

Rediscovering the Divine

*New Ways to Understand, Experience,
and Express God*

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Introduction

An Island Is the Tip of a Mountain



I spent the first twenty years of my monastic life deeply immersed in and influenced by the life and work of Bede Griffiths, OSB Cam., specifically two themes of his. One was his insistence on a tripartite anthropology, that the human person is not made up of just body and soul but is also spirit. The other was what he called the universal call to contemplation, that all people are called to share in the graces of the contemplative life, and that at the core and end of all authentic spiritual traditions there is a mystical experience.

Based on those two themes I gave countless retreats and conferences, immersed myself in the study of the meditation traditions and Asian spirituality, wrote articles and my first two books, and was deeply involved in interreligious dialogue. As a musician, I was influenced by these two themes in much of the music that I wrote and performed.

After a ten-year hiatus from living in my monastic community, during which time I did much of that work, I was asked to return and take on the role of prior. I instinctively knew that I would need to turn then to more classical Western Christian sources in my teaching within the community, and I did so with new eyes and new fervor without, however, losing that other influence. It was then

that I really fell under the influence of my esteemed and erudite confrere and intellectual mentor, Fr. Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam.

Bruno was a former prior of our community, having had to lead the brothers, oftentimes grudgingly, into the era of the Second Vatican Council. While taking on that role, he remained an autodidact of a wide range of topics stretching from literary criticism to modern poetry, and as would be expected, monastic sources and mystical theology East and West. He also edited *The One Light*, the definitive anthology of the writings of Bede Griffiths, whom he knew well.¹ Though he published only three books of his own, Bruno left behind a mountain of notes, homilies, and outlines of conferences as well as an extensive personal library. As one of our former monks said about him, “Every word he says has a thousand mirrors on it.” Though not well known outside of a small (but influential) circle, I was impressed by the long list of people who made their way down the serpentine Pacific Coast Highway on the Big Sur coast to search Bruno out and spend time in his company and conversation, influential writers and great minds such as Henri Nouwen, Donald Nicholl, Raimundo Panikkar, Richard Rohr, and Richard Tarnas, along with a host of clergy, including several bishops, fellow religious, and lay people.

Bruno used to regularly invite me to be a part of some of those conversations. He also urged me to write and exhorted me to offer regular chapter conferences for the brothers when I became prior. Besides the many conversations he and I had over meals and in his cell, when I conferred with him on matters both practical and intellectual, I had the immense privilege of accompanying him closely during the final few years, months, weeks, and days of his life, hours traveling back and forth to doctors’ appointments, then a hospital stay, and visits with him during an extended time in a rehabilitation facility. After we brought Bruno home for his final hours, aware that death was imminent, I sat next to his bed

¹Bruno’s own introductory explanatory notes for each section of that book are as precious as Bede’s own writings.

during my allotted time keeping vigil, working on the homily for his funeral Mass, knowing that that task would fall to me as prior, knowing also how well known Bruno was for his scintillating and insightful preaching. For some reason I decided to re-read Bruno's book *Second Simplicity* there at his bedside, perhaps the most accessible of his works, as I kept watch while he breathed his final breaths.

It is a temptation for a homilist at a funeral to eulogize rather than preach, but that is not the task at hand. The preacher even at a funeral is tasked with preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' life, passion, death, and resurrection. The eulogy is for another moment. There is, however, nothing to stop one from using the deceased's life as a framing device for that homily. And as I read through *Second Simplicity*, I decided to preach the "gospel according to Bruno" and share what I understood to be his unique insight into the gift of the Christ event and Christianity's specific contribution to the great conversation going on across the globe in churches, ashrams, zendos, temples, synagogues, and mosques about spirituality and the working of the Divine in our world.

When I was asked to write an article in memory of him for a monastic revue, after Bruno's death, I based it on that homily. I used that article again as the basis for a conference that I offered to a local group. That conference turned into four conferences, and within a year I had nearly a 100-page outline as it grew into a full retreat and then a twelve-part series. The topic just kept expanding in my own mind and heart. I never referred to *Second Simplicity* after the initial impetus; I simply began improvising on the themes myself. It was almost as if after twenty years of digging so deeply into the thought of Bede Griffiths, I didn't even realize that I had tapped out that root and was looking for a new vocabulary.

