

# FATHER BEDE GRIFFITHS IN SEARCH OF TRUTH.

## A CHRISTIAN MONK COMES TO RURAL INDIA ON HIS WAY TO GOD.

by Dosubaba

In the present scientific times, the humans have reduced their abode, the earth, to a very small dot. The slow bullock cart is replaced by the fastest plane. One human can meet another thousands of miles away in few hours. This is therefore, the age of meetings and conferences and assemblies and parliaments and seminars. People meet and meet to rule or to search or to discuss or to have dialogues. Many of these meetings are like a flock of crows descending on a huge tree, doing their "kau kau" for a while and then suddenly dispersing away, leaving a relieving silence on the tree. Our Parsi friends in America and England hold many such meetings with high-brow titles like "Gatha Colloquium" or "nth Youth Conference". Political and international conferences are haunted by the unseen devil of greed and ruthless selfishness. There are, however, a few meetings held from times immemorial, where God remains conspicuously present.

The meetings of Saints in the lofty Himalayas or in the Tibetan monasteries, where silence is more dominant than speech, the meeting between a Guru and his disciples in a remote jungle, the meeting of ascetics for worship or Yagna or Yasna, are the sacred meetings where the divine blessings pour down. There is another kind of meetings where the non-saintly humans meet in quest for God's truth, with a sincere searching mind. I am going to talk to you about one such meeting, where only two humans had a dialogue on : what God can be and what are the ways to reach Him; and what can be learned from the experience and teachings of different prophets, saints and mystics of the world; and whether, and if so, how the explorations of nature by modern science can help in the search for reality and truth. The dialogue was between a woman, **Renee Weber** and a man, **Father Bede Griffiths**.

The time, the place, the two participants and the subject matter of their dialogue were all unique. Both of them were sitting on the floor of a little veranda of a tiny and serene structure surrounded by lush green nature, in a small village called "Shantivanam" - the green forest of peace. It is a few miles west of Thiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu. The river Kaveri, known as the holy Ganga of the South, pours out its flowing music, nearby. The Arunachalam cave, where the great modern Saint Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) lived, taught, and died of cancer but with serene bliss on his face, is about 125 miles away.

The tiny building had a dining hall, a meeting hall, a kitchen and few small rooms for visitors. There was not much of a furniture and no glitter of modernity. It was a blissful revolt against the material civilization of 20th century, which is a huge factory of sensual objects and push button conveniences. Here in Father's 'Ashram' the motto was "doing without", not "what more?" Yes, it was an Eastern Ashram blended with a western monastery - a barren, clean, pure, simplest of the simple place lived by a Christian Benedictine Monk in the style of a Hindu Sage. "Tall and lean, almost gaunt, his muscular frame reflects the years of hard toil under the Indian sun, his ascetic face dominated by high cheek bones, deep-set blue grey eyes, and a brilliant smile". That is Renee's masterly description of Fr: Griffiths, observed through the searching eyes of a truth seeking woman. When they talked on the little veranda, it was the Indian winter in January 1983. In India summer is more intense than winter and that is why his frame reflected years of hard toil - the spiritual labour of the "sacred simplicity" (as Renee puts it), of intensive contemplation in search of truth, and of a thorough going exploration in the sacred writings of the great Mystics of the world, as also in the quest of nature undertaken by modern science.

What did he eat and feed to the Ashram-visitors? The self-grown rice and vegetables and fruits and coconuts from a field adjoining the Ashram. Had the Ashram any name? Yes, **Sachidanand Ashram**, a beautiful Hindu expression of the mystical trinity: Sat, Chit, Anand - Sat, the Eternal Truth; Chit, the divine consciousness that leads to Truth; and Anand, the bliss that accompanies the search for Truth and God, all

the way. **This trinity is revealed and reflected in our 'Ashem Vohu' prayer as Asha, Vohuman and Ushta.** (The Western Scholars have drowned this noble and mystical meaning in the mire of their philology).

Father Griffiths used to wear a saffron robe of the Hindu yogis. The Hindu way of joining hands as "Pranaam" or greeting to man as well as God and His manifestations, was a habit with the Father. Was he an Englishman converted to a Hindu? Oh! No! He was a devout Christian till his death on 13th May 1993, 10 years away from the dialogue. His coffin was laid with the Benedictine cross and rosary. Minutes before his death he and his main disciple Father Christudas sang their favourite hymns in Sanskrit and then the Lord's Prayer three times. He was buried in Shantivanam on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1993 according to Christian rites in presence of the simple villagers, who used to call him the white sanyasin and a number of his friends Hindus, Muslims, Christians from India and abroad.

Father proclaimed the deep underlying unity in all Religions and yet was completely committed to lead his life through the Christian path of his birth and upbringing.

### **THE WONDERING, WANDERING LADY**

Who was **Renee Weber?** who talked to Fr. Griffiths and recorded the dialogue in her "Dialogues with Scientists and Sages" (p. 157 to 177 - Arkana - 1986). She is by vocation a Professor of Philosophy, former editor of "Re Vision Journal" and a renowned writer of several brilliant books. She is a life long seeker of unity - "unity of things: man and nature, consciousness and matter, inner and outer, subject object - the sense that these can be reconciled" (Ibid - page 1). She has a natural kinship with all nature and its "offsprings - animals, plants, rocks, forests, water, earth, the sky, and even with remote stars and galaxies". She has taken formal training in modern sciences. For her, science is the search for truth, and philosophy, the "love of wisdom". She writes, "Science and mysticism may have a common pursuit and may even enrich one another in ways that we have ignored". (Ibid page 4). If science is the sense of wonder, mysticism is the sense of awe. Her "Introduction" to her above book reflects a wonderful synthesis of the two. The book contains dialogues with four eminent scientists - Bohm, Sheldrake, Prigogine, Hawking, and four profound mystics: Lama Govinda Angarika (a German!), Dalai Lama, Father Bede Griffiths and Krishnamurti. There are joint dialogues with Dalai Lama and David Bohm together, and also Bohm and Rupert Sheldrake together; (the latter was a close friend of Fr. Griffiths).

