

Bede Griffiths' Images of God

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By

Beatrice Green

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This book is dedicated to my kind, faithful husband, Gregory, our loving, creative, hard-working sons, Daniel, Thomas, Joseph and John, our strong, beautiful daughters-in-law, Tom's wife, Kellee and their bright young men, Charlie and Toby, and John's wife, Yang Qiong and their delightful children, Ethan and Emily.

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I am very grateful to my family, neighbours, friends and colleagues who have given me space particularly over the past months to finally complete the book. They figure strongly in its accomplishment. I pray you will all be blessed abundantly.

The work went on through the Covid Pandemic, family illness, record fires, and now record-breaking rains and flood crises, and the present, harrowing Russian war against Ukraine. The deep interconnection described by Bede Griffiths as basic to all of life has indeed been my mainstay over the long months of commitment and concentration on this task.

I am thankful for our garden and pets - our little dog Fifi, budgie, cockatiel, parrot and fish that I care for daily and which give me such joy. I have persevered with the book confident that the work has been in and through Christ who has no other hands but ours.

Especially, I would like to thank, Greg and Joe for keenly listening to me read various chapters, John for his IT advice and support, Tom for assisting me with the cover, and Dan for giving me a beautiful *Natarāja*.

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Hopefully, readers will find that in spite of my human limitations, *Bede Griffiths' Images of God* throws fresh light on Dom Bede Griffiths' creative insights, extraordinary wisdom and prophetic message.

INTRODUCTION: THE GOLDEN STRING OF BEDE GRIFFITHS' SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Bede Griffiths' Images of God maintains the spiritual insight and theological depth characteristic of the Benedictine sage. The book carries forward his prophetic voice up to the moment of our extraordinary transitional times. For Bede, the image “the golden string,” the name he gives his first book, his autobiography, is central and profoundly resonant; he takes it from William Blake’s poem, *Jerusalem*:

I give you the end of a golden string
Only wind it into a ball
It will lead you in at Heaven’s Gate
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.

Why I have written this book

Bede’s prophetic message is relevant, gentle yet urgent and sometimes confronting, a message of hope nevertheless, that I would like to make more accessible through presentation of particular images he uses for the divine. He interprets the ‘golden string’ as Christ,¹ his own journey, the journey of humanity and the journey of the cosmos, the divine Pilgrim, manifest in and through the ordinary leading him to horizons ever “beyond.” This symbolic image remains the necessary pivot in this work that examines related images that he used to assist us to approach the divine mystery, and help guide our path in an era of epochal change.

The idea for my subject was engendered by a recollection of someone very dear to me. My mother, Doreen Delta-Faith (Bartley) Dique, was a gifted musician, poet and painter, and, before marriage, a reporter and graphic artist with the *Madras Mail*. She was Anglo-Indian and deeply contemplative from childhood. Her ethnic background was complex: Maratha Indian, English, Scottish, and Danish. One day, over 40 years ago,

¹ Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1982), 184. (Henceforward, *Golden String*.)

she gave me Griffiths' autobiography, *The Golden String*, which I relished. Decades later, two years after my mother's death in 2003 when I was contemplating images of God as a subject for PhD research, my friend, and colleague Margaret Hannan SGS, a Scripture scholar, drew my attention to Bede Griffiths and it struck a chord as I remembered my mother's gift. Accordingly, I decided on a path which led to the experience of India, engagement with different religions, PhD research, and finally this book that promotes the significance of Dom Bede Griffiths' prophetic insight for our present times through an examination of the evocative images he uses, especially Christian and Hindu. In 1948, two years before I was born, my parents had migrated to Australia; co-incidentally, it was the very year that Monchanin and Le Saux founded Shantivanam—the Forest of peace, or Saccidananda ashram, in Tamil Nadu, the Christian ashram which, after they left, Dom Bede Griffiths led for 25 years.

Accompanied by my husband, Greg, anticipating years of research, I did a 'walk in Bede Griffiths' footsteps' for seven weeks visiting monasteries and ashrams in England, Scotland, India and the USA. I had never before visited India, and the experience proved invaluable; it assisted me to better understand *advaita*, a concept central to the development of Griffiths' thought and to Hindu experiential knowledge and philosophical development. This non-dualist philosophical Sanskrit term, with a particular qualification, has correlations with Christian 'unity.'

