objects leaves one with a great sense of calm relief, a kind of cosmic buoyancy.<sup>13</sup>

There is evidence that pilgrimages were made in Megalithic<sup>14</sup> times and associated with earth centres of magnetic intensity. There were places of pilgrimage for the Celts, Egyptians and Greco-Romans,<sup>15</sup> while in India shrines and temples (the focus of endless pilgrimages) contribute to a sense of sacred space that permeates the whole sub-continent, as was observed by Griffiths and which endures even today for visitors as the extraordinary sacred symbolism of India, despite the encroaching western-style business and technology.

In the Forward of 2000 of a new translation of Hermann Hesse's 1920 *Siddhartha*, the translator, Kohn quotes Hesse' prophetic recognition of 'pangs of spiritual loss and the desire to cure them by means of a "journey to the east"':

....many are speaking of ....a new religion to come...Europe is beginning to sense that the one-sidedness of its intellectual culture...is in need of correction, a revitalization coming from the opposite pole....This is a general yearning for...a yogic capability.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The friendship continued throughout their lives despite some irreconcilable differences in belief.

<sup>12</sup> Before 1895, it is reported there were several hundred thousand of these 'Red' Kafirs. They were massacred and enslaved in 1895 by the Emir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan. Cited in Fosco Maraini. *Where Four Worlds Meet*. Trans. Peter Green (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964), 242

<sup>13</sup> Maraini. *Where Four Worlds Meet*, 270.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Gray, *Sacred Sites: Pilgrimage in Ancient Europe - Megalithic and Celtic Sacred Space* [http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Sacred\\_Sites/id/2323](http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Sacred_Sites/id/2323)

<sup>15</sup> Ian Rutherford, Department of Classics, FOLSS, University of Reading. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/events/conferences/enco/ancient>.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Hesse "Preface," in *Siddhartha* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), vii.

A 'yogic capability'? A means or technique to gain access to these hidden depths. There is no easy way. The presence of the Christian Ashram in India with the Sannyasi who acts as a spiritual guide reflects the same kinds of structures in Western contemplative communities and tells us that this is an interior journey fraught with its own perils that proceeds only in stages.

Almost a century later, we have a report<sup>17</sup> of the 'huge interest in pilgrimages' among the youth of Norway, only a minority of whom attend church and this seems for the author an indication that younger people are searching for a deeper meaning in life beyond the surface trivialities. The movement between 'poles' (comparable to Griffiths' concern for the integration of East and West) is intimated here where the report suggests such pilgrimage is a means of free expression of faith which Norway's natural reticence avoids.

What we are dealing with is the sacramental whereby the ordinary details of daily living are realised as vehicles for an encounter with a transcendent reality, or as mediators of the divine presence. However it is daily living understood in terms of a necessary journey along the way to ultimate fulfilment in the divine Mystery.

Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress* and the more ancient *Way of the Pilgrim* from the Eastern Orthodox tradition are examples of this enduring motif in the Christian tradition. Griffiths was deeply conversant with the Eastern tradition of interior prayer and it is the one he chose for his own pilgrimage in life. In his dying hours, his prayer was the repetition of the Russian pilgrim, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me - a sinner....' together with the joyful 'Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.'<sup>18</sup>

The metaphor of pilgrimage we have just been discussing therefore uses a word designating an age-old ritual to image the journey of the soul and all humankind to a final goal in God but also the creative outward journey of the divine from the transcendent source for the consummation of unity with humanity and all of creation.

### Metonymy

I now take the tool of Metonymy, substituting a word referring to an attribute, feature or quality for the thing that is meant, in order to chisel with attention to detail. An example of this device would be to say, 'What a day this has been', referring to the day's travel.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the Old French derivation of a day's travel when the light was available, is quite significant for journey in terms of a pilgrimage. Jesus words, 'Walk while you have the light so that the darkness may not overtake you'<sup>20</sup> can be interpreted as directed towards each person but most pertinently the faith community, who are expected to 'know the signs of the times,'<sup>21</sup> to be conscious of and in relationship with the Spirit of Wisdom as she is revealed in the history and daily life of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Griffiths says of Wisdom in conversation with Hindu *advaita* that it is

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<sup>17</sup> In Norway, says Gustav Erik Gullikstad Karlsauene, lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at NTNU. [http://www.ntnu.no/gemini/2001-06E/42\\_1.htm](http://www.ntnu.no/gemini/2001-06E/42_1.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Matus. *Bede Griffiths, Monk (1906-1993): The Universal in the Specific* (1994), 287.

