

Living With Both Halves Of Our Soul

BOOK REVIEW: *The Marriage of East and West*

Reviewed by Fr. Charles A.E. Brandt (yde)

By Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB

Shantivanam Ashram

published by Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Illinois

“LET THEM REFLECT ATTENTIVELY on how Christian religious life may be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions whose seeds were sometimes already planted by God in ancient cultures prior to the preaching of the Gospel.” Vatican Council II (Ad gentes).

Indeed, Dom Bede Griffiths went to India to assimilate their contemplative traditions while at the same time remaining true to the teachings of the Catholic Church. This in his mind was a step towards the marriage of East and West, an ecumenism not limited just to the West. Father Thomas Ryan speaks eloquently on grassroots ecumenism, working and praying for a unity that somehow will bring together the best elements of the major Christian traditions: Anglican, Evangelical, Lutheran, Orthodox, Reformed and Roman Catholic.

In this book Father Bede Griffiths is concerned with an even greater marriage, that of the East and West. Formerly a monk of Prinknash Abbey, Bede Griffiths went to India in 1955 and assisted in the foundation of Kurisumala Ashram, a monastery of the Syrian rite in Kerala. In 1968 he came with two monks from Kurisumala to Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, in Tamil Nadu.

This ashram was founded in 1950 by two Frenchmen, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, and was a pioneer attempt in India to found a Christian community following the customs of a Hindu ashram and adapting itself to Hindu ways of life and thought.

BEDE WRITES, “IT WAS not merely the desire for new ideas which drew me to India, but the desire for a new way of life . . . I wanted to discover the other half of my soul. I had begun to find that there was something lacking not only in the Western world but in the Western Church.”

“We were living from one half of our soul, from the conscious, rational level and we needed to discover the other half, the unconscious, intuitive dimension. I wanted to experience in my life the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and intuitive, the conscious and unconscious, the masculine and feminine. I wanted to find the way to the marriage of East and West.”

In his book Bede goes to great length in pointing out the importance of Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, for the ecumenical movement, as a centre for contemplative prayer, a place where people come to experience God in the spirit, in the dimension of the intuitive and unconscious.

“An ashram or monastery,” he writes, “has to answer the needs of all these people, offering them that gift of contemplative prayer, which brings together people of different religions and opens them up to the hidden mystery of the indwelling presence of God.”

REV. WILLIAM JOHNSTON, S.J. writes: “Believers of the great religions can best meet at the level of faith where . . . the deepest encounter will take place in the area of mysticism where we go beyond thoughts and concepts and images, to a state of silent love.”

It is Fr. Bede’s prayer that out of this silent love will come that marriage to which he has dedicated his life: *The Marriage of East and West*. Other books by Bede Griffiths are: *The Golden String*; *Return to the Center*; *the Cosmic Revelation and River of Compassion*, a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*.

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