Gazing through the sign: Bede Griffiths as a model for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue

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I hope today to point to Bede Griffiths as a model for interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. Unlike many who are engaged in interreligious dialogue today, Griffiths is different because of his unusual status. He was not an academic bound by the structures and rules of the academy. Though he was a Benedictine monk bound by the rule of community, his status in the Church was often awkward after he moved to India and founded an ashram. Unlike those of us in the academy who have to think about jobs, prestige, money, families, etc., Griffiths left everything, even his homeland in his pursuit of the mystery of God. Though most of us are not able to live such a radical life, it is important to keep this context in mind as we approach the study of this holy man. Of course, the downside of his detachment from the academy is that he was not always precise or consistent in his terminology. In his desire to look at the best parts of Hinduism vis-à-vis Christianity, he often did this to the exclusion of other interpretations of Hinduism, which contradict Christian doctrine and experience.

I would like to highlight 4 points which make Griffiths an exemplary model for interreligious dialogue and how we might adopt some of these in our own dialogue. These are not in any particular order, but I believe each of them is closely related to the others. After this I hope to raise some questions that might help us continue the dialogue in which Bede engaged.

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1 I owe special thanks to Prof. Brad Malkovsky who helped direct and shape this paper and without whose teaching I never would have written it. This is a shorter version of a longer, more detailed paper I submitted for a course. Since it was delivered orally, it lacks many of the original footnotes.
The first aspect I would like to point out is Griffiths’ emphasis on mystical experience and the sacramentality of language. Bede first came to faith through what we might consider a mystical experience in nature. Just as St. Paul’s conversion to Christ would shape the way he understood his faith and how he would proclaim it, so did Bede’s experience of God shape the way he approached his search for truth. Here we see the connection between mystical experience and the sacramentality of language. Anyone who has ever had such a mystical experience knows that it is difficult, if not impossible to describe it. No matter how hard one tries, the words cannot do justice to the experience itself. Anyone who has ever been in love or had a child knows that these kinds of love are unspeakable. In his dialogue with people of other religions, particularly Hindus, Bede came to realize that their mystical experiences were similar, if not identical. Yet they continued to express their respective faiths quite differently. As he said, “All religious teachings are a symbolic expression of a truth which cannot adequately be expressed.”

Different formulations are often, though not always, simply the use of other words that ultimately point to the same truth. In other words, though doctrines and experiences are expressed differently, they often point to the same reality beyond expression. Griffiths was not content with western intellectual traditions, and he sought to understand the faith through eastern traditions and language. As he said,

“The Christian message has to be rethought and restated in the language and thought forms of the people of India; it has to embrace the culture of India in all its richness and variety….Christianity has to become as deeply rooted in the culture of India as it once was in the culture of Greece and Rome.”

In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II likewise exhorted Christians, “In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements

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3 See, for example, his discussion about Buddhists’ belief or non-belief in God in *The New Creation in Christ: Christian Meditation and Community*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 62.
compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought.”⁵ Just as the early Church used Greek philosophical language to express, and thus shape, doctrines, so must we, according to Bede, use Indian ideas and language to understand, retranslate, and transpose the Christian faith for the people in India.

How did Griffiths come to the point where he realized that language, even traditional religious language is inadequate with regard to the mystery of God? He was initially drawn to the supernatural through his love of nature. Griffiths recounts his first religious experience at the beginning of his autobiography, *The Golden String,* ……Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.”⁶

He experienced a moment of overwhelming awe unlike any he had ever known. This initially led him away from religion, since he regarded his love of nature as something opposed to religious faith. After coming to faith, though, he was able to regard the experience as a moment of grace, one in which he began to be open to the mystery of God. This of course, raises the question: How do doctrines relate to religious experience? Are different doctrines simply different ways of expressing the same reality? Yes and no. On the one hand, Bede was eager to find as many commonalities as possible with those of other religions. He looked first at what they had in common and only then, tried to discern what the differences were. On the other hand, he was able to recognize real differences between those of different faiths.

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⁵ *Fides et Ratio,* 72.
While some religious believers and thinkers are content with doctrinal formulations, Bede always went through the doctrines to the mystery behind them. He did not neglect or seek to avoid doctrines, but he sought to go through and beyond them. In a video made shortly before he died, he said, “Religion belongs to a world of signs, of sacraments; and they are necessary – you cannot do without them. But we must go through them and beyond them.”

Bede recognized the possibility of the misinterpretation of this, and so he was always careful to qualify his position in such a way that it was faithful to the Christian tradition. Some interpret this to mean that we should ultimately put doctrine aside when we have advanced through the spiritual life. Bede neither thought nor practiced any such thing. Since he learned his theology by studying St. Thomas Aquinas, he carefully maintained the Thomistic (and previously Augustinian) distinction between sacramentum and res. Though this distinction is often lost on those who are content to settle for platitudinous doctrinal formulations and sacramental signs detached from their deeper reality, Bede always kept this in the forefront of his mind. By their very nature, doctrines and sacraments point to something beyond themselves. If we are content to look at the sign without going to the place where it is pointing, we will never reach our destination. We must keep the sacramentality of language in mind when trying to understand mystical experiences in the context of different religions.

