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God in Nature, God in Christ, God in Religions: Bede Griffiths's Mysticism, and Its Ambiguities

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Abstract

Bede Griffiths is considered one of the pioneers of interfaith theology. He sought to establish a profound connection between different religious traditions at a time when even Christian ecumenism was still in its infancy. His spirituality, nourished by monastic sources, and his mystical teachings devoted an unusually high degree of attention to the problem of nature. According to his own interpretation, he first found God in nature, then in Christ and the Church, and finally in the comprehensive horizon of religions. This article attempts to demonstrate that his theology of religions, which reflects an explicitly mystical approach, is not simply pluralistic in orientation, but remains committed to Christianity, yet presupposes an almost forced harmony between different religious traditions. An analysis of Griffiths's most important texts reveals a series of ambiguities and inconsistencies in his thinking that are rarely examined in the relevant literature. By analyzing Griffiths's mysticism, his conception of nature, and his theology of religions, the article argues that his thinking is still so nuanced and complex that it has potential for the future.

Keywords: theology of religions; Bede Griffiths; Hinduism; ashramic spirituality; monasticism

1. Introduction

Bede Griffiths was born in England in 1906 into an Anglican family. After a long period of searching for his path in life, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1932. In 1933, he entered the Benedictine Pinknash Priory, and in 1947, he was appointed prior of Farnborough Abbey. In 1955, following his longstanding religious interests, he traveled to India, where he first founded an ashram in Kerala and then became the head of the Shantivanam *ashram* in 1968. In 1982, the ashram was received into the Camaldolese order, of which Griffiths had become a member in 1980. During his years in India, he became a widely popular spiritual teacher, published numerous articles in Western journals, and his books made him well known in the West. Throughout his stay in India, he remained committed to the program entrusted by Henri de Lubac to Jules Monchanin, who founded Shantivanam together with Henri Le Saux: 'To rethink everything in terms of theology, and to rethink theology in terms of mysticism' (Griffiths 1982, p. 159). It would be a big mistake to simply place Griffiths in the tradition of Christian mission (du Boulay 1998, p. 154), because he primarily wanted to promote a deep encounter between Hinduism and Christianity, but it would also be a mistake to deny his clear Christian commitment. The word 'nature' appears remarkably often in his writings and is inseparable from his conception of mysticism. He was convinced that every religious tradition 'begins with a mystical experience' (Griffiths 1976, p. 105), and that there is a 'perennial religion' in which this mystical experience forms a unified worldview, but as a result of the original mystical



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experience being expressed in words and then transformed into a system of thought through the workings of the rational mind, the one Truth gets divided. Griffiths devoted his life to the search for this one religious truth but refrained from assuming a simple unity among religions without distinction. There are many ambiguities in his views on nature and mysticism, which can be explained, on the one hand, by his pioneering efforts (he sought connections between religions at a time when even Christian ecumenism was still undeveloped) and on the other hand, they testify to the fact that a nuanced and complex theology of religion cannot be developed in the space of a few decades. Nevertheless, Griffiths's way of thinking can offer an extremely important contribution to the future encounter and spiritual rapprochement of religions.

2. God in Nature

Bede Griffiths, the English Benedictine monk was one of the representatives of a Catholic generation of spiritual theologians who, according to Francis X. Clooney's estimation, 'studied Hinduism with more consciously configured combinations of scholarship and spiritual commitment'; these spiritual teachers, in whose work several notions and traditions of mysticism gained momentum, were more respectful of Hindu wisdom than many of their predecessors, and "more vulnerable to the spiritual impact of serious study" (Clooney 2010, p. 38). Just like for Henri Le Saux, Raimon Panikkar, or Sara Grant, who were other towering figures of this generation, this vulnerability reflected in the case of Bede Griffiths not only a deep need for inner transformation, but also an openness to an overarching theoretical assessment of the personal and communal encounter with the divine reality. It is no exaggeration to say that Bede Griffiths developed a general theory of the phenomenon of religion, and within this theory, the mystical interpretation of nature played a prominent role. What Griffiths says about nature combines Christian commitment, a general interest in religious traditions, and a serious consideration of the findings of modern science in a very distinctive and unique way.