The 'Golden String' image is open to different interpretations that resonate in Bede's life and theology; the hinge for him for other images of God. Together, these images intimate the interior spiritual journey and humankind's movement in space and time, cosmic and biological, with the myriad cultural differences and transformations that accompany the evolution of consciousness. They ground and reflect his developing theology of complementarity within an increasingly pluralistic religious global reality, which motivates his urgent appeal for specific changes we must make for the well-being of all of life on this planet. Despite the challenges of his time, he remained hopeful in life as a learning process, a process underlying his overarching image of God who journeys with us, which motivated me to search beneath the 'skin' of his story. It assisted me to understand his theological method centered in experience that was sustained throughout his life.

To some extent, our pilgrimage was determined by the one-world flight, westwards from Australia to our first stop, India, and on via England and Scotland to Osage Monastery²—the Shantivanam of the West in Sand

² At the time of our journey, Osage Monastery held the Bede Griffiths Trust. This is now located at the New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur CA.

Springs, Oklahoma, and the final destination, the Camaldolese Big Sur Monastery in California and the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library in Berkeley University with Griffiths' archives. The reader may be interested in the steps of this trek where my aim is to evoke something of the texture, colour, extent, and experiential depth of his spiritual journey. For the theologian, Bede Griffiths, experience is essential and this account may encourage the reader's personal engagement with this book. Called, "A Walk in Bede Griffiths' Footsteps," it also includes a brief survey of India's background and can be located as Appendix 1.

Introduction to the book's structure

I had been surprised at the emergence of an image I had not clearly contemplated that came quite sharply into focus: the hospitable Host, the One who is outflowing, generative love in relationship; it allowed greater discernment in respect of the other selected images, and directed a central position for the image, the divine Feminine. A reality that is profoundly significant for all the images I explore came to the fore: the idea of a "dynamic network of interdependent relationships" underlying all details of existence that Griffiths emphasised as source of healing and growth and of life itself.

Bede Griffiths was a pioneer in the contemplative dimensions of interreligious relations and so, it is not surprising that Christian critics have accused him of relativising Christianity and deserting his own monastic Christian tradition, and Indian critics of merely playing the Hindu to appropriate vast and ancient spiritual traditions for his own Christian purposes.³ More positively, though, a number of critical studies explore the development of his theology. Apart from his own works, I am greatly indebted to the critical, scholarly works I accessed; the primary sources are described in Appendix 2.

Griffiths' contemplative use of images of God does not detract from the journey to 'the beyond,' that is, the goal of transcendent unity. Sensitivity to this movement of growth makes his use of images dynamic. Furthermore,

³ See Judson Trapnell, "Bede Griffiths, Mystical Knowing, and the Unity of Religions" *Philosophy and Theology* No 7 (1993): 355-379. This paper, presented for the Catholic University of America provides examples such as the papers by Steven Katz in 1978 and 1983 and the ensuing dialogue with Griffiths. See also, Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 365 – 372, and 195 – 200. (Henceforward, *Bede Griffiths: A Life*.) See also, Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannysins or Swindlers?* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1988, 1994).

his theology and method are centered in, and flow from, his day-by-day Benedictine monastic habit. With my use of a narrative structure, I hope to convey this.

To be true to his 'voice' this takes the shape of a pilgrimage. This image looms large in his life registering an ambiance through which his ideas receive a certain texture, credibility and power to convince. It is shown as nucleus and nebula from which particular related images emerge and in which they converge. According to the structure imposed, the sections are named figuratively to represent the whole adventure. The process elaborates Griffiths' emphasis on the central importance of right use of image and symbol in the spiritual journey for encounter with other faiths and disciplines, particularly the 'new science.'⁴

His theology appeals primarily to the Christian mystical tradition and respects its considerable diversity. He refers, for example, to sources as diverse as the mystical dimension in the work of such systematic theologians as Thomas Aquinas and Karl Rahner, and to mystics such as Julian of Norwich, John Ruysbroeck, and Meister Eckhart, and to Gregory of Nyssa, a notable exponent of the mystical theology of the early Christian East.