<sup>19</sup> For the linguistic derivation of 'journey': from the Old French *journée*, meaning a day's traveling, and *day*, from the Latin *diurnalis* - the time when the sun's light is available, before the 'dying' of the sun. <http://www.collins.co.uk/wordexchange/Sections/DicSrchRsult.aspx?word=journey>

<sup>20</sup> John 12:35.

<sup>21</sup> See Mt 16:3.

<sup>22</sup> In the *Prologue to the Rule of St Benedict*, Benedict has 'Run, while you have the light of life.'

'the realization of the one Spirit in all. The centre of consciousness ...passes from the ego, the *ahankara* or I-consciousness, to the Self, the Spirit within, who is the real centre of our being. When we see everything in the light of the Spirit, we see the truth; when we see everything in the light of the ego, we are the victims of error and illusion.'<sup>23</sup>

Like Gandhi, whom he admired tremendously, Griffiths sees this special journey, the day-travel of our interaction with the Spirit as a self-surrender. The metonymic equivalent for journey as pilgrimage is surrendering up, the movement into total surrender to God. Further, again as with Gandhi, he understands 'total service of humanity' as being 'compatible with total surrender to God'. The external movement of the journey and the interior dimension are integrated. Furthermore this surrender, in Hinduism, *samatva* is the source of peace whether it is in the midst of failure or success. Griffiths makes the comparison with Ignatius Loyola's 'holy indifference.'<sup>24</sup>

This kind of self-surrender apparently synonymous with the human search (for God) may seem as if human effort is all important when in reality, 'it is God who is loving us and drawing us towards (Godself).'<sup>25</sup> This expands on the 'golden string' image. What is the basis of the rock foundation of that confidence all important for perseverance in the journey? For Christians at least, it rests on the revealed Word,<sup>26</sup> '...every one who asks receives, and ...who seeks finds, and to (they) who knock it will be opened' the prayerful conviction that the Giver is standing waiting and ready with the gifts; the Divine object of the search is already lighting the way; standing the other side of the door eagerly anticipating the knock.

Indeed, the emphasis on Benedictine hospitality in Griffiths' own life is well and truly grounded in this 'surrendering up'. But it is a surrendering in the first place on the part of the Divine Mystery.<sup>27</sup> Through their different symbols, Christian, Jewish and Muslim mystics convey an experiential knowledge of God which like Hinduism speaks of a movement or journey out from the divine or transcendent source and a return.<sup>28</sup> Moreover they express this creative impulse deriving from a Divine ardor. All religions can at a mystical level of insight speak of a pilgrimage out from the transcendent origin with an originating impulse of dispossession through creative ardor whether it is expressed in the sense of Self-condensation, Self-immolation, Self-spending –diminishing or giving-away.

Griffiths insists there is 'no difference' with regard to the Hindu and Christian views of God as both immanent and transcendent. 'We are all members of a cosmic whole...Our

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<sup>23</sup> Bede Griffiths. *River of Compassion* (New York: Amity House, 1987 ), 232.

<sup>24</sup> Griffiths. *River of Compassion*, 32, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Griffiths. *River of Compassion*, 227.

<sup>26</sup> *The Rule of St Benedict*, Ch 19, ('God is present everywhere') and 53, ('Any guest... should be received...as we would receive Christ himself').

<sup>27</sup> Self-surrender can be seen to be constitutive of divinity. Christian theology expresses this as love in relationship, epitomized or, more significantly, incarnated in the Christian absolute symbol, Jesus Christ. In *River of Compassion*, Griffiths explains the difference between the *Gita* and the *Advaita Vedanta* interpretation such as that of *Shankara* - because it only appears that Brahman acts, a person must go beyond karma, beyond action to reach God. In the *Gita*- though eternally inactive, God always acts. As the action in the world derives from One who is immutable, it is intuited and theologically interpreted as sacrifice and clearly this is significant for Christians.