Another unique feature is that the English Benedictine monk's mature conception of nature is intrinsically linked to his spiritual quest throughout his life, and it organically continues the restless natural religiosity of his youth, which it also, obviously, surpasses. Griffiths claimed throughout his life that the successive stages of his spiritual biography did not extinguish each other, but the earlier stages were incorporated into the later ones, so that his youthful awe for nature found fertile ground in the nature-related reflections of his mature work. Talking to one of his biographers, Griffiths claimed that he distinguished "three stages in his lifelong surrender: God in nature, God in Christ and the Church, and *advaita* or nonduality" (Trapnell 2001, p. 5). This self-interpretation, which to my knowledge has never been expressed so clearly in any of his works, requires us to first examine his relationship with nature in his youth, as this biographical phase not only provides a distant backdrop to his later ideas, but also constitutes a constantly substantial dimension of his thought.

One day during my last term at school I waited 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. [...] It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before [...]. 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. (Griffiths 1954, pp. 1–2)

This is how Bede Griffiths's autobiography begins: with a description of an experience, which immediately paints a clear picture of how he experienced an "overwhelming emotion" in the presence of nature, sensing an almost "religious awe" and a deep awareness of

an “unfathomable mystery”. Young Alan (this was his original name) soon broke with his religious (Christian) upbringing because he felt that no religious ritual could compare with the effect that nature had on him. In his young years, he was attracted to literary works in the same spirit: to Thomas Hardy because of his love of nature, or to Shelley due to his “religious love of nature” (Griffiths 1954, p. 21). Later, in Oxford, studying with C. S. Lewis, he came to appreciate Wordsworth based on his “description of the kind of trance which he experienced in the presence of nature” (Griffiths 1954, p. 27). It is easy to see that whatever he thought about nature during those years, he always thought about it in terms of religious concepts (awe or mystery) and from a religious perspective (emphasizing trance and ecstasy). It is difficult to resist the temptation to present further quotations illustrating the contours of his early thinking, which, in seeking harmony with nature, sharply criticized industrialized society and rationality separated from imagination and morality. More important, however, is the observation that the Cartesian idea “that mind was a pure spirit and the body a pure mechanism was surely the most disastrous error ever propagated” (Griffiths 1954, p. 42). Criticism of this misconception will lead to that “new vision of reality” (Griffiths 1989) which will attempt to unite Western science, Eastern mysticism and Christian faith.

The early search for harmony with nature was stripped of its romantic naivety by C. S. Lewis, who warned the young university student of the value of rationality. As a result, Griffiths—following Coleridge—gradually arrived, first, at a concept of the spirit, which is able to unite rationality and imagination, and, second, at a concept of the symbol, which is able to explain how something can become present to the soul in a way that makes a real knowledge of it possible (i.e., one that shares the given thing’s existence). Spirit and symbol will become for Griffiths ways of expressing the possibility of intuitive knowledge and of the presence of a transcendent reality within the immanent frames of the world. And from the perspective of his later work, one more trait is very important from his early reflections on nature: the awareness that in unity with nature, the self does not disappear, does not melt into some greater reality, but rather remains distinguishable (Trapnell 2001, p. 32). The fact that the self has an eternal call to exist and is not meant to be annihilated in some mystical experience, will always remain an essential feature of Griffiths’s thought.

The importance of the concept of symbol was also expressed in his early development in the fact that after a while “it was no longer the face of nature which seemed to contain the meaning of life” for him, but he felt “that the real mystery lay within” (Griffiths 1954, p. 50). Nature was becoming for him a symbol of a greater mystery which transcends the natural world, but is also present in it, especially in the human soul. From then on, his life will be devoted to searching for this mystery. However, I believe that his life journey is worthy of attention not only because of his individual search and individual insights, but also because he expounds a concept of the mystical way of life and the mysticism-centered relationship between religions which, despite all its ambiguities and questionable features, offers indispensable perspectives on the contemporary relationship between religions.

Less than a year before his death, Griffiths once again recalled the enduring significance of his youthful experiences and his early reverence for nature: “Awareness of the presence of God in nature remained with me, and remains with me today, as absolutely fundamental in my life” (Griffiths 1997, p. 16). Like many other thinkers, he drew parallels between this early experience and his subsequent development and the entire history of humanity and the stages of its evolution (it is well known that concerning parallels between individual development and the evolution of humanity he relied mainly on the work of Ken Wilber; cf. Teasdale 2003, p. 55). He equates complete harmony with nature with the state of paradise, with a childhood, which must inevitably come to an end, but whose knowledge and memory constantly call us to return to paradise, to the “transcendent mystery”. It is

worth noting that in the tradition of monastic theology paradise “is not coterminous with original creation. It is a pocket within it, a gated community in which man, made in God’s image to be like him, might practice happiness.