As well, he conscientiously draws on Eastern and non-Christian spiritual classics, especially the Hindu classics, the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Importantly, his theological basis is Trinitarian, which he elaborates in reference to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner and Raimon Panikkar, while maintaining dialogue with representatives of the Indian spiritual classics such as Sri Aurobindo.

His interest in native spiritualities, notably that of Indigenous Australians is apparant on two separate occasions while on lecture tours in Australia when he had the opportunity for dialogue with Aboriginal elders.

Significantly, he showed considerable interest in new areas of science and trans-personal psychology. This increasingly became a dominant interest, so much so that he finally envisaged living for six months of the year in the US where he could be involved in what he saw as a growing dynamic theological/scientific exchange. The main figures of importance for him in this area are the transpersonal psychologist, Ken Wilber, physicists - David Bohm and Fritjof Capra, and the biologist - Rupert Sheldrake who advocate a new scientific approach that accepts the whole of

⁴ In future this will be simply written as, the new science. In the opening chapter of his *A New Vision of Reality* of 1989, Griffiths describes this as a "new understanding of science," especially in regard to physics as presented in Fritjof Capra's seminal works, *The Tao of Physics*, 1975, and *The Turning Point*, 1982.

reality, macrocosm and microcosm, as a dynamic interrelated and interdependent unity.

The structure of this book is sensitive to and overtly represents Bede's emphases in theological method; hopefully it reflects the kind of personal change and transformation inherent in theological research, along with Bernard Lonergan's urge for a therapeutic return to the subject.⁵ The expectation is that the book develops and unfolds in an organic, holistic way from the surface towards deeper and more detailed levels of understanding like "peeling an onion," to use Margaret Hannan's words.

The personal familiarity I gained with the milieu in which the images of God were shaped in Bede's experience and imagination has enabled me to better appreciate his interpretation of the story of humanity and his unique contribution. This heuristic (hands-on) dimension adds a demonstrable consciousness of a particular lens, which on the one hand may impose limits but which can also be a means of achieving and communicating deeper insights.

Initial preparation included engagement with the *Australian Ejournal of Theology* (AEJT) and membership in the organisations, the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (APTO), and the Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA). I was encouraged and supported in these endeavours by Assoc. Prof. Gerard Hall, one of the founding members of APTO and creator and the then Editor of the AEJT.

A brief explanation in respect to some points of terminology may be helpful. I have implemented Bede's request to Thomas Matus that all future quotations from his talks and writings make the necessary changes for inclusive language; I have made the adjustments without the use of (*sic*).⁶ As well, I am using Griffiths' method of differentiating God as transcendent other with a capital "G," and the "gods" with a lower case "g" as attributes or manifestations of the One.⁷ I maintain Griffiths' writing of the *Upanishadic* concept of "being," "consciousness" and "bliss" for the Absolute, with variable spelling. The term can be spelt either *saccidānanda*—emphasising the compound form, or *satcitānanda* with the emphasis more on the elements: *sat*/being/truth, *cit*/consciousness/knowledge, *ananda*/bliss. I use the upper case 'C' to indicate the universal "Church," and as the

⁵ Vernon Gregson, *Lonergan Spirituality and the Meeting of Religions* (MD: The College Theology Society, University Press of America, 1985), 23.

⁶ Thomas Matus, *Bede Griffiths: Essential Writings*, in the *Modern Spirituality and Masters Series*, selected with an Introduction by Thomas Matus OSB Cam (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 23. (Henceforward, *Essential Writings*.)

⁷ Bede Griffiths, *Cosmic Revelation*, 19.

Roman Catholic Church as indicated by the context. In certain instances, I have used transliteration; where the original is used, I have tried to add the appropriate accent marks. I have varied Bede Griffiths' name mostly for stylistic reasons, except at the start before he enters the monastery, when I call him by his birth name, Alan.

I provide here a brief summary of the book's content according to its figurative 'journey' structure.

Part One: Plotting the Way

Chapter 1: Landmarks for the Journey

This chapter has five sections that introduce Alan Griffiths' motive led by The Golden String, and provide an overview of his journey. Along with the next two chapters, this functions as a map. Furthermore, importantly, this early section surveys Griffiths' life in a manner that chronologically situates significant events and publications.

