

Document on Christian Meditation Found Wanting

INTRODUCTION

by Rev. Charles Brandt, Black Creek

INDIA'S POPULATION is in excess of 800 million. After two thousand years only 3 per cent of its population is Christian. Unlike earlier evangelists carrying with them to this great subcontinent their gothic churches, clerical garb and western civilization, **Père Mochanin, Dom Henri Le Saux and Dom Bede Griffiths** (the present prior of Saccidanada Ashram in southern India) adapted their life and religious customs to those of the Indian people.

These early monks (from 1947) went barefoot, adopted the Sannyasi kevi habit, kept a vegetarian diet, lived in simple thatched huts with dirt floors with minimum furniture and slept on the floor on a simple mat. In addition the monks studied the Indian's holy writings (the Vedanta) and even sometimes read these aloud at their communal office. This was a far cry, this kind of inculturation, from earlier missionaries to India, and indeed from the type of evangelization that occurred in Canada among our native people.

In time, the Indian people of the surrounding villages came to respect the religious community, and the community has grown strongly with Indian recruits. Perhaps no one today has a greater knowledge and understanding of eastern religions than **Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB**. It was my privilege to live at his ashram in Tamil Nadu during the last two months of 1989. Hundreds of people from all parts of the world came to consult with him during the brief time that I was there. He is truly a Christian guru.

ON MY RETURN FROM India I received from several parts of the world copies of the December, 1989 Vatican document on Christian prayer and meditation. This document has been reviewed in the London Tablet, America, Sunday Visitor, New York Times, etc., etc. The various reviews and interpretations of this document have created concern and some confusion among Western Christians who practice Christian meditation or centering prayer.

I sent copies of the document to five world known teachers of Christian meditation for their critique. Amongst these was **Father Thomas Keating, OCSO**. One response came from **Bede Griffiths** who asked that **Father Keating** review it before it became public. **Father Keating** stated that **Dom Bede's** response was the most powerful one that he had seen.



Father Charles Brandt, left, with Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB, at Shantivanam, India in November, 1989.

SACCIDANADA ASHRAM,
SHANTIVANAM, INDIA
DATE 18-2-90

Dear Father Charles,

THANK YOU FOR YOUR letter and for sending me a copy of the document on Christian prayer and meditation. As a response to the challenge presented by Hindu and Buddhist spirituality today, I find it extremely disappointing.

There is no hint of the tremendous depth of this spirituality or of its profound wisdom. Eastern meditation is treated as though it were a

matter of superficial techniques, of "bits and pieces" which a Christian can use if he wishes, but of whose dangers and abuses he must be made aware.

What is still more disappointing is that the conception of Christian prayer which it presents is most inadequate, ignoring as it does what is deepest and most significant in the Gospel and in Catholic tradition.

THE DOCUMENT INSISTS on the "distance" which must always exist between human and God as creature and creator, and warns against any attempt to "try and overcome the distance", as though God in Christ had not already overcome that distance and united us with him in the closest bonds. St. Paul says: "You who were far off he has brought near — not kept distant — in the blood of Christ".

Jesus himself totally denies any such distance. "I am the Vine," he says, "you are the branches". How can the branches be 'distant' from the Vine? Later the document insists that we must "never in any way seek to place ourselves on the same level as the object of our contemplation". Of course, we don't seek to place ourselves on the same level. It is God who has already placed us there.

Jesus says: "I have not called you servants but friends". And to show what such friendship means, he prays for his disciples: "That they may be one, as thou, Father in me and I in thee, that they may be one in us".



THE UNION BETWEEN Jesus and the Father in the Mystery of the Trinity is the closest which it is possible to conceive, or rather it is beyond all conception. Yet it is for this very union that Jesus prays for his disciples. One of the great teachers of Christian meditation today, **Father John Main**, has said that "Christian meditation is a 'participation in the consciousness of Christ'. Or rather it is to share in that stream of love which flows between Jesus and the Father and is the Holy Spirit".

It is to this depth of contemplative wisdom that Christian meditation should lead us and it is towards this depth of unitive prayer that many Christians have found that the Hindu and Buddhist and Sufi mystics can lead us.

This reminds us that centuries ago the church was challenged by a similar movement of mystical prayer in the Fourth Century Platonism of **Plotinus** and **Porphyry**. But the Church in the Fourth Century did not meet this challenge by a cautious retreat into the past. It boldly accepted the challenge and incorporated into Christian doctrine the profound insights of the Neo-Platonists. **Jean Danielou** in his *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique* has shown how **St. Gregory of Nyssa** steeped himself in the philosophy of **Plotinus** and by subtle changes adapted it to orthodox Christian doctrine.

ANOTHER CRISIS IN Christian mysticism was encountered in the sixth century with **Dionysius the Areopagite**, now generally believed to have been a Syrian monk of that period who had absorbed the teaching of **Porphyry**, a later Fifth Century Platonist. He boldly went beyond the dualistic, conceptual mode of prayer to which the Roman document clings and declared that in contemplative prayer we must go beyond all words and concepts and enter into "divine darkness", so that we come to "know by unknowing".

Anyone familiar with Hindu and Buddhist mysticism will know that it is to this 'supra-conceptual' knowledge, this experience of a transcendent mystery, transcending word and thought, that they also can lead —

This is not to say that Hindu, Buddhist and Christian mystics all have the same experience. But it is to recognise an analogy between them and to look upon the Hindu and Buddhist experience as something of supreme significance, not to be lightly dismissed by a Christian as of no importance.

THERE IS A CRISIS in the Church today. Many Christians are looking to the Church for guidance in contemplative prayer and are failing to find it. They then turn to Hindu and Buddhist masters for guidance and often through them come to understand something of the depth of Christian mysticism.

But for such people this document offers no assistance whatever. It is rather calculated to put them off and make them confirmed in their belief that the Christian Church has nothing to offer those who are seeking God in the dark, often on a lonely path and desperately in need of the guidance which the Church so often fails to give.

I hope that I have not put the case too strongly, but I feel that a protest has to be made. You can make any use you like of it. If you decide to publish it, please show it first to **Father Thomas Keating** or anyone else you respect for corrections.

Yours ever sincerely in Christ
Dom Bede Griffiths