

**SLD07.01.07 13<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Dom Bede Griffiths**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Colossians 1:15-20**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**Father Bede Griffiths – “A Universal Heart”**

At my father’s funeral, the preacher said that his was a very big God. What he meant was that the God that my very Presbyterian, very devoted churchman and very preacher’s kid of a father worshipped was bigger than the church, bigger than reformed doctrine, bigger even than all the world religions rolled into one. As a career Air Force officer, my dad traveled all over the world the first half of his life, apparently learning along the way to recognize and appreciate God in many and diverse manifestations.

The saint we’re visiting this Sunday, (for our visitors – you’ve landed in the middle of a summer series on admirable holy ones we might learn from) – the saint we’re calling on today, Father Bede Griffiths, is also renown for the bigness of his God. In fact, Father Bede’s God was so big that the whole cosmos pulsed with the Trinity, and every religion, at its deepest core, pointed to the same God made manifest for us, and for Bede, in Christ Jesus.

Father Bede’s God was so big that the way he’d learned to understand God seemed a bit limited. A bit incomplete. A bit...lopsided... if you will. For Father’s Bede’s orientation, like most of ours, started out primarily defined by the world he was raised in, the church he was drawn to, the doctrine he was taught. Bede was raised at first by atheists, then drawn to the Church of England, then magnetized to the Roman Catholic church, world views all dominated by post enlightenment Western thought and practice, with its heavy emphasis on linear thinking, intellectual understanding, and the hierarchical and patriarchal pattern and history of the Christian church.

But Griffiths's inquisitive personality, adventuresome spirit, and perhaps, destiny, steered him in a different direction, in the opposite direction, I suppose we could say; in the direction and influence of *Eastern* thought, with its emphasis on intuition, experience, the senses and the feminine. Inexplicably, Griffiths found himself drawn to Jungian analysis, Yoga, and the study of the classic Indian scriptures. While his serpentine spiritual path began with reading literature at Oxford University in Cambridge, England, it ended in an ashram in southern India.

1955 was the year when everything conventional in Griffith's life would be left behind when Bede, eager, as he put it, "to find the other half of his soul," jumped at the opportunity to establish a Benedictine monastery in southern India. When he arrived on the subcontinent, Griffiths was struck, even more than by the staggering poverty, by the "profoundly religious atmosphere – what he later called 'a sense of the sacred' that seemed to permeate the air. To be sure he had come as a missionary – to help implant and witness to the gospel in a non-Christian culture. But what Griffiths soon discovered was that the secularized West had much to learn from India."<sup>1</sup>

Immediately Griffiths immersed himself in the study of Indian thought, exploring its possibilities for relationship with Christian theology. And the longer he studied the holy Vedas and Upanishads of the Hindu tradition, the more he was convinced that his mission was to witness to "the marriage of East and West," to facilitate an encounter between Western rationality and the intuitive spirituality that was so much a part of the Indian soul.

"In Kerala, Griffiths helped establish a monastic ashram – a community faithful to the monastic tradition, while adapting its form to Indian culture. Eventually he and the

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<sup>1</sup> All Saints, Robert Ellsberg, The Crossroads Publishing Co., New York, 1999. p. 549.

other monks left behind all the outer trappings of their Benedictine affiliation and adopted the appearance of sannyasi, or Hindu holy men. Instead of the traditional Benedictine habit, they donned the saffron robes of Indian monks, went barefoot, and like all poor Indians, sat and slept on the floor and ate with their hands.

“Griffiths experimented with yoga, meditation, and other Indian spiritual disciplines, and continued studying the Vedanta and other Hindu religious classics. His study confirmed his faith that Christ represented the fulfillment of the universal religious quest. But just as the church had discerned the mystery of Christ hidden in the religious history of Israel, so it was possible and necessary, Griffiths believed, to discover the face of Christ hidden within all the religions of the world. Christ, he believed, was already present in the Hindu soul, waiting to be discovered.

“At the same time, he believed the Hindu world had much to teach the West. India had preserved a religious depth, an appreciation of interiority, an understanding of wisdom, that was too often effaced in the Western culture. A true dialogue between East and West might help seekers in both cultures find their way to a deeper dimension of the faiths that drew them, perhaps even to a reality in which all religious paths might ultimately converge.

“In 1968 Griffiths helped establish Saccidananda Ashram, a new monastic community which was even more radical in its synthesis of Eastern and Western spirituality. Liturgies combined Christian prayers and reading from the Bible with readings from the Vedas and the Bhagavadgita. Meanwhile he produced a stream of books that brought wide global attention to his monastic experiments. In his later years, after a near fatal stroke, Griffiths also began to travel throughout the world, sharing the

wisdom of his experience and seeking to recall all Christians to a more mystical and contemplative brand of spirituality.” [At the age of 85, he also preached that life only really begins after 40, when spiritual powers begin to develop and transcend the capacities of mind and body, in preparation for the ‘flowering of the whole personality.’ I call that wise, don’t you?]