Chapter 2: Companions for the Journey

I compare and contrast aspects of Bede Griffiths' life and vision with five relevant figures: Raimon Panikkar, Sri Aurobindo, Karl Rahner, Gregory of Nyssa, and Bernard Lonergan. Introducing these "journey companions" considerably widens the approach to Griffiths' use of the selected images.

Chapter 3: God of the Journey

This section provides a fitting texture for Griffiths' theology reflected in the overall organic structure of the book. The chapter focuses on the overarching image of God in relation to the spiritual journey, especially Griffiths' understanding of life and the universe.

Part Two: Exploration

This is the central section of the book and comprises five chapters, each a deeper more detailed exploration of an image related to or emerging from The Golden String image.

Chapter 4: Divine Host: all-encompassing out-flowing generative Love

This chapter finds a balance in the tension between the One who is "beyond" yet intimately near. It draws heavily on Griffiths' familiarity with the *Vedas*. The image emphasises Love-in-relationship—the I/you relationship and the Trinity. It recommends right balance for the sake of healing centred in

an incarnational, familial love, and the incarnational dimension in architecture and environment.

Chapter 5: The Imago Dei

The chapter explores the evolutionary process of development of the *imago dei*. This includes an investigation of the perennial philosophy together with the evolutionary process in history to examine Griffiths' hope for a new way of being, a new consciousness that is profoundly integrative. Bede's use of this image indicates the vital importance intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and engagement with the new science.

Chapter 6: Divine Feminine

The exploration of the divine Feminine in this chapter firmly states Griffiths' conviction that movement to the next level of consciousness is only possible through a turning towards and integration with the feminine principle that is integral to the whole of reality. The interwoven threads of Griffiths' own experience and his special relationships are evaluated.

Chapter 7: Divine Lord

This chapter emphasises change through an evolutionary process based in dialogue and is overtly centered in surrender to a God of love in a movement with a goal both immanent and infinite. It interprets what we have named as Griffiths' "hermeneutic of encounter" in respect of The Golden String and the overall journey to God. It includes sin and the demonic, and the psychic realm.

Chapter 8: Divine Light

Griffiths' recognition that in all religious traditions this image evokes the goal of life is explored. This brings together the different strands of our exploration of the previous images. The image is deeply connected to a particular understanding of "listening" related to the contemplative mode of being.

My selection of these five images in Part 2, Exploration, was dictated by my reading of Griffiths' major works, his letters and talks and so are firmly based in his own experience and theological reflection. They, and a wealth of associated images evoke overall, his focal image of the pilgrimage journey and the next stage with which we are now confronted, movement towards a new level of consciousness.

Part Three: Reflection on the Journey

Chapter 9: The Import of Bede Griffiths' Images of God: The Implications for our Times of Christ the Golden String

This chapter represents "Journey's end" which is a taking stock of the enterprise. As a summary of the whole, it respects the conceptual changes that have taken place in the 'pilgrimage.' It contains the implications of Griffiths' thought drawn from the chapters and a final conclusion.⁸

⁸ Biblical references are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, Catholic Edition (Geoffrey Chapman, 1991).

PART ONE:
PLOTTING THE WAY

CHAPTER 1

LANDMARKS FOR THE JOURNEY

Introduction

It is significant that Dom Bede's poetic inspiration in his autobiography, *The Golden String*, comes via a verse from the poem *Jerusalem* composed by a mystic of the Romantic era, William Blake:

*I give you the end of a golden string;
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at heaven's gate,
Built in Jerusalem's wall.*

Bede defines the metaphor as Christ¹ drawing him to union with God as his final destiny.² *The Golden String* was written in 1954, during the latter period of his Western monastic experience and published the year before he left for India. It endures as a 20th Century classic story of conversion. The second edition with his Foreword, Prologue, an Epilogue with its garnered insights, and the Publisher's Note, contains in germinal form, insights that Bede explores further in later writings and lectures.

With this autobiography as a basic resource, the chapter surveys his life and publications under the following headings:

1. Alone with nature
2. Discovering the Word
3. Monastic community in England and Scotland
4. Moving to India
5. The ever-larger community

¹ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 184.

² To take the string and follow it means a personal choice; however, in *The Golden String* Griffiths describes how, in the prior events of his life, God's providence preceded the time of choice.