“The book of Genesis presents Eden as a privileged space where the sweetness and goodness of creation are astoundingly explicit.” Erik Varden OCSO, the author of this statement, legitimately emphasizes that on the basis of this understanding, paradise is the norm a monastic community is held to in its endeavor of conversion, as the brethren, each individually and all together, renounce themselves, turn their back on the region of unlikeness, and return to the Father’s house and garden (Varden 2025). In the light of these observations, it can be said without difficulty that Bede Griffiths remained a representative of monastic theology and spirituality throughout his life, and that everything he said about the human vocation to return to the “transcendent mystery” was always rooted in the experiences of nature of his youth.

3. God in Christ

It is characteristic of Griffiths that before turning to the Gospels, he had already read some classic works of Eastern wisdom, among others the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Buddha’s Way of Virtue*, and the *Sayings of Lao Tzu* (Griffiths 1954, p. 58) which even later he identified as the three greatest books of spiritual wisdom outside the New Testament. This unity of Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese tradition is also characteristic of his vision.

However, this broad religious interest did not stem from uncertainty about Christianity. As Peter C. Phan notes in relation to pioneering Christian spiritual masters such as Henri le Saux and Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle, his experiences “did not originate in some kind of uncertainty about Christian identity or spiritual crisis or even discontent with the Catholic Church, much less in ignorance of the Christian tradition”; his love and loyalty to the church were unquestioned, and out of this love and loyalty he “undertook interreligious sharing in order to enrich the church with the spiritual resources of other religions and in this way help it achieve its full self-realization”. Phan is also right in emphasizing that while insisting that his interreligious sharing must occur predominantly in the areas of ethical and monastic practices and prayer and even mysticism, he did not “belittle the necessity of an intellectual mastery of the intricate doctrines and histories of non-Christian religions” (Phan 2004, pp. 72–74). This attitude meant that the second biographical phase of his life (God in Christ) remained present in his thinking even when he was deeply imbued with the spirit of Advaita.

How did Bede Griffiths think about Jesus Christ, and how did his Christocentric spiritual teachings relate to his views on nature? It is striking in his early writings that the solitary asceticism of his pre-conversion years is replaced by an approach that greatly values the communal experience of the body of Christ and the material reality of the Catholic sacraments. He notes: “There can be no greater or deeper mystical experience than this [the celebration of the Eucharist]: it comprehends in itself the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive way. The senses are purified by learning to apprehend the sacred mysteries under sensible forms; the mind is illumined by contemplation and union with the Word made flesh; and the soul is united to God in its inmost depths by the communication of the divine nature. Finally, this is no solitary ecstatic experience; it does not take place in the desert or on a mountain” (Griffiths 1940, pp. 7–8). As the solitary asceticism that characterized the early stages of his life is integrated into an approach that values material reality and religious community, his earlier symbolic vision is also integrated into a comprehensive vision that no longer sees poetry and the poetic symbols as the highest form of grasping reality, but rather mysticism: “The poet is nearer to a vision of the whole [than science], the world begins to be transfigured in him, but it is only the mystic who is present at the

final transfiguration, who catches a glimpse of the world transfigured in the divine light” (Griffiths 1976, p. 41).

In Griffiths’s thinking, as in almost all forms of mysticism, transformation is of decisive importance, but for him this transformation is not exclusively individual in nature, nor does it concern only the Christian community or the whole human family, but extends to the whole of created reality, and in a Christologically informed way. In this regard, his understanding of Christ’s death and resurrection is of decisive importance. After his resurrection, Jesus did not simply carry on with his life in this world, but “was alive for evermore, transcending the world”. What this means, said Griffiths, “is that in the death and resurrection of Jesus the matter of this world was transformed”—because unlike other religions, Christianity claims that the matter of the universe is not simply an appearance which disappears when the final reality is reached, but is transformed (Griffiths 1989, p. 167). “The atoms, the molecules, the cells of Jesus’ body were changed”, he transcended matter in all its levels, entered “the spiritual level, and with that transformation, the matter of this universe is taken up into the Godhead” (Griffiths 1989, p. 168). According to Griffiths, this process is the final fulfillment of the dynamic that has been present in the world since the first appearance of matter, and through human consciousness was raised to a new level in human existence.