Instead of constricting into smaller and more precise doctrine, in the course of Griffiths’ lifetime, Father Bede’s God seem to become bigger and bigger until the Trinitarian Mystery became for him universally accessible through worship, through nature, through other faiths, but most of all through meditation and prayer. His attitude became one of surrender and observation, ever allowing the process to unfold without analysis or interference. For Father Bede, the act of being centered and grounded with a listening heart and an open mind provided the conditions for God to bring forth the fullness of God’s Word through silence and Self-reflection.

In Father Bede’s understanding, as in the testimony of the epistles, that divine fullness bursts forth in Jesus Christ. In Colossians Paul writes ...for in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. (Col. 1:19) And again, for in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have come to fullness of life in him. (Col. 2:9-10)

Albert Einstein remarked once that each “human being is part of the whole, called by us ‘universe,’ limited in time and space. (We) experience ourselves, says Einstein, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest...but this is a delusion.”<sup>2</sup> For Father Bede, this delusion is broken and connection with the universal Whole re-established through communion with Christ. The fullness of Christ becomes a

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<sup>2</sup> Bruno Barnhart, [www.bede-griffiths.com/wisdom-christianity](http://www.bede-griffiths.com/wisdom-christianity)

fullness in us when we “participate” in Christ through faith and baptism, and form a community in his name.

Does all this make sense to you? Do you understand what Paul and Einstein and Griffiths are talking about? Or does all this talk of a universal God and divine fullness and delusional separateness and Indian ashrams, and a Presbyterian sanctuary smelling of incense on a communion Sunday, sort of make you nervous.

This kind of language and thinking is a stretch for some of us, because most of us don't tend to think this way. The very term “cosmic consciousness” smacks of the bad hair, bad breath, and bangly beads of the 1960's, or worse, all the latter-day, cherry-picking New Age drivel with which we are surrounded today. But can we suspend our disdain for long enough to imagine the language Griffiths uses as simply an alternative way of “knowing?” A particular, more sensorial, way of knowing that differs from the purely objective knowing of the empirical sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine a kind of knowing that is highly intuitive, deeply loving, and profoundly participative, experiential – you feel it in your gut, you know it in your heart; something in you recognizes it as truth, even if you can't explain it.

Now relate that kind of knowing with your faith, to the places where scripture grabs you, where music lifts your heart, where the spoken Word speaks your truth, and somehow enlivens it. Center that knowing in Jesus Christ, in the mystery of Christ, in the welcome and acceptance and forgiveness and healing of Christ, and you're closer, perhaps, to a more Eastern understanding of contemplative union with God, of the interiorized Mystery of Christ, of the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the “new self” given in baptism.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.bedegriffiths.com/wisdom/christian-wisdom](http://www.bedegriffiths.com/wisdom/christian-wisdom), p. 1.

However foreign to our own personal experience, or to Reformed worship, for that matter, can you at least imagine the delight and joy of this kind of knowing; the gracious gift of it? Certainly both the disciple John and the apostle Paul could imagine it, experienced it for themselves, and frequently exalted the gifts of what might be called “Christian wisdom” in their writings. It’s not that such spiritual wisdom or experience is foreign to Christianity; it’s just that from the fall of the Roman Empire through the blossoming neo-classical rationalism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century through the materialism and corporate greed of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, mystery itself, never mind wisdom, became rather unfashionable in the western world.

Yet modern day Western Christianity continually finds itself confronted not only by the wisdom of the East – Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism - but by other wisdoms as well. Jungian and transpersonal psychology, modern art and poetry, tribal shamanism, hermeneutics, ecology and feminism, literary theory and the history of thought. On every side, as contemporary priest Bruno Barnhart remarks, the sharp edges of western consciousness are rounded and silvered by an invisible river of psyche and spirit.<sup>4</sup>

But the *Christian* wisdom tradition awaiting *rediscovery* by the West centers on what Barnhart calls the “Christ-Event,” the paschal mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the sort of “big bang” that got our fatih started in the first place, in the context of this larger, dynamic and interrelated world of reality.

In dedicating his life to the marriage of East and West, Bede Griffiths assisted in the rebirth of the fullness and vitality of Christian wisdom and its all-embracing language of mystery and love. In an age of interreligious dialogue, Griffiths stood in a category of his own, a living bridge between different cultures and religious paths. Ever rooted in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

his Christian tradition, yet Griffiths witnessed to a Truth that he believed was the object of all religious striving. Born Alan Richard Griffiths in 1906 of a British middle class family of Walton-on-Thames, Father Bede died in 1993 as Swami Dayananda, “barefoot and clothed in the color of the sun, in his thatched hut in Shantivanam in South India.”<sup>5</sup> “To the East he represented the face of Christianity stripped of the trappings of Western culture. To the West he issued a challenge to recover the contemplative and mystical dimensions of Christian faith.”<sup>6</sup> To you and me, well, perhaps he simply begs the question of just how big we’re willing to allow our God to be.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.bedegriffiths.com/biography.html](http://www.bedegriffiths.com/biography.html), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *All Saints*, p. 550.