1. Alone with nature

A secure family life mainly lived in the safety of the countryside was a prelude to Bede's life-changing numinous experience. Born Alan Richard Griffiths on December 17, 1906, he had three older siblings, Dudley, Laurence and Barbara. A business partner had cheated his father and forced him into retirement when Alan was a child of four. His mother, Harriet Lilian Frampton-Day, whose father had been a London City Alderman, had a private income. Out in the country near Hampshire, the children grew up free, happy, and secure, though poor. They were self-reliant and lived peacefully despite the Great War. Alan Griffiths remembers both parents as religious and kindly. The family attended regular Sunday services at the local Church of England. The country parson was a learned man and a "lover of nature"³ whom Griffiths always remembered with admiration and affection. Yet their family life was touched by deep and vague sadness; Walter Griffiths soon came to suffer from a debilitating illness. His son reports that he remained generous and gentle but he lived on past memories and argued incessantly over politics. Much later in his sixties, Fr Bede confided to a friend, "I never had a real father . . ."⁴

Such early influences engendered in the child, Alan, an enjoyment of the quiet English countryside. It may well have helped him survive the tyranny of the married couple who ran Furzie Close, the preparatory school he entered as a dayboy. At his next school, Christ's Hospital, a charity school with a means-test, his enjoyment of nature was encouraged by the new headmaster, a layman, W.H. Fyfe, who arrived when Griffiths was thirteen. Scholarly, humane, and forward-thinking Fyfe came as a great relief compared to the previous, severe regime of the Protestant clergyman, Dr Upcott. He impressed his gifted student,⁵ who was not particularly interested in religion at the time, with sermons that emphasised the humanity of Christ. After Alan Griffiths became captain of his house and won a Scholarship to Oxford, Fyfe excused him from the games periods so that he was free to cycle or walk round the countryside at Newbury where the family had

³ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 20.

⁴ Shirley Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness* (London: Rider, Ebury Press Random House, 1994), 4.

⁵ The entrance examinations to Christ's Hospital were very strict. Griffiths passed first out of 100 students and his score permitted him to skip the first forms so that he entered as a "broady," wearing the broader girdle. See Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 12. See also, Kathryn Spink, *A Sense*, 39.

moved.⁶ An avid reader, he immersed himself in Thomas Hardy's novels which evoked a sense of companionship with the natural beauty of the area. By the end of his school days, despite a healthy interest and participation in school sport,⁷ he was especially attracted to literature of a political tenor and to the aesthetic beauty of Swinburne's poetry. However, what most inspired him was the nature-poetry of Shelley and Wordsworth.

In his last term of school, Griffiths experienced a "mystical exaltation" which became a guiding "impulse." He declared it to have been "one of the decisive events" of his life.⁸ He describes this transforming experience in the Prologue of *The Golden String*:

I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all the year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked on, I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing, I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. 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.⁹

Griffiths understood this intensification of consciousness as a graced moment which initiated him into the awareness of a transcendent dimension to life. It was an experience both of self-discovery and self-transcendence, an initiation into a profound harmony and unity. After this, nature appeared "sacramental" connecting him with "the presence of an unfathomable

⁶ Fyfe must have formed a good impression of Griffiths. In 1955, when as a Benedictine monk, Bede left England for India, awaiting him on board was a telegram from the now Sir William Fyfe which read: "Arch-Magisterial blessing. Fyfe." In Bede Griffiths, the 1st Instalment of, "Fr Bede Griffiths and the Indian Foundation," April, 1955. Available from The Pluscarden Archives.

⁷ He did well at boxing, played rugby and enjoyed following the cricket.

⁸ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 10, 11.

⁹ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 9.

mystery . . . drawing (him) to itself.” He now believed Blake’s “golden string” had been revealed to him as “grace . . . given to every soul, hidden under the circumstances of daily life.” To attend to this graced moment—to take up the string and begin to wind it into a ball in the midst of “the labyrinth of life,” meant for him “the beginning . . . of a long adventure” he could never have imagined possible.¹⁰

2. Discovering the Word

Besides the beauty and mystery of nature, another major influence on the young Alan Griffiths came from his reading. Harriet Griffiths’ youngest child was gifted, and generously acknowledged by the family to be her favourite. She had him taught French when he was four years old, and by the age of seven he was fairly proficient at Latin. A friend of Harriet also made him learn the Beatitudes and chapters 10 and 14 of the Gospel of John by heart. In High School, he was remembered as modest and intellectual.¹¹ Besides his affection for the Romantics, he entered passionately into the world of Shakespeare whose works he considered, adopting the phrase of Matthew Arnold, a “criticism of life.” His wider reading, including Tolstoy’s *Kingdom of Heaven*, Giovanni Panini’s *Story of Christ*, along with the plays of Ibsen and Shaw, produced in him sympathies that were at once, humanist, socialist, pacifist¹² and avowedly anti-industrialist.

