

A Creative Application of Indian Advaita

The Dynamics of Dialogue According to Bede Griffiths

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Introduction

The book *Dialogue as Way of Life*² is a creative contribution to dialogue that takes place among human beings in general. Though the basic experience of the book is derived from inter-religious dialogue, the book tries to focus on dialogue as a human way of living. The book tries to extend the theory and dynamics of dialogue to different cultures, and between science and religion.

Advaitic Understanding of Dialogue

The book is a study on Bede Griffiths. Born as an Anglican, Bede Griffiths converted himself to the Catholic Church. After coming to India, he was fascinated by Eastern traditions and Indian monastic movement. So he started an Ashram in India which fostered dialogue among religions, cultures and sciences. He died as an Indian mystic. The life of Bede Griffiths brings together dialogically the Eastern and Western cultures, Hinduism and Christianity, science and religion.

The author, Kuruvilla Pandikattu, begins the book on Griffiths by asserting that the fundamental experience of Indian religions could be termed as “*advaita*.” Though “*advaita*” has been interpreted diversely, no Indian religion or philosophy could be understood apart from it. In this book, an attempt is made to approach dialogue which is so essential for India from the perspective of India’s rich philosophical heritage: *advaita*. It is the author’s valid contention that *advaita* could be a crucial basis and fundamental incentive to religious dialogue and between religion and sciences.

Though the approach in the book is derived from the Indian experience, Pandikattu visualises that its role is not limited to India alone. He extends the vision to the larger world of dialogue and hopes that it has a world-wide relevance. The author rightly points out that the phenomenon of globalisation cannot be ignored even in religious and cultural dimensions of human life. Hence the international or global dimensions of the work have been confirmed by the very choice of the main person in the book: Bede Griffiths (1906-1993). He was born in England and had made India his home. This search for an *advaitic* vision of dialogue is based on the experiential life of this person. It could be a stimulus and encouragement for others as well, to situate their lives on an *advaitic* and dialogical situation: be it religious, philosophical, cultural or linguistic.

The aim of the search in this book, therefore, is to show that *advaita* forms the hermeneutic key in the inter-religious dialogue as carried out by Bede Griffiths and may be extended also to dialogue between science and religion. Here it is assumed that we could rightly enlarge the sphere of hermeneutics to include not just interpretation of classical texts, but also interpretation and encounter between various religious traditions. The author tries to visualise the dialogue and interaction between religions carried out by Griffiths, as hermeneutics.

It is interesting to note in the context of science religion dialogue that though Griffiths was not a scientist, he kept abreast with the latest scientific findings. He knew science much more than an educated lay man. Though his writings cannot be read as scientific ones, it is evident that his mystical writings depended heavily on scientific knowledge, which he gathered also from some of his scientist disciples who used to come to his Ashram regularly.

Griffiths' Creative Understanding of Cosmic *Advaita*

Pandikattu introduces first the person of Bede Griffiths. That is carried out in the first chapter. He has divided the life of Griffiths into three sections, which would roughly characterise his search and conversion to the Catholic Church, his becoming a Benedictine monk and coming to India and then finally his life as a full-fledged *sannyasi* in his own *Ashram* in India. His life journey is truly interesting and the

various steps he has taken in his life have contributed significantly to his own theological development. Born an Anglican, he lived his student life primarily as an agnostic. Later he found meaning in the Roman Catholic Church, became a monk and further experienced the significance of Indian heritage and its religious traditions for his own life. That urged him to take a significant turn in his life-style to live like a Hindu *sannyasi* or *advaitin*. When he died in 1993, he was fully at home in India both as a Christian and as an *Advaitin*, whereby he had experienced the intimate union with the divine.

Then the author takes us to the profound concept of *advaita*, as Griffiths has experienced in his own life journey. In order to understand this significant notion of *advaita*, the author has divided the notion of *advaita* into four phases corresponding to the life of Griffiths. *Advaita* basically means non-duality. And it is *the* theological term in the general Indian philosophy that is used to denote the relation between the divine and the human or between God and world and between God and the individual. This theory of *advaita* sums up the basic account of creation and eschatology in Hinduism, since Hinduism does not have or need its own separate theology of creation or eschatology. The popular and predominant theory of *advaita*, normally grounded on the Indian philosopher Sankara, affirms that there is a relation of identity between God and world. This implies that ultimately the world and the individual's soul are *maya*, or unreal. Basically everything is God (pantheism or panentheism). Griffiths takes up this profound notion and enriches it by taking it beyond the reductionistic or nihilistic understanding of popular *advaita*. But he gives a Christian interpretation to *advaita*, whereby the reality of the world and the value of relationship are stressed. Thus Griffiths is able to introduce the Christian notion of love to *advaita*, which is traditionally seen in terms of *jnanamarga* (*path of wisdom*) or the Gnostic way. In this way, it is Griffiths' achievement that he had been able to bring in a healthy synthesis between the Gnostic elements of traditional *advaita* and the love or relationship found in his Christian heritage.