<sup>28</sup> This is more pronounced in Christian theology and Jewish mysticism but is also found in the mystic writing of Ibn al-Arabi. In *A History of God*, 237, Karen Armstrong shows how the Muslim mystic stressed the pathos, the longing of God which brings forth into existence the whole of the cosmos and human beings, *logoi*, God's self-expression. <http://www.necessaryprose.com/armstrong.htm>

only true Self is our Self in God.’<sup>29</sup> ‘Journey’ in this respect becomes an image of depth and density. It includes Aquinas’ idea of ‘connaturality.’<sup>30</sup> In his exploration of the Hindu concept of Advaita<sup>31</sup> and the interior journey to the Self, the *Atman*, Griffiths describes the human spirit, Francis de Sales’ ‘fine point of the soul’, (the nous or intellectus) comparable to the Hindu concept of the *Buddhi*.<sup>32</sup> It is at this point that the Spirit of God and the human spirit meet, where the human spirit is open to realization of the divine ground of being, the Self. He understands ‘connaturality’ as describing that principle common to all humanity as a primordial intuition of this innate taste for the divine.

However, this universalist perspective was for Griffiths based on the concrete specificity of the life of the monastic community. Thomas Matus<sup>33</sup> writes that for Griffiths, being grounded and centred in the daily round of prayer, manual labour, domestic tasks and recreation ‘were as much synonyms for being universal as they were for meditation and contemplative prayer.’<sup>34</sup> Griffiths himself speaks of the chanting in choir being for him, ‘the bridge between the cosmos and the Absolute.’<sup>35</sup> In the community, representative of the world, where he experiences his own and his community’s limitations, he is called to surrender up his own will in faithfulness to the times of common prayer and the requirements of hospitality. It is in the midst of this interplay of the universal and specific that he expresses his sense of the urgent need of a marriage of East and West and responds to a request to start a foundation in India. This means a difficult leave-taking and the painful process of requesting Rome for temporary exclaustation for the interim travel and misunderstanding attendant upon such an irregular step.

The journey to India, the geographical move corresponding with a psychological shift demands of him a deeper degree of conversion and self-surrender. An authentic dialogue – that of equals impels Griffiths to exchange what had seemed like the accoutrements of poverty for the most basic of material goods, giving up his monk’s robe and the simple furniture of his cell for the way of the *sannyasi*, saffron *kavi*, bare-foot, food taken with the hand, seated on the ground.

Correspondingly, the interior way of surrender led him to deeper simplicity. His conviction of the need for a synthesis of ideas among world religions was not to suggest any kind of collapsing together of the different religious beliefs which are contingent on culture, but that all faiths, each operating in accord with its own Absolute Symbol, have their share of truth by which all are meant to profit. All are pilgrims on the way to the one Divine Mystery, which in its profoundly intimate relationship with the whole of the

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<sup>29</sup> Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 261.

<sup>30</sup> Griffiths illustrates how in Aquinas’ thought in spite of his delineation of ‘connaturality,’ the source of knowledge is through logical reason. Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983), 153. To me this is justifiable in view of the Aquinas’ later contemplative experience that motivated his words that all he had written was ‘but straw’.

<sup>31</sup> Griffiths constantly insists that in contrast to pure Advaita, Christian mystical experience speaks ultimately of unity in multiplicity. God is One but holding all within that oneness. The experience is one, total union yet distinction. Taken from AEJT, Bet Green, [A Pilgrim God with a Pilgrim People](#). Griffiths points to the Buddhist experience described by Lama Govinda for comparison. Rather than the image from pure Advaita of the drop dissolving in ocean, Lama Govinda speaks of the ocean ‘slipping into’ the drop. Citing Trapnell, 394.

<sup>32</sup> Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Father Thomas Matus OSB Cam teaches at Sant’Anselmo College in Rome.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Matus. *Bede Griffiths, Monk*.