At Oxford, his first choice was New College, but he was rejected. However, he was later accepted at Magdalen to begin in October 1925, dependent on a scholarship,¹³ his interest—aesthetics rather than athletics. Apparently, this college well deserved its denigration by Chesterton as, “the playground of the idle rich.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, the surroundings were beautiful, and he chose to study English literature, specifically the Romantics, rather than take courses in philosophy. At Magdalen, he met two idealistic men who were to become life-long friends, Hugh Waterman and Martyn Skinner. Both shared his passion for a natural way of life in which to exercise the imagination and creativity. Consequently, some months after Griffiths left Oxford, in April 1930, these three began their “experiment in the common

¹⁰ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 10, 11, 12.

¹¹ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 12.

¹² He and three other friends were granted exemptions when they refused on principle to join the Officers’ Training Corps. See Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 25.

¹³ He was given a Classical Exhibition (Scholarship) of £50.00 a year, which the School increased to £100.00. GS, 30.

¹⁴ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 25.

life” to escape “from the whole system of mechanisation.”¹⁵ For Griffiths, industrialisation was a scourge destroying the quality of life; it had robbed honest people of their self-respect and polluted the environment. He diagnosed the source of this evil as the Enlightenment, especially Cartesian philosophy. He considered the mechanistic objectification of life to be soul destroying, as it eroded the very civilisation that had been so much in evidence during the 17th century in the creativity, strength and stability of its art and literature.

One other person at Oxford who became a life-long friend was C.S.Lewis, Griffiths’ tutor.¹⁶ He eventually persuaded the younger man to extend his reading to the philosophers; and in the months after Oxford and before the Costwold experiment, Griffiths thus exerted himself, “like a man climbing a mountain.”¹⁷ He searched desperately through Spinoza, Marcus Aurelius, Berkley, Hobbes, Locke and Hume, and Kant. A significant resource emerged in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poet and philosopher. It offered a synthesis which helped him to reconcile reason and imagination, and affected his appreciation of the theological value of images. As he wrote, “The pure idea which alone is truth and equally (as Keats had seen) ‘absolute beauty’ is communicable in this present reality when embodied in an image as a living symbol of ultimate reality.”¹⁸ In his reading of Augustine, in the original Latin, he came to appreciate the integration of experience, imagination, intellect and will in the search for truth.¹⁹ This discovery excited in him an intense “passion of religious love.” It also put the Catholic Church “on the map of life” for him.²⁰ In Dante, too, he found a mind of immense moral and intellectual power. Around this time, he was further influenced by three books given him by a theosophist friend of his mother, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Buddha’s Way of Virtue* and the *Sayings of Lao Tzu*.²¹

¹⁵ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 65.

¹⁶ Bede belonged to C.S. Lewis’s *Inklings* group with Tolkien, Williams and Barfield. In David S. Toolan, “The Other Half of our Soul: Dom Bede Griffiths.” Available from the Bede Griffiths Trust, 1993.

¹⁷ Griffiths reports that the intellectual effort at this time was so intense, his longing for insight so great that the habit remained throughout his life “as part of a living process of thought.” See *Golden String*, 63.

¹⁸ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 55.

¹⁹ Griffiths was indebted to C.S. Lewis who maintained a correspondence with him, and challenged him to read in the original language which he found put him into a relationship of such immediacy with the author that he continued this painstaking way ever after. See Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 57.

²⁰ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 59.

²¹ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 59-64.