We find here a cosmic vision that is finalized to the Christ-event, and encompasses the entire history of the material world, from the formation of matter to its ultimate transformation. Here Griffiths is aided by what he calls new physics: a form of science which understands the material universe as a field of energies, as a web of dynamic interrelationships in which the parts can be only understood in relation to the whole. The dynamic development of the material universe reaches a new level “with the advent of the human body”: a “breakthrough takes place when matter and form, which have been working together, come into consciousness and we can be aware of ourselves as a material organism with cells made up of matter from the first matter of the universe. Each of us, in the cells of our body, are linked with the original matter of the universe, [...] we are all linked with all the original cells which began to form on this earth as it reached a state when life could emerge, about four billion years ago” (Griffiths 1989, p. 24). In Christ’s resurrection, this human relatedness and bodily existence were “made totally conscious and became one with God, in the Godhead” (Griffiths 1989, p. 168).

This could happen, because Christ has assumed the whole creation: “He has not only taken us up into himself; he has taken up the whole of creation” (Griffiths 1983, p. 38). Griffiths’s Christocentric view of creation has a lot of traditional features, so there is no need to explain it in detail: God as Trinity is present in every particle of the world which has Christ as its center; every created reality has its existence in the Word who contains everything in himself potentially even before creation; God is to be known through the created reality, and so on. What is important to emphasize is that this Christology, informed by both patristic sources and medieval mysticism, was not simply a transitional phase in Griffiths’s thinking, but rather a permanent dimension of it, manifested primarily in his views on the material world and its ultimate destiny. In this area, he, of course, relied heavily on the work of various theologians (such as Teilhard de Chardin or Sri Aurobindo), scientists (such as Fritjof Capra), and spiritual thinkers (such as Ken Wilber), but he integrated everything he took from these authors into a completely unique structure of interreligious thought.

4. Interreligious Perspectives

In some respects, Bede Griffiths was an extremely complex figure, while in others he was extremely simple. Later, I would like to discuss how his simplicity of thought may

have had its downsides, but for now I would just like to say a few words about his views on the relationship between religions. He was a sovereign and independent thinker who differed sharply even from those who were otherwise very close to him: Jules Monchanin, who was the founder of the Shantivanam *ashram*, which Griffiths led from 1968 until his death in 1993, and Henri le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), from whom he took over the leadership of the *ashram*. As Raimon Panikkar later put it, in the *ashram*, “Jules Monchanin, the founder, Abhishiktananda, the transformer, and Griffiths, the reformer [. . .] were so different that the friends of the first were rather critical of the second, and the followers of the second were not “tuned in” by the third” (cited in [du Boulay 1998](#), p. 154). Monchanin, who Henri de Lubac considered to be “a brilliant priest, saint, and mystic” ([de Lubac 1967](#)), studied Hindu and Buddhist philosophy early on and with great passion. His approach was always philosophical in nature and scientific in scope, and throughout his life he remained skeptical about whether Hindu Advaita and the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity could be reconciled ([Monchanin 1974](#); cf. [Vagneux 2025](#)). Abhishiktananda was no less passionate a thinker, but his approach was always primarily spiritual and existential in nature, and was marked by immense anguish and effort as he sought to establish an inner connection between faith in the Trinity and Advaita. His diaries ([Le Saux 1986](#)) and other works (cf. [du Boulay 2005](#)) vividly testify to this passionate search for a viable path, which refused to accept any kind of simple compromise or simplistic solution. He always remained in a painful state of transition between the “two shores” ([Davy 1981](#)) and never reached a harmonious solution regarding the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity.