2. The second aspect of Griffiths which I would like to highlight is the importance of being rooted in one’s own tradition before one can responsibly and truly encounter the other in dialogue. If one is unclear where she stands in relation to her

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8 *Sacramentum* means sign. *Res* is the thing signified by the sign. See *A Human Search*, 96.
Church or faith tradition, the dialogue is more likely to degenerate into a confused muddle. Though he often pressed against the boundaries of what is often considered orthodoxy, Griffiths always strove to remain faithful to Christ and the Church. At the beginning of his book *The Cosmic Revelation*, he says, “Therefore I would like to approach this subject in a spirit of reverence and of humility and with a great desire for truth. And where there is anything challenging, let it be tested by whether it is true to Christ and to what God has revealed in Christ, and let us try to see other religions in their relation to him.” While some scholars in interreligious dialogue would view this as an unfair presupposition to bring to the table, Griffiths was at least honest enough to recognize that, as a Christian, this is what he had to do. This did not make him any less open or generous to the other, rather, it was the very source of his openness just as Christ was open to all and sought to draw everyone to himself (Jn. 12:32). In his recent article in Commonweal, “Learning to Listen,” Fr. Francis Clooney offered a similar recommendation for anyone wishing to engage in interreligious dialogue. He says, “The theologian venturing to speak about religions today must know what she or he is talking about, live a life dedicated to this learning, and be vulnerable in the dialogue that should ensue whether we speak in public or academic settings.” I cannot imagine anyone fulfilling this better than Bede Griffiths. He dedicated his life to this dialogue in search of truth in a way that many of us are unable to imitate.

Again, though, it was Griffiths’ solid foundation in his Christian faith that allowed him to follow the Spirit’s call to engage the other in such a radical way. As he says, “We have to learn how to have a clear commitment and a firm, clear faith, while at the same time

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time being truly open to other ways of faith and commitment.”

He had a broad and well-rounded education, both when he studied under C.S. Lewis at Oxford and after college when he read widely in an intellectual journey that would lead him to enter the Roman Catholic Church. One of the last books he read that eventually led him into the Church was John Henry Newman’s *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Through this book, Griffiths began to understand that doctrines are not static museum pieces to be preserved from contamination, rather they are organic realities which grow and develop through their interaction with different languages and cultures in the context of the believing community. In order to recognize legitimate developments and perhaps to help shape future ones, one must know both Scripture and Tradition and how the Church’s understanding of these has developed historically. As Peter Phan says in another recent Commonweal article, “It is only by means of a patient and painstaking investigation of particular texts, doctrines, liturgical practices, and moral precepts that both differences and similarities between Christianity and other religions may emerge.”

Griffiths was well versed in Scripture and in the thought of Thomas Aquinas in whose theology he was trained. When he was criticized for his excessive accommodation to other religions, Griffiths often responded with an insight from either Scripture or Aquinas, thus confounding his detractors by proving himself as a legitimate voice within the developing tradition of the Church. A contemporary scholar, who exemplifies the work of Bede Griffiths, though in a different context, is Francis Clooney. In his books and various articles, he writes with great humility and openness in a way that avoids both narrow triumphalism on the one hand and hopeless relativism on the other.

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3. The third major aspect of Griffiths’ approach is his insistence on openness and listening as the posture with which to approach interreligious dialogue. In his correspondence with C.S. Lewis shortly after Griffiths became Catholic, we see him with a more triumphalistic and narrow-minded attitude, typical of young converts. Though we do not know what exactly Griffiths wrote to Lewis in the initial letter of this conversation, it certainly provoked a strong response from Lewis,

“You, in your charity, are anxious to convert me: but I am not in the least anxious to convert you. You think my specifically Protestant beliefs a tissue of damnable errors: I think your specifically Catholic beliefs a mass of comparatively harmless human tradition which may be fatal to certain souls under special conditions, but which I think suitable for you….who wants to debate with a man who begins by saying that no argument can possibly move him? Talk sense, man! With other Catholics I find no difficulty in deriving much edification from religious talk on the common ground: but you refuse to show any interest except in differences.”

Luckily, this later matured into a healthier, more nuanced expression which ultimately bore little resemblance to his early overbearing zeal. Even though their common Christian faith was a firm ground for future correspondence, their different faith traditions remained the source of tension. We see this especially in Lewis’s letters in which he responds to Bede’s apparent attempts to convert him to Roman Catholicism: “I had better say once and for all that I do not intend to discuss with you in future, if I can help it, any of the questions at issue between our respective churches.”

It is difficult to believe that Lewis was writing to the same Bede Griffiths who spent most of his life engaged in interreligious dialogue. Griffiths no doubt learned many lessons from this correspondence to which he would continually return later in life. Toward the end of his life, at a conference in Indiana, Bede spoke about evangelism during a question and

answer period: “Evangelism today needs to be expressed in terms of mission and
dialogue. It is no good simply putting your view to someone and expecting them to adopt
it. You have to listen to them if they are to listen to you.”