This intellectual and spiritual search as it gained momentum led to the year's experiment of alternative living with Hugh and Martyn in the Cotswold Hills, near Gloucester. They had planned the purchase of a farmhouse there, where they had been accustomed to retreat during their student lives in order to ease the "profound sense of discontent with the world in which we were compelled to live" that Oxford had bequeathed to them.²² He recalled this time twenty-six years after publishing *The Golden String*, in his 1980 Prologue to the second edition, where he deemed their attempt at the simple life and its routines that was designed as a flight from the industrialised world, a "failed experiment." Compromises were inevitably made and their ways began to diverge. Particularly Hugh and later also Martyn were interested in marriage, something which disappointed Griffiths who was becoming increasingly ascetically religious. This Prologue, however, was composed prior to Griffiths' "experience of the feminine" during the 80's and from this later vantage point he may have been less willing to use the term, "failure."

Furthermore, there were totally unforeseen religious developments. The three had begun to read the Bible together merely out of literary interest. But this led to their sharing experience of a deeply religious nature, and the practice of common prayer and ascetical discipline. The Word of God in Scripture now informed all of Griffiths' thinking, and went beyond anything he had previously discovered in his reading. In the Gospel of John especially, he encountered a decisive summons to faith, while the Letters of Paul revealed to him the significance of the Church, as "the great sacramental mystery," while her dogmas and sacraments were "the ramparts of Jerusalem's Wall."²³

I saw now that underlying that seventeenth century culture which I so much admired lay the solid strength of the Christian tradition. It was in rejecting this that our civilisation had gradually fallen from its original greatness to its present state of decay.²⁴

On his return home, Griffiths had decided to take orders in the Church of England. His religiosity and change of demeanour strengthened the bond of affection between him and his mother while he relentlessly continued his asceticism and searching reading including the mystics William Law and Jacob Boehme. By now, though, he was something of a fish out of water. A

²² Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 46. Griffiths later returned to "a lonely desolate spot" in the Cotswolds by himself at the time of conflict in the midst of his conversion.

²³ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 186.

²⁴ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 90.

short stint working at the Oxford Mission at Bethnal Green only deepened unbearably the inner conflict he suffered:

The life of prayer and austerity which I had been leading had increased my sensibility to an extreme degree, and I felt the presence of the surrounding world as a violent oppression. It was not simply a matter of sensibility. The life around attracted me; I felt that here was the human world which I loved; . . . But . . . I felt . . . a giant force opposed to all that I loved, ceaselessly beating against the doors of my mind, breaking down my resistance and driving out the spirit of prayer.²⁵

Griffiths describes in detail the remaining profoundly spiritual final steps of his conversion. We can read these as desolation of soul, the inspiration to repent, guidance by an interior voice and by Providence to an Anglo-Catholic retreat, confession, the surrender of the autonomy of his reason, continued unrest leading him to the works of the mystics, Tauler, Suso, Molinos and Hindu and Buddhist, all of which brought him back to live alone in the Cotswolds.²⁶ Here, he learned to distinguish between the life of a solitary, attuned to the silence of God within, and that of a hermit, who lives alone in the ‘wilderness,’ and at this time, he was guided towards the former. Barbara Millard whom he met in the Cotswolds remained a good friend even after her return to South Africa and her subsequent marriage, and Griffiths kept up a regular correspondence until her death a few years later from a horse-riding accident.²⁷ His continuing conversion led into the depths of spiritual experience, and further self-renunciation.

However, it is important to note that while Griffiths’, Hugh’s, and Martyn’s lives had permanently changed after their Cotswold experiment, which for Griffiths had meant regular reception of communion at the Church of England, the written word was central to his conversion. Reading Aquinas’ *Summa* introduced him to the “solid structure” of philosophy and theology and he was inspired by further reading of Augustine, John Chrysostom and T.S. Eliot. Finally, however, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of England* and Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* helped him overcome the “monster” that was his fear of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, while he was induced to visit the Catholic church at Newbury, the experience was so alien, it served only to increase his fear²⁸ and while prayer led him to the Anglo-Catholic retreat with the Cowley Fathers, it was Newman’s *Development of Christian Doctrine* that provided the bridge (along with the

²⁵ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 101.

²⁶ *Golden String*, 112, 113.

²⁷ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 119.

²⁸ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 95 - 97.

mediation of the Catholic priest of Winchcombe, Father Palmer) to nearby Prinknash Priory²⁹ and finally into the Catholic Church on Christmas Eve, 1931. A month after his entry into the Church,³⁰ Griffiths was received into the Prinknash community as a Benedictine novice and, significantly, chose the name Bede after the saintly historian.

