

Marriage of East and West: The Contribution of Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths to Inter-religious Dialogue

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THIS PAPER IS NOT GOING TO BE A COMPARISON BETWEEN THOMAS Merton and Bede Griffiths but rather an indication of the invaluable contribution that both have made to the impetus of today's exchanges between Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. Although this paper will give exclusive attention to these two monastics, this by no means implies that they were the only pioneers in this field.

Alan Griffiths (to use his baptismal name) was born at Walton-on-Thames in 1906. He attended Oxford University and after his first year switched his studies from Philosophy to English Literature. C.S. Lewis was his tutor and the two of them became good friends. In his early days at University Bede rejected religion, but towards the end of his time at Oxford he became aware of a sense of the 'holy' and the 'inner source of life'. It is worth noting that both Bede and Merton had a mystical experience completely out of the blue when, as teenagers, they had no real religious affiliation or inclination. Bede recounts how the world came alive for him as he walked alone one evening in the playing fields at his school (GS, p.9). Merton vividly describes his experience of the mosaics and churches in Rome that drives him to his knees (SSM, p.116ff.).

After university Alan and two friends began an experiment in simple, community life in a small cottage in rural England. Through reading the Bible, Alan rediscovered the Christian faith and became active in the Church of England, even considering ordination to the

priesthood. After a whole night on his knees in prayer in 1933 he decided to join the Roman Catholic Church and within a month entered the Benedictine Monastery at Prinknash, taking 'Bede' as his religious name. After many years in monastic life he became guestmaster at Pluscarden Abbey where he met Toni Sussman, and under her influence Bede began reading the sacred texts of the East. These studies created a longing to go to India.

In 1955 Bede was given permission to respond to an invitation from Fr Benedict Alapatt, an Indian Benedictine, to establish a Benedictine foundation in the Bangalore region of South India. As he was preparing to leave Britain, Bede summed up his desire in a letter to a friend: "I'm going out to India to seek the other half of my soul." This statement expresses the pressing lack he felt both in himself and in his culture. Britain, like most of the Western world steeped in Graeco-Roman and Cartesian philosophy and psychology, was far too addicted to the rational, analytic mind. It gave little room to spirituality and the interiority of contemplation. Even in his monastery, where these values were espoused, there was no method for accessing them directly. At first things did not go well in India, but in 1958 Bede joined with a Belgian Cistercian named Fr Frances Mahieu in establishing Kurisumala Ashram in Kerala.

After ten years at Kurisumala, Bede responded, in 1968, to an invitation from Fr Henri le Saux (Abhishiktananda) to take charge of Saccidanada Ashram at Shantivanam (Forest of Peace) founded by le Saux and another French priest, Jules Monchanin in 1950. It was at this Ashram, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, that Father Bede established a deeply Christian contemplative lifestyle thoroughly inculturated in a simple Indian way. It was here that he extensively studied Sanskrit, the Hindu sacred writings and traditions, while also engaging in inter-religious dialogue. Under Bede's leadership a solid community grew that eventually affiliated with the Congregation of Camaldolese Benedictines. This community, with its regular round of monastic prayer, formed the heart of the Ashram which began to attract spiritual seekers from all over the world.

Father Bede died on May 13, 1993. On hearing of his death Cardinal Basil Hume of Westminster said of him:

We can only stand in admiration of the way in which Dom Bede Griffiths, throughout his life and holding us all in prayer, explored the origins of all religions. He is a source of inspiration and encouragement

for many all over the world, since he is a mystic in touch with absolute love and beauty.

We turn now to Thomas Merton. According to William Healy, Merton's interest in Eastern religions began with a college reading of Huxley's *Ends and Means*. We can also note from Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* that while at Columbia University he knew of Father Wiegner's French translation of oriental texts. During the late 1930s Merton had contact with a Hindu monk, Bramachari, who not only introduced him to Eastern Spirituality but also to the classic texts of Western Spirituality. You may remember from his autobiography that when he entered the Roman Catholic Church Merton had some pretty negative things to say about Eastern religions.