<sup>35</sup> *The Golden String*.

cosmos has dispossessed itself and pilgrimages with and in humanity. Self-giving, self-surrender is constitutive of the Divinity.<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere, I have followed the thought of Bob Plant and Michael Barnes concerning the cutting edge, the point of growth, the place where things are alive and happening where the risk of alterity exists, where that which is different even 'other' is encountered and engaged in dialogue in a spirit of courage. So, for people of faith this is no mere option but vital for the sake of integrity. Faith discomforts. Griffiths is uncompromising, 'It is a vital need of the Church that we should enter into dialogue with other religions – I see no future for the church apart from this. It can only survive as a ghetto religion as Judaism did, unless it opens itself to the truth contained in the Scriptures and living traditions of other religions.'<sup>37</sup>

The metonymic use of surrendering up applied to journey as pilgrimage has brought us to the confrontational issue of commitment to and engagement in inter-religious dialogue as non-negotiable. Does Griffiths suggest steps of approach?

### *Synecdoche*

By way of response, I now employ synecdoche. This is a figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole or the whole for a part.<sup>38</sup> To journey as pilgrimage I apply Griffiths' particular use of the image of the horizon. The pilgrimage of life can be imaged as horizons. As in the hymn familiar to many The Galilee Song, horizons surmounted give rise to others. The passing from horizon to horizon corresponds to the stages of self-transcendence.<sup>39</sup> Griffiths' constant reiteration of the need 'always to go beyond' is central. Ultimately the horizon is for Griffiths the promise of advaita.<sup>40</sup> For Griffiths this is consonant with the mystical teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of John 17:21. Beyond the apparent, on the other side of this material reality in the world which is passing away is the experience of unity with God. It is especially meaningful that in the midst of this life's pain and suffering, the horizon gives hope.

There are no words to express that which is finally 'the Beyond', the Godhead, or *nirguna brahman*. It is 'the One beyond all...beyond thought altogether...beyond concepts.'<sup>41</sup> It is described as *neti neti*, 'not this, not this'. Revelation of this One, communicated through the power of the non-rational mind, is always conveyed symbolically. Griffiths draws attention to the divine revelation to Julian of Norwich of 'all that is' as an object in the palm of her hand the size of a hazel nut.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in the mystical tradition of Eastern religions, the One immanent in all the vast cosmos is ultimately wholly 'other' wholly transcendent.

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<sup>36</sup> Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> 16 October 1984.

<sup>38</sup> Collins online dictionary:

<http://www.collins.co.uk/wordexchange/Sections/DicSrchResult.aspx?word=synecdoche>

<sup>39</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A Human Search: Reflection on My Life* (Ligouri, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1997), 132.

<sup>40</sup> There has been some difference in judgment as to whether the 8th century Hindu mystic *Shankara's* experience and explanation of this final non-dualistic union with God meant that all material existence as *maya* was pure illusion. However, Griffiths came to believe that *Shankara* properly interpreted meant *maya* as illusion only in the sense of the way material existence is perceived by those who have no faith in a spiritual reality.

<sup>41</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1992), 201.

<sup>42</sup> Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 200.

For Griffiths, the 'only way' to overcome the conflict and violence of present times is for humanity 'to go beyond the limits of each religion and realize the transcendent mystery which is manifest in all of them...we're all pilgrims on a journey to the beyond...'<sup>43</sup> The present status of humanity demands that all religions re-examine their religious symbols. Mutual sharing may lead to re-expression of the symbolic content and avoid a cloying effect from those symbols which have lost their meaning, have virtually died. The journey is not as separate individuals but as one humanity. It is moreover the journey of the entire cosmos which is 'connected in a wonderful way' and he quotes Francis Thompson,

Move but a wing  
And disturb a star.

Griffiths draws attention to the theology of Rahner whom he regarded as having extraordinary mystical insight. In his 'Theology of the Symbol' written in the 50's, Rahner describes the differentiation within unity as 'an ontological ultimate.'<sup>44</sup> That every being must express itself as an other is necessary for fulfilment. It correlates with the Eastern mystical experiential knowledge of the multiplicity held in the One and the One being present in all things. From present times, Griffiths uses the example of the hologram, a three dimensional image where each minutest component contains the whole.<sup>45</sup> He also indicates the ancient Hindu image of Indra's pearl necklace where the whole necklace is reflected in each part, in each pearl is reflected every other pearl and the whole.<sup>46</sup>

He insists that understanding, appreciating and celebrating the diversity of religions, sourced as they are in different cultures and linguistic systems is necessary for ultimate human fulfilment. Because of the very real differences, 'We have to evolve a consistent conceptual system by which we can interpret and integrate our experience of the transcendent'. It would be the basis of sympathy and synthesis. It is a synthesis that Griffiths points out has become evident in a whole variety of areas in the present era.