Let us have a brief glimpse of this unique dialogue between Renee Weber and Fr. Bede Griffiths.

To the question why Fr. Griffiths chose to live in a corner of rural India, the monk said, **"India has been much more like a revelation to me"**. Its great lesson to the world is that to be spiritually free, one must not have attachment to anything i.e. any material objects. One may use the things, but with detachment. "Elaborate system of material conveniences built up in the West is not necessary for the real enjoyment of life," Father says. (Just think how we get terribly upset when the electric power fails, when our telephone goes out of order, when our car fails or the sink overflows). **Life in the peaceful surroundings of the natural world "gives you a balance and harmony in your life and in your whole relation to people and to God."** says Fr. Griffiths.

### **A FLASH-BACK**

Fr. Bede Griffiths was an Englishman born near London on 17-12-1906 and educated at Oxford. On 20th December 1932, he entered in a Benedictine monastery and changed his first name from Allan to Bede, who was an English holy man and whose life had deeply impressed him. On 9th March 1940, he took his final vows as the priest. All along he was utterly dissatisfied with the material life of the West; and as a Christian trying to live the life as ordained by Lord Jesus Christ, he began to realise that there was something missing in the Western church too. "We only live out half our soul; the conscious rational side. We still have to discover the other half, the unconscious intuitive dimension", he wrote in his autobiography beautifully titled

as "The Golden String", from a poem of the great English poet, painter and mystic, William Blake (1757-1827). He craved for "the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and intuitive, the masculine and the feminine". That craving brought him in 1955 to the rural India, at his age of almost 50.

To Renee, Fr. Griffiths said, **"For me the great discovery in India is the discovery of the sacred. In India everything is sacred : the earth is sacred, food, water and taking a bath are all sacred, a building is sacred."** This is surely food for thought for we, the Parsis. We have a 'Baj' to chant before 'eating, a "Niyaesh" to recite before water, the sun, the moon, the fire. ....And we, like Fr. Bede, chose this holy land Bharata as our mother-land, where everything is sacred! **In Vendidad pargarad 11. Asho Zarathushtra asks Ahuramazda how do I sanctify and keep sanctified the house? how, the fire? how, the water? how, the land? how the 'gava' - the white 'cow' of nature? how the trees? how, the Nar-Ashavan, the holiest of the holy men? how, "Naairikaam Ashaonim" - the holiest of the holy women? how, the stars? how, the moon? how, the sun? how, the divine sky of "Anagra Raoh"? how, all the pure white Nature of Mazda-dat, which is the emanation from the divine seeds of Mazda's Light?** The Avesta word for "sanctify" or "consecrate" is "Yaozdathaani". 'Yaozdah' means to make sacred, keep sacred, alchemise to sacred. The word "Yaozdaathreygar", used for a Mobed striving to remain holy, has the same sense of sacredness. If the humans want to attain their 'Frashogard' - their final aim for reaching Ahura (or Mukti, Moksha, Nirvana, whatever you name it), they have to keep not only all things on earth, sanctified and sacred but even the things above viz. the stars, the sun, the moon, the highest heaven of Mazda! What a lesson in not only spirituality but also ecology!! And Vendidad! What a stupendous Manthra structure! What lofty Teachings!! What a profound Light on Ahura's Path!! Alas! Those high-brow atheist Parsis living in the West blaspheme this, their own, Sacred Scripture! Forgive them Oh God! They know not what they are doing!

In rural India, everything is sacred, Fr. Griffiths told Renee. Way back in 1930 in Gloucestershire Allan Griffiths had rejected hyper-intellectualism and the whole industrial environment, the uglification of what was once beautiful. To him Churches were beautiful, not the industrial factories. When Renee reminded him of these thoughts Father Bede had 50 years back, the notes of wisdom poured out from the golden string of his serene voice,

"From the earliest times, men and women all over the world lived in this sacred universe, whether it was the Australian aborigines, the American Indians, the tribal people of Africa, they all sensed a sacred living universe of which humans are a part. And this divine power, whatever name it is given, penetrates through the earth, the water, the air and through your own being. You belong to the sacred universe. **But in the sixteenth century this sacred universe began to be destroyed, and the ideal was viewed as superstitious. It was a deliberate effort to get away from the sacred, to rationalise everything**".

That has happened to the humans in and from the 16th century. A deliberate escapism from the sacred life ordained by God through His Prophets, Saints, Seers and Sages. We the Parsis have done the same thing; and now the humans and one of their reducing tiny fractions viz. Parsis, both, are on their way to extinction, unless the divine intervenes.

May the Divine intervene soon! Father Griffists was the living shadow of the coming event. May his spirit guide the dying humanity...

- K Navroz.

• • •

(Parsi Pukar APRIL 1998 Vol. 3; No. 10)