Griffiths combined Monchanin’s intellectualism and Abhishiktananda’s passionate mysticism, but he integrated the two into a completely unique harmony. The key to this harmony is what he called perennial philosophy and perennial religion already in his years in England. In his cultural criticism writings, he regularly refers to the ancient religious mindset, in which humans lived in complete harmony with nature and God, and which has been disrupted by modern science and modern lifestyles. All concrete religions derive from a cosmic covenant between God and mankind through nature ([Griffiths 1976](#), p. 101), and there is a principle that unites all the conflicting and partial views in religions: this ancient principle “transcends their differences and reconciles their conflicts” “beyond all the formulations of the schools and beyond all the revelations of the scriptures”, “beyond words and thoughts”, “where the divine Word is spoken and the mystery of Being is made known” ([Griffiths 1976](#), p. 107). The notion of “reconciliation” is especially telling: Griffiths was convinced that the various religious traditions can be integrated into a harmonious unity. My impression is that, in this regard, he took too simplistic a view of the differences between religions and arrived too quickly at some kind of harmony. This in no way diminishes the fact that Bede Griffiths was a holy man who, over time, became an “international guru” ([du Boulay 1998](#), pp. 160–75), but from a theoretical point of view, there are difficulties that can be articulated in relation to his theories.

From the perspective of interreligious theology, these difficulties are evident, for example, in the fact that his writings often alternate between what is called “unitary pluralism” and “pluriform pluralism” (see [D’Costa 2009](#)). The first represents the view that all religions ultimately offer the same path to divine knowledge and salvation, while the second represents the view that no religion is complete, but that religious traditions need the complementary additions of other religions. In Griffiths texts both views are to be found, resulting in an unresolved tension. Let us have a look at a longer passage that clearly demonstrates the presence of pluriform pluralism:

We can thus discern a basic pattern in all the great religious traditions. There is first of all a supreme Principle, the ultimate Truth, beyond name and form, the Nirguna Brahman of Hinduism, the Nirvana and Sunyata of Buddhism, the Tao

without a name of Chinese tradition, the Truth of Sikhism, the Reality—al Haqq—of Sufism, the Infinite En Sof of the Kabbala, the Godhead (as distinguished from God) in Christianity. There is then the manifestation of the hidden reality, the Saguna Brahman of Hinduism, the Buddha or Tathagata of Buddhism, the Chinese Sage, the Sikh Guru, the personal God, YHWH or Allah, of Judaism and Islam, and the Christ of Christianity. Finally, there is the Spirit, the Atman of Hinduism, the Compassion of the Buddha, the Grace (Nadar) of Sikhism, the “Breath of the Merciful” in Islam, the Ruah, the Spirit, in Judaism, and the Pnuma of Christianity. (Griffiths 1994, pp. 41–42)

Griffiths does not simply argue that this triadic pattern is equally valid in all traditions, but that “we must be willing to learn from every ancient tradition” (Griffiths 1976, p. 99), because since the disintegration of the original unity, no single religion contains the whole. No religion can now remain in isolation, because each is a unique revelation of the eternal Truth—and since each is unique, each is indispensable.

Those familiar with Raimon Panikkar’s thought know that Griffiths’s view later reappears in Panikkar’s Trinitarian theology of religions (Panikkar 1973). Panikkar is a pluralist who can be regarded as an “exception” (Vanhoozer 1997, p. 58), as he considers the Trinity to be important (unlike other pluralists), but this is because he discovers the specific characteristics of the persons of the Trinity in different religions and religious traditions which so become all essential and complementary. As he famously puts it in the second edition of his most widely known book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, the “reality is many names and each name is a new aspect, a new manifestation and revelation of it”, or with a spatial metaphor: “It is non simply that there are different ways leading to the peak, but that the summit itself would collapse if all the paths disappeared. The peak is in a certain sense the result of the slopes leading to it” (Panikkar 1981, pp. 29, 24).

This is precisely why it is surprising that in other texts Griffiths speaks of the “essential message” of all religions (Griffiths 1976, p. 107) or does not hesitate to mention that the final mystery when known in its ultimate ground is “one with the mystery of Brahman, Nirvana, Tao, YHWH, Allah” (Griffiths 1976, p. 74). This draws attention to a fundamental problem in his theology of religions, namely that it has failed to consistently represent the idea of the original and ultimate unity of religions. I believe that this difficulty can be supplemented with a few more specific problems. Since the literature on Griffiths is written almost without exception from those who held the “international guru” in high esteem, it is understandable that the various difficulties in his thinking are rarely discussed. This is precisely why I consider it important to highlight some of the problems within his oeuvre.