This has provided a unique opportunity for a new development in consciousness available to humanity. In conversation with the new science, he emphasizes Fritjof Capra's description of the cosmos as 'a dynamic web of interdependent relationships'. It is a sign that science has broken free of the Cartesian rational objectification of the material order and included in its ambit the primordial rhythms of a deeper pattern of life. It is reflected again in theoretical physicist, David Bohm's implicate order.<sup>47</sup> The material existence is explicated as the observable part of an implicated whole so that the whole of creation is unfolding as particular forms and structures. Also, Ken Wilber, a transpersonal psychologist describes the stages of development of the human psyche whereby each stage is transcended and replicated as a movement towards full integration in the whole. There is a new appreciation of the 'cosmic religion' of 'native' peoples such as the Australian Aborigines and the American Indians for whom 'everywhere there is this sense of a divine power and presence in the whole creation - in all matter, in all life, in all human beings.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Interview by Trapnell Wainsfield, Vt, Tape Recording, August 1992.

<sup>44</sup> Trapnell, 242.

<sup>45</sup> This is an example of Griffiths mature spirituality where the dialogue with religions is constantly being widened to include the inter-faith dimension.

<sup>46</sup> "Modern Physics and the Eucharist." Taped lecture (Shantivanam, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> "The universe was originally folded up fifteen thousand million years ago in a tiny point." "Modern Physics and the Eucharist."

<sup>48</sup> 'Cosmic Person Cosmic Lord,' Bede Griffiths' talk at *Human Potential* (St James's, Piccadilly, 1992).

To disregard the signs of the times, not to catch the tide at the height he predicted would amount to a negative focus on 'difference', a worsening of racial and religious violence, religious disintegration, eco degradation, and a growing threat of nuclear annihilation. In the end, Griffiths' contemplative experience in India and in particular his experience of personal integration barely two years before his death convinced him that the key to the impasse was to be found in lay contemplative communities.<sup>49</sup> These would be groups comprised of people from a variety of backgrounds, and connected with a religious monastic community, who would meet for discussion and most especially corporate contemplative prayer and then go back to their day to day activities inspired and energized to work wisely and effectively. Griffiths came to believe as he practiced the prayer of the presence of God that mindfulness was key and that action as prayer was as much a means to union with God as the monastic discipline.<sup>50</sup>

In all mystical traditions, there is no possible way to union with God other than transcendence of the ego, the self, the recognition of creation's, humanity's and every individual's utter dependence on the Divine Source. In the human journey to God Griffiths describes awareness of the horizon representing the veil between reality as we presently perceive it, and the full truth of 'the beyond' as a basis of mindfulness. He proposes that humanity can only go forward now through living out the kind of interdependency which has already become manifest at basic levels and which was always known by mystics. This would require a synthesis of non-rational and rational thought, through the light of contemplation, of religious truth through interreligious (and inter-faith) dialogue, and of prayer and action.

The goal is *saccidananda*, being, consciousness, bliss. Griffiths' Christian interpretation of this final experience of union with God as 'love in relationship' is often repeated. While 'horizon' on the one hand represents that which is always beyond, on the other, it is something which we as journey people are always exploring, that which is the source of exhilaration, which provides the wider view.

### *Irony*

This is irony, the use of words to imply something opposite, or irrational. And it is our final rhetorical category. Besides horizon, we can apply the other images here: the Pilgrim God is also the goal of the journey; surrendering up is to possess; to journey more deeply towards full humanity is to journey into God.

We have come the round to a better appreciation of Griffiths' profoundly incarnational, Eucharistic theology, which he has represented through his talks and writings as a theology for today. It is one of complementarity in regard to inter-religious dialogue and contemplation in action where contemplative experience is key.