Bruno suggested in *Second Simplicity* that there are four poles or dimensions that manifest themselves out of the unitive experience of many ancient religious traditions. I shall also refer to them as "energies." In Christianity, these four dimensions are represented

by the arms of the Cross.² He named those four dimensions the Silence, the Word, the Music, and the Dance. This is where we will begin. The first three of these energies, poles, or dimensions are related to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, whom we normally refer to as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Then there is a fourth, which is not just a person. With my late confrere, I believe that this fourth is another energy, another essential pole or dimension of Christianity that is often overlooked, unrealized, and unarticulated. We will have hints at it along the way but will really explore it in the final chapter.

Bruno was very influenced by Carl Jung, and you might recognize that the idea of quaternity was also a theme that fascinated Jung. Jung was always looking for the psychological completeness of a fourth wherever there was a trinity, always wanting to complete a triadic figure with a fourth element. All of this Jung ultimately tied in with the psychological process of individuation—and I think that’s a key to this mysterious fourth element, because individuation, which you might say is the *telos*, the end, of Jungian psychoanalysis, is to bring everything from the unconscious into consciousness. That is to say, Jung thought that the Christian Trinity was at least *psychologically* incomplete, that the fourth must have been either forgotten or hidden or “displaced” in the unconscious. Simply put, the fourth element is the shadow, and although it is dark, that shadow is not just evil and not necessarily evil at all. There’s also a “holy darkness,” as the song goes.

Like Jung, because of this idea of the quaternity, Bruno was also attracted to mandalas, and very often when he would begin a retreat conference, he would start by drawing a cross/mandala on the whiteboard or chalkboard and then proceed to fill it in throughout his teaching. I like to think that when he died he drew one last mandala on the board, but this time he left it blank for

²Bruno Barnhart, *Second Simplicity: The Inner Shape of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 4–5.

me to fill in with colors, words, and images in my own way. This book is my filling in of that blank mandala.

One last note by way of introduction. This work was originally titled “From the Ground Up” because this is what we aim to do, to rediscover the Divine and articulate our understanding of God all over again, starting from someplace new, “not in some heaven lightyears away,” but in the very Ground of Being which is the ground of our own being and consciousness. Nor is it removed from the ground we stand on, the ground of Mother Earth and creation. And so this is not a theology or spirituality from the “top down” but from the “ground up.”

In order to do that we may have to do some gentle and respectful deconstructing of “all imaginations and all the notions we have acquired from outside ourselves,” in the words of Johannes Tauler, whom we shall encounter below. With that gentle respect in mind, I mean in no way to diminish the venerable tradition of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If anything, what follows is a way to increase our knowledge of these Persons.

A metaphor might help. I am tempted to use a common phrase and say that the names for the Persons of the Trinity are but the “tip of the iceberg.” But an iceberg floats and melts! A stronger image for the names of the Trinity might be an island. It might appear that an island is floating in the vast sea, but actually every island is the tip of a mountain, rooted deep in the fathomless abyss of the ocean. Even more rooted in the fathomless are our names for God, including those names for the Trinity: they are merely the island that we see sticking out of the sea.

What we’d like to do now is explore the rest of the mountain that sustains those islands and move beyond the God of our imagination, the God of our projections and desires. This exercise hopefully will give us a greater appreciation for the depth of the meaning of the Persons of the Trinity as we have known them in our limited way until now.

May the words of this prayer poem of St. Catherine of Siena be our guide:

You, eternal Trinity, you are a sea:
The more I enter you, the more I discover,
and the more I discover, the more I seek you. . . .

O abyss! O eternal Godhead! O deep sea!
What more could you have given me than the gift
of your very self?
You are a fire always burning but never consuming;
you are a fire consuming in your heat all the soul's selfish
love;
you are a fire lifting all chill and giving light.
In your light you have made me know your truth.³

³Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, #167, trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 364–365. Sense lines mine.