5. Ambiguities

Bede Griffiths was “the embodiment of the great tradition of the Benedictine host, he made everyone welcome” (Barnes 2012, p. 134). We know from his biography that his hospitality was such that it caused him problems at Farnborough Abbey between 1947 and 1951. His fellow monks there “felt that his boundless charity and kindness to everyone who came to the abbey was excessive, that for the guests to outnumber the monks (as often happened) was disturbing to the life of the monastery” (du Boulay 1998, p. 92). He was a representative of what is called “ashramic spirituality”, and in Shantivanam, he was fulfilling the duty of the *guru* or *acarya*, the leader of the *ashram*: in structing his disciples who come for wisdom” and in this context religious affiliation is secondary (Barnes 2012, p. 134). I suspect that this teaching attitude and role resulted in a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty remaining in his writings, as it is easy to imagine that his writings were born out of oral teachings given in different circumstances. We know for sure that his magnificent commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* was originally composed as talks given to

the guests of Shantivanam ashram (Griffiths 1987, p. 6). This teaching role may also explain why critical comments on Griffiths's theories are very rare. It is true that he was criticized in many ways by his Hindu contemporaries, who mostly treated him with distrust and even called him "the worst kind of spiritual colonialist" (Trapnell 2001, p. 119), but neither the official church nor academic theology offered any serious criticism.

Criticism from the realm of academic theology was mostly indirect and veiled, and generally directed at those efforts that sought to establish an overly close and misleading connection between Christianity and Hinduism. For example, in his seminal work on the theology of religions, Jacques Dupuis mentions Griffiths's pluriform pluralism and poses the question: "It may be asked whether this view is altogether consonant with the Christian tradition", because in this tradition the Son and the Spirit share with the Father one and the same Godhead and all "three constitute, in their interrelationships, the Ultimate Reality and the source of all created beings", so it is not possible to distinguish a hidden Godhead behind the manifestations of the divine persons which seems to the case in Griffiths (Dupuis 1997, p. 268). Similarly, Gavin D'Costa indirectly criticizes Griffiths's thinking when he criticizes Panikkar's pluriform pluralism, arguing that in this way of thinking, Christianity and the other religions are being "viewed from a place outside of any of the particular traditions through the forging of a kind of religious Esperanto" (D'Costa 2009, p. 15). To my knowledge, however, there is no serious theological critique of Griffiths's theology. This is precisely why it may be important to identify a few problems.

The first difficulty worth mentioning relates to the person and significance of Christ. Naturally, from the perspective of Christian theology, any relevant ambiguity receives special attention, and Griffiths's writings do present difficulties in this regard. Certain texts testify that Griffiths considered Christ to be unique and unparalleled, while other texts show that he considered his function to be completely identical to that of other prominent religious figures. When he claims that Jesus "knew himself in the eternal ground of being, as the Buddha had done, as the seers of the Upanishads had done" (Griffiths 1976, p. 58), then it is completely unclear how he believes Jesus differs from the giants of other religious traditions. Being rooted in the eternal ground of being in really no special characteristic. In the sequel to his autobiography, *The Marriage of East and West* (Griffiths 1981) one finds similar statements, for example, when the author discusses how Jesus, calling himself the Son of Man, connects to the ancient tradition that includes the Jewish Adam Kadmon and the Muslim Universal Man, thereby revealing the "fundamental unity of all religions" (Griffiths 1981, p. 14). Even more unusual is his statement that Christ is indeed a symbol of God's grace, salvation, and presence among people—but that this symbol will "pass" when the reality it represents becomes utterly manifest (Griffiths 1981, p. 42).

Another ambiguity and uncertainty can be found in the way Bede Griffiths distinguishes between Godhead and God. Of course, this distinction also has precedents in Christian tradition, primarily in the work of Meister Eckhart, whom the "international guru" likes to refer to (e.g., Griffiths 1987, p. 171), also due to fact that he is "very popular among Hindus because he comes nearer to Vedanta than any other Christian" (Griffiths 1987, p. 247). Eckhart's main point in making this distinction was that the God named and conceptualized by humans cannot be identical with the inexpressible and incomprehensible God. A similar idea can be found when Griffiths distinguishes between Godhead and God in the sense that Godhead is the ground "by which all things, including God the Creator, exist" (Griffiths 1976, p. 24). He does not shy away from even claiming that the persons of the Godhead are "manifestations" of the abyss of this divine ground (Griffiths 1976, p. 25). It is questionable whether this distinction between the Godhead and the creator God is easily reconcilable with Christian teaching, and it gives the impression that the Christian Trinity is merely a secondary manifestation of a much more primordial divine reality.