It is not possible to force
someone to agree with a certain position simply by forcing it on her. This is a lesson
Bede learned the hard way through his communication with Lewis.

4. The fourth aspect of Griffiths’ theology which I find helpful is his distinction
between cosmic and historical revelation. Before the revelation that we associate with
the Judeo-Christian tradition, namely the covenant with Abraham, God made a covenant
with all creation through Noah. Though these covenants and the blessings associated
with them are different, Griffiths recognized that all of creation is part of an irrevocable
covenant with God (cf. Rom. 11:29). Because of this covenant, God has been speaking
to those outside the Jewish-Christian tradition, “in many and various ways” for centuries,
especially, for Bede, to those in India (see Heb. 1:1). He clearly follows the tradition of
St. Justin Martyr who saw the presence of the logos spermatikos, wherever there was
truth, even if outside the visible boundaries of the faith community (cf. Jn. 1:9). In this
cosmic revelation, God speaks to the human person in two ways, through nature and
conscience. This cosmic revelation is one:

which God makes to all men through nature and the soul… It is the intuition of
Being in pure consciousness, which underlies the whole tradition of Hindu
religion… This is not a merely rational knowledge of God. It is knowledge by
intuition or by experience. The soul passes beyond both sense and reason and
reaches the eternal ground of its being and knows itself by the direct experience of
God present in the inmost depth, the ‘cave of the heart’…. This then is the
‘revelation’ which God has given to India, a revelation of himself as the ground of
being and the source of consciousness and the goal of absolute bliss.

This cosmic revelation echoes what St. Paul says early in his letter to the Romans: “For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made” (Rom. 1:19-20). This cosmic revelation precedes historical revelation and is completed by it, though not, for Bede, in a way that renders it obsolete. It is still useful, even for those who have already received the revelation of God’s salvific action in history. In it, one can recognize God as the source and ground of the world’s being, that without which the material world would be meaningless. Historical revelation completes this and gives answers where the cosmic revelation is silent. As Brad Malkovsky says in a forthcoming essay, “Historical revelation gives to the world and to the human a value that is generally lacking in religions that focus on the cosmic presence alone. In cosmic revelation the discovery of the infinite as the true Reality and highest spiritual goal often threatens to diminish the value of the finite and material.” Since cosmic revelation is silent on questions about the value of human life and the ultimate destiny of creation, historical revelation is able to offer answers that affirm the value of life and of all creation. Creation is not meaningless but is groaning toward a final transformation which includes the Resurrection of the body, a complete transformation of the whole human person (e.g. Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 15). This is one place where Bede acknowledged a significant difference between Hindus who believe in reincarnation and thus body-soul dualism and Christians.

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17 Perhaps we could draw an analogy here between the Old and New Covenants—even in light of the New Covenant through Christ, the Old Covenant through Abraham remains in force, for “the gifts and call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).

who affirm the integrity of the human being as body, soul, and spirit. This has radical implications for the ways we think about social justice. If time is cyclical and ultimately meaningless, if souls simply pass on to other bodies based on karma, then social justice does not have the same importance it does when faced with the value of the human person as affirmed by historical revelation. If, as Paul says, “creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19), we are more likely to hunger and thirst for the justice and peace that characterize the kingdom of God both now and in its consummation at the end of history (Rom. 14:17; Mt. 6:9-10; 5:3-10).

Before closing, there are a few questions I have about Bede’s theology, which though answerable, are important in continuing this conversation. In The Cosmic Revelation, he insists from the very first page that the Vedic Scriptures are a revelation from God. As we saw earlier, he does submit this revelation to whether it is true to Christ. In what sense then can we consider this or other religious traditions to be “revelation”? Must we create some sort of hierarchy of revelations? By the time we do this, will the word “revelation” have the same meaning for the Christian Bible as it does for the Vedic Scriptures, or for others who claim that God has revealed himself through the Qur’an or the book of Mormon? The Church, at least at this point, does not acknowledge that other religions are the recipients of revelation in the same way as the verbum Dei, through Christ, Scripture, and Tradition. It is not inconceivable that Bede’s view of other religions as a revelation of God, could one day be adopted, provided that this is done in a nuanced way that is subordinate to the Church’s belief in the unique salvific value of Christ through the Church.
I find his ideas on cosmic revelation helpful, and I like the way he sees them as a check and balance on each other. I question though whether focusing too much on cosmic revelation might lead one to ignore God’s action in history, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and most especially through the Incarnation, the ultimate scandal of particularity. God’s covenant with Noah was negative since it was a promise “that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth” (Gen. 9:11). The promises to and covenant with Abraham are more comprehensive. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you” (Gen. 12:2-3). “I have singled him out that he may direct his sons and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD may carry into effect for Abraham the promises he made about him” (Gen. 18:19). “…and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing--all this because you obeyed my command (Gen. 22:18). God’s blessing here is intended for all the nations on the earth, but the channel of the blessing is Abraham and his seed. How can we bring this together meaningfully with Bede’s theology of religious pluralism without ignoring this distinctively Jewish-Christian way of salvation? Of course we acknowledge the *logos* spread throughout the world, but how should this affect the dialogue on the ground?