Ultimately, I suppose all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques that do the same thing, but in a far more subtle and advanced fashion: and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil, per se, according to Christian standards: but it does not make it good, in relation to the supernatural. It is simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical. (SSM, p.205-6)

It would seem that in 1949 his interest in the East was rekindled when he met a man who had come to do some painting at Gethsemani who had been a postulant in a Zen monastery in Hawaii and had spoken to the community about it in chapter.

By the late 1950s Merton was seriously studying the writings of the Japanese Zen master, D.T. Suzuki. Merton now clearly had a vastly different assessment of the Eastern tradition and from now on there are frequent references to Zen in his journal. Perhaps he now felt that he was well rooted enough in his Christian tradition to be comfortable at entering into dialogue with Suzuki and others. To be rooted in one's own tradition is vital for satisfactory dialogue. It is important to remember that both Bede and Merton always thought of themselves as thoroughly Christian. As Brother David Steindl-Rast has pointed out: *Merton could go so deeply into another tradition only because he had a home to which he could return.* Both Bede and Merton always remained rooted in their Christian tradition and teach us a valuable lesson for any activity in which we might engage towards inter-religious dialogue.

Merton records receiving a letter from Suzuki in his Journal on April 11, 1959. After noting the contents of the letter in a very

positive way, Merton continues with words that are absolutely central to all inter-religious dialogue.

If I tried baldly and bluntly to 'convert' Suzuki, that is, make him 'accept' formulas regarding the faith that are accepted by the average American Catholic, I would, in fact, not 'convert' him at all, but simply confuse and (in a cultural sense) degrade him.

On the contrary – if I can meet him on a common ground of spiritual Truth, where we share a real and deep experience of God, and where we know in humility our own deepest selves – and if we can discuss and compare the formulas we use to describe this experience, then I certainly think Christ would be present and glorified in both of us, and this would lead to a conversion of us both. (Vol.3, Journal p.273)

Merton had a chance to put this into action when he met Suzuki in New York in 1964. He accepted Suzuki just as he was and a genuine dialogical exchange was able to take place. This openness and the feeling of being "at home" with Suzuki which he describes in his journal entry of that meeting is no doubt because Zen gave Merton a language to articulate his own contemplative experience. Through his contact with Suzuki, Merton wrote a seminal work in Buddhist-Christian studies entitled *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and a collection of essays *Mystics and Zen Masters*.

We should not think that Merton's interest in Eastern religion lacked the praxis of Bede who had immersed himself in the culture and spirituality of India. Merton incorporated Zen practice into his meditation. Through this he was able, like Bede, to recover the ancient tradition of contemplation and interiority in Christianity. Zen provided Merton with a whole range of techniques and exercises for facilitating the spiritual journey. It can be noted that Merton's attraction to the East was for similar reasons as Bede. Bonnie Thurston remarks in her essay 'Why Merton Looked East' that:

Merton was increasingly disgusted with technological, materialistic America and the Eastern Way provided an alternative to its 'getting and keeping' mentality. Merton came to believe that the modern West lacked interiority. Buddhism, with its ancient practices and profound formulations of religious psychology, gave Merton a new and enriching collection of prayer practices. Merton adopted and adapted Buddhist prayer techniques into Christian practice. (TCW)

We will never know for certain how much Bede and Merton influenced the Second Vatican Council's revolutionary document,

The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate).

There we read:

Thus, in Hinduism people explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love...

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all...

The Church, therefore, urges her children to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.

Merton gives us further orientation to the task of inter-religious dialogue in his *Asian Journal*. There are two extremely significant passages

...I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. (AJ, p.313)

Merton also writes:

And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have. (AJ, p.343)

Merton died in 1968 and Bede in 1993. We would do well to ask whether their contribution and influence still continues. In this paper I will list a few of the ways in which their work for inter-religious dialogue is still alive. Both our subjects published a number of books on the religious traditions of the East. Both Merton and Bede have given us many foundational writings upon which contemporary scholars continue to build. Academic theses on the subject continue to be produced and conferences, workshops and retreats abound

using the life and writings of both of these two Christian monastic figures that were held in such high esteem by the religious leaders of the non-Christian East.