A third ambiguity relates to Griffiths's comparative procedure and comparative method. In light of what has been said above about his conception of the relationship between religions, it is not surprising that he regularly compares the leading representatives and theorists of religions with each other and regularly mentions them in parallel. In his texts, Shankara and Thomas Aquinas, or Ramanuja and Catherine of Siena, are particularly often mentioned side by side. It is questionable whether, in these cases, the parallel mention is really based on the essential identity of the views of the authors, or whether only formal similarities can be found between them, behind which, due to the historical context, religious language, and style of thought, there are far greater differences than similarities. The comparison seems even more problematic when, for example, the divine Saccidananda appears as another name for the Holy Trinity (Griffiths 1976, p. 59), although it is much easier to understand when Jesus is referred to as the "great sannyasi" (Griffiths 1981, p. 43).

Given the perspective of this article, it is especially interesting to see how ambivalent Bede Griffiths can be in his assessment of nature. The expression "nature" is one of the most frequently occurring words in Griffiths's writings and it is not easy to distinguish between the many different meanings in which this concept is used. Accurate understanding is made particularly difficult by the fact that the term has both positive and negative connotations and, depending on the context, can refer to a variety of phenomena. The first layer of meaning was already apparent in the way he evaluated his youthful experiences of nature: on this understanding, nature has a theophanic character, it can reveal the reality of God or at least of something divine beyond itself. Related to this is the belief that in paradise, man lived in complete harmony with nature, and matter was not separated from spirit, nor body from soul (Griffiths 1976, p. 95).

Griffiths usually describes this original state as favorable and positive, stating, for example, that it was a blissful state of innocence. This favorable assessment is not diminished by the fact that he is apparently aware that this state of affairs cannot last forever, but that man must go through the process of growing up and maturing. In this respect, there would be no ambiguity in his thought, but he also calls the state that man must attain through asceticism, mysticism, and contemplation, or that is granted to him through intuitive insights or unexpected grace, a natural state. He presents us with a holistic view as the goal to be achieved, in which "the barriers of space and time begin to fall, and everything comes together in unity": this is the natural state of our being; "we were born for this vision of eternity" (Griffiths 1976, p. 29). Of course, it is possible to find an explanation for how both the starting point and the final state can be natural for humans, since the monastic program of returning to paradise points in this direction. However, in certain texts, nature appears as a reality that contains dangerous forces, is located below the human level, and separates humans from the universal structure of the universe and the law that creates order, which humans should follow. Since the self is not independent and does not create its own laws, it must always follow some a priori law, and the conviction that it either follows the laws of the universe and reason or submits to the laws of nature, "to the law of passion and desire" (Griffiths 1976, p. 14), is a source of serious ambiguity.

However, it would be unfair to Bede Griffiths not to mention that in other areas he is unusually clear and takes a firm stance on issues where other interfaith pioneers have been ambiguous. One such issue is whether there is such a thing as a specifically Christian mysticism. He lists several factors that outline the contours of a specifically Christian mysticism. He emphasizes five points in particular. First, that in Christ the whole of creation is gathered into one, the total reintegration of everything is realized, and the whole of humanity is taken up into the life of the Godhead. Mysticism is built into this reintegration (Griffiths 1987, p. 252). Griffiths refers to creation in many places