With this enrichment, he has been able to show the *advaitic* intuition not just in classical Hinduism, but in the whole universe. The best example for this is the Christian doctrine of Trinity. In the Christian understanding

of Trinity, there is a union between the different persons preserving their individuality (reality) and at the same time giving scope to a healthy relationship of love.

In 1990, at the age of 84 when Griffiths experienced a stroke he could accept that stroke in the true spirit of *advaita*, as a gift from God or as a discovery of the mother, of the feminine in his life. This stroke enabled him to experience the divine in a much more intimate and *advaitic* manner. His whole life took a different turn after the stroke until his death in 1993. He has been advocating a change of consciousness effected through *mantra* and meditation as the felt need for today's world. Here science and religion can come to help.

In the next chapter, the author studies the unifying vision of Griffiths' universe. He sees the whole cosmos divided in terms of its physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions. In analysing and assimilating these dimensions, Griffiths tries to take the findings of the modern science and modern psychology seriously. Then he traces the development in each of these dimensions and comes finally to the spiritual dimension. It is here that religions do have their significant role to play. It is this religious or spiritual dimensions which leads to a unity in the totality of the one. It does not in any way belittle the uniqueness and individuality of religions.

It is in this context of *advaita* that the author tries to articulate his future vision for the whole world. According to Griffiths, the Western world dominated by science and technology has to marry the Eastern world dominated by spirituality and the feminine aspect. In his vision of the future, he is against every sort of reductionism, specially the materialistic reductionism as it is practiced in the West. And the three dimensions of life, the physical, psychological and spiritual, are to be respected. The new world will have a spiritual basis and so will be an integrated world. In the spirit of *advaita*, it is an integration where the individual differences are accepted, affirmed and transcended. So the future world according to Griffiths would be a holistic and unified world where individuality is respected and integration sought after.

Within the perspective of the unifying totality of the one, Pandikattu examines Griffiths' understanding of religious dialogue and encounter.

In the fifth chapter, he comes to analyze Griffiths' theology of religions. Pandikattu has divided Griffiths' developing theology of religions in terms of the three stages in his life. In his first phase, his view of religion could be vaguely categorised as that of identity. That gave rise to the fulfilment theory of religion, in the second phase, as he becomes acquainted with Hinduism. Finally, in his third stage of direct encounter with *advaita* he was convinced of the complementary nature of religions. Within this complementary nature of religions, he could convincingly advocate a religious dialogue based on an *advaitic* vision.

Concluding Remarks

It is clear that for Griffiths religious dialogue is crucial not just for the survival of the different religions, but also for the survival of the world itself. So in an *advaitic* vision he sees it as imperative that different religions interact, trying to reach a wholeness or totality, without sacrificing their own uniqueness. Different religions do have different roles and functions, but they do point to an *advaitic* totality, to a unifying and integrating wholeness. Griffiths is not seeking uniformity of religions, but unity of religions. He is not seeking a world religion, which would replace all other religions and bring them under its control. He is seeking a mutual hermeneutic encounter between different religions, which would form the basis for the total integration of the whole cosmos. His vision is truly integrating, truly holistic, truly unifying, without in any way sacrificing the individual uniqueness of each religion. Hence, there is a need and scope for a relationship of love between religions. There is a scope for acceptance and affirmation between religions. In this way his view of inter-religious dialogue is *advaitic*. Such an understanding of *advaita* constitutes a hermeneutic key in carrying out and understanding the religious dialogue as practiced by Griffiths.

The author begins the book by analyzing the context of the Indian situation in the beginning of 1990s. If he had written the book now, the present context of religious fanaticism would have made the theses of the book still more pertinent.

By and large the book is quite readable. It has done a yeomen service by understanding dialogue (between science and religion and between religions) as a hermeneutic encounter and applying it to day-to-

day life. Though the procedure is legitimate, when the author suggests 'advaita' as the 'hermeneutic key' it makes one wonder, if he could have brought in also the religious experience of the subaltern sections of the Indian masses – the tribals, dalits, the marginalised sections. Advaitia, predominantly the philosophy of the elitist *jnanamarga* may be philosophically popular, but not for the masses.

The book is systematically written. The Dynamics of the book is evident. The index and the diagrams provide useful tips. The American edition of the book look prosaic and scholarly, while the Indian edition (hard cover) is more presentable.

The book responds to the present problems of religious fanaticism in our Indian situation by focussing on the need for interdisciplinary and interactive dialogue. It is to be noted that the author asserts that dialogue is constitutive of human life and encounters. He concludes by reminding the readers that dialogue itself is a sacred task and a mystical experience.

Notes

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2. Indian Edition: Kuruvilla Pandikattu, *Dialogue as Way of Life: Bede Griffiths' Attempt at Interfacing Religions, Cultures and Sciences*, Foreword by Ronald Ropers (Mumbai: Zen Publications, 2001), Hardbound, pp. xvi + 344, Rs. 300. Its American Edition: Kuruvilla Pandikattu, *Religious Dialogue as Hermeneutics: Bede Griffiths' Advaitic Approach*, George F. McLean (Gen. Editor) Indian Philosophical Studies, III (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), pp. vi + 318, \$ 21.