Building on their work, and especially on Merton is the Aide-Inter-Monastères and its sub-division Dialog-Inter-Monastères both based in Paris guided by Dom Pierre de Béhune OSB. The Monastic Interreligious Dialogue composed of Benedictines and Cistercians in North America has made a very significant contribution. This latter organization has done much to further dialogue especially with their monastic exchange program between Buddhists and Christians. This culminated in 1996 with a ground breaking gathering of Christian and Buddhist monks with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders for an Encounter at Gethsemani. Dom Pierre in his preface to the book of published papers from the meeting states rightly that "The Buddhist-Christian encounter at Gethsemani will remain as a reference point for the future of interfaith dialogue." In his Foreword to the same book the Dalai Lama, who incidentally asked that it be held at Merton's own monastery, writes:

Gatherings of spiritual practitioners from different backgrounds, such as the Gethsemani Encounter, are of immense value. I believe it is extremely important that we extend our understanding of each other's spiritual practices and traditions. This is not necessarily done in order to adopt them ourselves, but to increase our opportunities for mutual respect. Sometimes, too, we encounter something in another tradition that helps us better appreciate something in our own. Consequently, I hope that Christians, Buddhists, people of all faiths and people without faith will approach this book from the Gethsemani Encounter with the same rigorous curiosity and courage for which Thomas Merton was renowned. (GE, p.ix)

My recent visit to Dom Bede's Ashram in India convincingly showed that it continues to flourish. Bede's pattern of inculturation, contemplative life and inter-religious dialogue continues to attract numerous guests from all over the world. The work of social outreach to the local community is impressive. The Camaldolese Benedictine community there carry on the tradition of Bede. We need such places because rather than on the level of theological debate the truth and enrichment of inter-religious dialogue is only obtained by entering into the contemplative dimension. As Father Bede said,

What we find is that if you're arguing doctrines and so on, you get nowhere, but when you meet in meditation you begin to share your own inner experience and you begin to realize an underlying unity behind the religions. (from an unpublished lecture)

Bede would illustrate this in his talks by holding up his hand and beginning with his thumb point to each finger saying "Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism." At the finger tips he would show that Buddhism was far away from Christianity, yet, he would say pointing to his palm that as one goes to the depths in silent meditation one discovers their essential unity.

Osage Monastery near Tulsa in Oklahoma is a center that continues to bring Bede's insights, teachings and practice authentically to the West. Fr Bede himself encouraged and was very supportive of this Benedictine Ashram, founded in 1980 and ably directed by Benedictine Sister Pascaline Coff. A disciple of Bede, she is deeply formed in the monastic contemplative tradition and the Spirit of Father Bede.

I am personally convinced that over the next several generations all the world religions will be enriched and changed by three factors that are now just emerging. First is the increase of people desiring and recovering the mystical dimension of religion (*pace* Karl Rahner's assertion that the Christian of the future will either be a mystic or nothing). Secondly the advent of women of all religious traditions writing theology and being taken seriously, and finally inter-religious dialogue. Both Merton and Bede were supportive in all three of these and have already made a significant impact.

Our way forward is given direction by the words of Merton and Bede:

The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity...we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are. (AJ, p.308)

writes Merton in his *Asian Journal*, while Bede writes in *The Marriage of East and West*:

When the mind in meditation goes beyond images and concepts, beyond reason and will to the ultimate Ground of its consciousness, it experiences itself in this timeless and spaceless unity of Being. The

Ultimate is experienced in the depth of the soul, in the substance or Center of its consciousness, as its own Ground or Source, as its very being or Self (Atman). This is an experience of self-Transcendence, which gives an intuitive insight into Reality. (MEW, p.31)

No doubt it was an awareness of this essential contemplative dimension that prompted Pope Paul VI to invite Benedictine and Cistercian monastics to be at the forefront of the dialogue with non-Christian religions. Hence we can say that all who have a contemplative lifestyle are included in this invitation.

Notes and References

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