as a distinctive feature of Christian doctrine, emphasizing that there is no place in other religions for the doctrine that constitutes Christian creation. Consequently, the second distinctive feature of Christian mysticism, according to Griffiths, is that created reality is not considered a fall from grace in this mysticism, nor is it identified with God. From this point of view, Griffiths is an advocate of the mysticism of love, arguing that the mystic is immersed in an “ocean of love” (Griffiths 1994, p. 23), because creation is, in essence, an outpouring of love. The third characteristic of mysticism in Christianity (mentioned by Griffiths) can be found in the fact that the human soul “is a capacity for God. It is not God. My atman, myself, is not God, but rather it is a capacity for God which can be filled by God and can be transformed into God, and this is a gift of pure grace” (Griffiths 1987, p. 252). The primacy of love and the dominance of grace, which Griffiths emphasized even in the last years of his life, suggest that his understanding of spirituality and mysticism always retained a deeply Christian quality. The fourth mystical characteristic is related to what we saw above in connection with the function and significance of Christ, the Church, and the sacraments. We have already briefly mentioned the fifth characteristic when we examined Griffiths’s experience of nature in his youth. This is that at the end of the mystical path, the human person “is not lost in the divine but enjoys perfect oneness in love” (Griffiths 1987, p. 253). While in Hinduism and Buddhism there is a tendency for the person to dissolve into ultimate reality, in the Christian mystical understanding each person is unique. When a person is lost in “the ocean of love”, they do not dissolve, but find themselves. The purpose of creation was from the outset that “each unique, individual being should participate in its own way in the divine Being”, and the whole of creation becomes completely meaningless “if there are no distinctions in the ultimate state, if everything and everyone is lost in God” (Griffiths 1976, p. 42). This theory of mysticism gives Griffiths an unusually clear position among the giants of interfaith spirituality and, despite the ambiguities in his work, makes him a thoroughly traditional author in many respects.

6. Conclusions

Among representatives of interfaith theology and spirituality, it is almost commonplace to think that “together the great religions can offer the values of meditation, interiority, compassion, nonviolence, justice, peace, fidelity” (Johnston 1978, p. 78), and therefore it is necessary to develop a synthesis between the intellectual values and practices of the great religious traditions. Bede Griffiths himself believed that a new culture was on the horizon, the birth of a civilization in which East and West, intuition and rationality, feminine and masculine qualities, the unconscious and consciousness would be united (Griffiths 1982). To this end, he also sought to find a new way of life. Of course, this is where the fundamental questions of the theology of religions arise: what is the relationship between the most important religious traditions, does only one religious tradition offer the path to salvation and a comprehensive knowledge of God, and does the diversity of religions correspond to their equality? More recently, the program of comparative theology has come to the fore, according to which it is not the theoretical problems of the relationship or hierarchy between religions that are most important, but rather that different doctrines and spiritualities can learn from each other, in such a way that, by moving back and forth between their ideas on a specific issue, an increasingly rich overall picture emerges for the reader, and the different traditions can remind each other of what the other tended to forget in the course of its history.

In this context of a theology of religions, Bede Griffiths often appears among those theologians who, influenced by their dialogical experiences, have moved away from their previous traditional way of thinking towards a pluralistic position (e.g., Schmidt-Leukel 2005, p. 166). I believe that in Griffiths’s case, this type of pluralistic classification is not

entirely accurate. If he were close to pluralism, he would be most closely related to the pluriform pluralism of which Raimon Panikkar is the best-known representative. However, there are several areas where Griffiths expresses views that do not allow us to classify him as clearly pluralistic. I have already mentioned his view of the Christian characteristics of mysticism. Similarly, his thinking leans toward Christianity in relation to the personal nature of ultimate reality: not only because, in his view, “the human person does not disintegrate as we pass into the unifying consciousness of the transcendent, but on the contrary becomes more fully personal” (Griffiths 1987, p. 94), but also because, in his analysis of Hinduism and Buddhism, he systematically points to the presence of the absolute person in these religious traditions, which he calls “the revelation of the cosmic person”. This is why he argues that the doctrine of *Purusha*, the divine person, is of decisive importance in the rapprochement between Christianity and Hinduism (Griffiths 1983, p. 76), and this is why he emphasizes the dimension of personal compassion in Buddhism. For this reason, I believe that Bede Griffiths can provide inspiration for a nuanced, complex, and thoughtful theology of religion that is willing to acknowledge that different religious traditions can learn from each other but is always aware of the requirement that a theology of religion cannot be developed without the privileged acceptance of a single religion. Griffiths’s ambiguities testify to the fact that this program can still only be developed with certain difficulties, but it seems certain that Griffiths’s contribution will be indispensable to such a theology in the future, because it draws on factual and concrete knowledge of religions, seeks to establish internal connections between religious traditions, and is guided by a comparative approach. If we examine the fundamental works and approaches within the field of the theology of religions, we see that Griffiths’s oeuvre does not belong to the corpus of texts most frequently analyzed from a theological perspective, but is rather significant from a spiritual standpoint; however, in my opinion, this assessment should be revised.

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