Properly speaking, the Benedictine life does not distinguish 'contemplation' and 'action' but centres on a balance or integration of prayer, reading (*lectio divina*) and work in community. Differently from this, the monastic Ashram which Dom Bede helped to found in India incorporated a contemplative dimension,<sup>51</sup> observable in the sprinkle of separate little huts around the central chapel. It was in the final two years of his life that a

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<sup>49</sup> The community founded by St Benedict was originally a lay community patterned after the style of St Anthony of the desert's community.

<sup>50</sup> 'Higher than meditation is surrender in love of the fruit of one's actions. The commonest most universal way is the most profound.' Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 225.

<sup>51</sup> In point of fact, this is an example of inculturation and reflects the Indian emphasis on the interior journey with its beginnings in rishi's contemplative isolation in the forest, 4,000 years ago, that gave rise to the Vedas.

profound sense of the real integration of these two aspects came about. Letters of 1985 to Sr Pascaline Coff<sup>52</sup> indicate Dom Bede's intention to 'retire'. He thought his journey was near its end, he was weaker and his life would be mostly one of isolation in his hut in the forest. Little did he know!

Dominic Milroy OSB says, 'Benedictines suffer from a chronic identity crisis.'<sup>53</sup> Reading *The Benedictine Handbook* of 2003, it is clear there is a general uncertainty just where to slot Griffiths. Although Shantivanam,<sup>54</sup> was welcomed into the Camaldolese<sup>55</sup> congregation in 1993, there is no mention of the Camaldolese or of Indian Ashrams in the book's quite detailed description of the Benedictine Family and the little that is said of Griffiths' status is ambiguous. There is no negative criticism intended in this observation. Griffiths' transcribed and published talks and interviews and aspects of some of his writings are not always consistent. The journey he made and the transformative experiences he had were enormous. His ideas changed. Some of what he says is ambiguous. One has to correlate ideas and read between the lines. Jacques Dupuis<sup>56</sup> questions whether Griffiths' has 'distinguish(ed) the hidden reality of the Godhead from its manifestation in a personal God and, in Christianity, from its manifestation in the three divine persons', in such a way that is not 'altogether consonant with the Christian tradition'. For Dupuis, such parallels are 'somewhat elusive and difficult to handle'. In *A New Vision of Reality*, however, Griffiths clarifies his Christian viewpoint and he finds support in Ruysbroeck.<sup>57</sup>

'...one has entered into the Godhead and one knows in the light by the light. This is exactly how it is put in the *Upanishads* and in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where it is said that one knows the *atman* through the *atman*. God is grasped and held through God....we have our eternal archetype in God which comes forth forever from the Father in the Son and returns in the Spirit.'

Again,

'In the utterance of the Word which comes forth from the Father eternally the whole creation, the whole humanity...are present...this is what is meant by our uncreated being in the Godhead.'<sup>58</sup>

In Griffiths' view the profoundly conscious celebration of the Eucharist is for Catholic Christians a contemplative experience. 'The Mystical Body and the Eucharistic Body are one.'<sup>59</sup> The glorified body of the risen Christ (*res*) is present in the Eucharist (*sacramentum*). Through the Spirit the risen Jesus draws us into the Divine life. Surrendering up is sacrificial in the sense of out-flowing love which makes holy, and returns drawing all things together in unity.

Expanding the dialogue into the inter-faith dimension, Griffiths explores the mystery of the Eucharist (along with the resurrected and risen body of Christ) by an explanation of

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<sup>52</sup> One of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration who founded the Osage Monastic Ashram at Tulsa, O.K.

<sup>53</sup> *The Benedictine Handbook*, 328.

<sup>54</sup> 'Forest of Peace' – the Benedictine Ashram in Tamil Nadu on the bank of the sacred Cauvery River where Griffiths spent 27 years.

<sup>55</sup> The Camaldolese are a monastic and contemplative community, in the Benedictine tradition, with an emphasis on both solitude and community.

<sup>56</sup> Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997), 267, 268.

<sup>57</sup> He quotes Ruysbroeck, 'God utters himself in the Spirit eternally without intermediary and in this Word he utters himself and all things.' Griffiths, *A New Vision*, 248.

<sup>58</sup> Griffiths, *A New Vision*, 248.

<sup>59</sup> "Modern Physics and the Eucharist."