His choice of this name represents his appreciation of the historical process as a whole illuminated by Christ to be seen in the development of Christian thought and the inspired thought of other traditions throughout the ages. It is significant for his later proclamation of a new consciousness that includes the need for inter-religious dialogue and lay contemplative communities.

3. Monastic community in England and Scotland

Prinknash gave Bede Griffiths the peace he had longed for.³¹ He expected prayer in common, and the balanced life of the community centered on the daily sacrifice of the Mass to go on being for him along the ignominious lines he imagined as Jesus' hidden life at Nazareth. Art and music were not absent from the monastery. Bede was an accomplished pianist and had also been something of an art connoisseur before his entry into the monastery. His taste in both areas accorded with his philosophical determination. He found the Plainchant deeply satisfying;³² and his correspondence with his friends, Hugh, Martyn and C.S. Lewis continued. A year after entry, he made his simple profession with the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and three years later, on 21st December, 1936, his final vows of stability, conversion of life and obedience in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict. About a year later, his mother, with whom he had kept up a close correspondence, died after a road accident in a car driven by one of his brothers. Griffiths describes how his focus on prayer with the goal of deep

²⁹ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 92 – 129. Prinknash Monastery was the Order of St Benedict, Subiaco Congregation following a “cenobitic” or communal life of prayer, work and hospitality.

³⁰ Alan's family were generally sympathetic in regard to his radical choice; his mother stoically accepted what he later admitted had wounded her. See Kathryn Spink, *A Sense of the Sacred*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 91.

³¹ His brief experiment with the Cistercian Order on Caldey (from a continuing interest in extreme austerity) was a lesson for him in the meaning of humility and obedience; he never felt drawn to it again. See Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 134.

³² See Spink, *A Sense*, 40, 49 and Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 159.

communion was at this time a source of spiritual consolation.³³ He took up further theological studies and in due course was ordained a priest on 9th March 1940.³⁴

In his first 15 years of monastic seclusion, Griffiths was not entirely cut off. As guest master, he enjoyed his conversation with the outside world. At the same time, his reflection on Fascism, Nazism, and Communism—as being an affirmation of community and a rejection of individualism, while denying to human beings the essential dignity of being an end in themselves—demonstrates his continued interest in world affairs. He saw clearly that while (profoundly for him as a monk) “the community represented Christ,” neither could “the individual . . . be sacrificed to the community.”³⁵ On the other hand, he understood the essence of monastic life as love, “the total giving of oneself to another.”³⁶ And while monastic life was ordered to contemplation, he perceived contemplation as “the true end of every Christian life.” Here, Griffiths understands contemplation as, “a habit of mind which enables the soul to keep in a state of recollection in the presence of God whatever the work with which we are occupied.”³⁷

Throughout this time, Griffiths maintained his interest in the mystical traditions of other religions. The Hindu *Vedānta* in particular was an interest he and C.S. Lewis had shared, and he continued to investigate this tradition finding the idea of God as *saccitānanda* (being, knowledge/consciousness, bliss) in the writings of Shankara,³⁸ comparable with that of St Thomas. Nevertheless, he rejected Shankara’s understanding of material reality as purely ‘*maya*’—an illusion.³⁹ While Griffiths believed that it required a “new Christian culture which would be able to make use of all the advances in modern science and history” to rebuild civilisation, he saw this in cross-cultural, inter-racial, global terms. Indeed, steps which would “place the great philosophical systems of China and India in relation to the Gospel” he assessed as being comparable to the bridge formed between the Hebrew and

³³ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 146. See also, Spink, *A Sense*, 98, and Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 78.

³⁴ The distinction between the calling to the monastic life and the priesthood were quite clear in Bede Griffiths’ mind at the time. Later in life, he asserted the potential/likely compatibility of the Catholic priesthood and marriage. In Spink, *A Sense*, 97, Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 171.

³⁵ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 136, 137.

³⁶ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 142.

³⁷ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 148.

³⁸ This name can be spelled, Shankara or Sankara. Both forms are used in this book.

³⁹ Bede Griffiths, *Golden String*, 172. Later Bede acknowledged Shankar’s insight as more subtle. See Bede Griffiths, *Marriage*, 17.