'fields of energy', not just material energy, but formal energy with an organizing principle, Rupert Sheldrake's 'morphogenetic fields of energy'. It reflects his anticipation of the new consciousness, at the centre of which is quantum theory's explication of the universe as 'a field of energy pervaded by consciousness'. This 'new consciousness', a discovery of 'the unitive consciousness which goes beyond dualistic awareness'<sup>60</sup> would be, as described above, powerfully integrative and creative. For Griffiths, this is the next stage to which humanity is being drawn. 'Every religion looks forward to a time when the end will come and the new birth will take place. So in a very wonderful way we are at the birth of a new age and a new consciousness.'<sup>61</sup> As the human being and consciousness of Jesus was assumed into the total divine reality, or in Hindu terms, *Satcidananda*, being, consciousness, bliss, so through the Holy Spirit, the whole of creation through humanity is being brought back to its source in God. Paradoxically, while we perceive according to time and space, in God all is the ultimate state - 'Now'. The world process through all races and religions has to be fulfilled for all 'to converge' finally on the One.

What is the significance of this for Griffiths' final vision for Christian community. A Christian ashram is lay community, a witness that all come from the silence of the Father and return to the silence.<sup>62</sup> It strives to live *koinonia*, the communion with the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit. This is a communion in love which epitomizes the goal of advaita that which is always 'beyond' and yet which is also the reality of the Church. Church is therefore essentially a mystical reality, materially present 'a movement in history...affected by all the social and historical conditions of the time' and so, a pilgrim, yet also an entity of the Holy Spirit where love exists in relationship and as such, the goal of the pilgrimage. Clearly, Griffiths understands that church in the world must be open to change and adaptation.

Griffiths emphasizes the monastic calling is universal. All are called to see within, acknowledge and accept their weakness, sin and limitation. To surrender the demands of the will, transcend the ego, to live for the other/others. This would mean to be pure of heart, disposed to contemplation. It is the way to personal integration and wholeness, the experience of oneness with all that is. Is Griffiths merely an idealist? His tone has the ring of the prophet. 'It's urgent. We must get beyond these terrible divisions which are destroying humanity. We are destroying the universe around us, the whole planet...We can never get over it as long as we remain on the physical or psychological level...'<sup>63</sup>

The best witness to judge the authenticity of Griffiths' message might be whether or not the transformation has taken place in his own life. This after all, has been the age-old test of private revelation. Griffiths did not retire to his hut in the forest. Instead an integrative experience in his eighties which he describes as a God hitting him on the head (others as a stroke) led to two years of constant journeying round the world. He produced two more books and went on tours giving talks in England, Germany, Canada, the US and Australia. People who expected to see a frail old man alight from the plane, were taken aback to see him energetically and cheerfully striding towards them.

Michael Casey OCSO describes in *Truthful Living* (2001) a 'surge in vitality that stems from a spiritual liveliness...Once the capacity to love is extended, sluggishness is overcome and a new dynamism is engendered. Like small children we have a surplus of energy...' According to St Benedict, this is in the context of love and it is true that Griffiths

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<sup>60</sup> "The New Consciousness," *The Tablet* (Jan 1993).

<sup>61</sup> "The New Consciousness."

<sup>62</sup> "The Ashram as a Way of Transcendence."

<sup>63</sup> "Spiritual Awakening" from a talk to the Mystics and Scientists conference.

who described his integrative experience as being 'overwhelmed by love', was in Benedict's terms, 'most intensely animated not by love of abstract goodness but by a personal love of Jesus Christ'.

Our treatment of journey began with physical travel, entered the interior dimension and has returned once again to the surface. This simple schema would be the pattern of Griffiths' hope for lay contemplative communities that they may constantly carry 'the light' uppermost in their minds. It is expressed in the Gayatri mantra the most sacred in the Vedas which is chanted in Shantivanam at the beginning of each prayer: 'Let us meditate on the splendour of that glorious light; may he illumine our meditation'. It is given to the Brahmin when he receives the sacred thread. For 'the universal monk', there is only one more word of advice, 'go, my son, go over the wide spaces of the earth, go to the beyond.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bede Griffiths, 'The Silence and the Solitude of the Heart: Communion with God.' Unpublished talk at Shantivanam. Edited by Roland Ropers, 1991. These are the words spoken by the guru at the conclusion of a sannyasi's initiation.