

**A SENSE OF THE SACRED. A BIOGRAPHY OF BEDE GRIFFITHS,**  
by K. Spink. *SPCK*. London. 1988. Pp. viii + 214. £8.95.

There is biography and hagiography. This book veers towards the latter, understandably enough when its subject is the English Benedictine, turned *sannyasin* (renouncer), Fr. Bede Griffiths. Griffiths is well known for his ashram in South India where many, including myself, from both east and west have rediscovered Christianity. The book is immensely readable and is well illustrated with sixteen black and white photographs.

Spink charts Griffith's life from his childhood spent at Christ's Hospital school (an intellectual aesthete), his Oxford days (meeting with C.S. Lewis and a life-long friendship), his commune days (with two Oxford friends), his slow conversion and awakening to Anglicanism and then to Roman Catholicism (appropriately prompted by readings of Newman). This is followed by his entry into the Benedictine order and his growing interest in Indian philosophy resulting in his passage to India in 1955. All this takes us up to the time covered by Griffith's autobiography *The Golden String*. Eight of the thirteen chapters of Spink's book deal with this period and the inevitable question arises: what insights are gleaned from Spink which are not available in Griffiths's autobiography? The answer: not very much, or certainly—not enough. Admittedly Spink has interviewed some relevant people, but too many important questions are just touched upon and a paucity of investigative rigour is sometimes evident. For example: Griffiths's father is a curious figure, acknowledged by Spink, but there is little illumination about him. There is much innuendo about repressed sexuality and the importance of this factor in Griffiths's life, but nothing is drawn together from the scattered suggestions. Often, the early bibliographical material is not related explicitly enough to his theology—the way in which most people, short of visiting India, will experience Griffiths.

There are other examples of this lack of thoroughness. We hear the 'other side' (from Abbot Rushton) of the account of Griffiths's removal as superior at Farnborough, but Spink makes no attempt to get further behind this story, or to relate it to what seems a considerable rift that was later to arise in Kerala between Griffiths and Fr. Mahieu (chs. 10–11). Or again, we hear that Abhishiktananda's North India meetings were 'not particularly successful' (121)—but we are not told why. Some of Abhishiktananda's important writings were inspired by those meetings. A final example. We hear that young potential permanent members of the ashram sometimes 'left in a manner which Father Bede found not exactly disturbing but not at all encouraging.' (164) Why didn't Spink try and trace some of these people and explore the reasons for their disenchantment?

The rest of the book takes us through Griffiths's gradual recognition of the implications of indigenizing the Church in India: from Latin to Syrian to Tamil and Sanskrit in the liturgy; from western dress to orange 'kavi' robes and vegetarian food—and of course, the more profound transformation in spirituality. Again, Spink tells a good story and tells it well. However, when she comes to the theological sections (chs. 10, 12) there is no critical evaluation of or even allusion to many real difficulties

raised by Griffiths's work. Furthermore, there is never any real questioning as to the nature of Griffiths's work in India. When I stayed at the ashram I encountered some incisive criticisms from some young Indian priests who had fed from the waters of Latin American liberation theology. They argued that a social gospel was needed in India, not a Brahminical type of Christianity with a Gandhian form of economics. This may be attractive in peaceful village Kulitalai, but what about throbbing metropolitan Calcutta? Spink, in an aside, voices Griffiths's concern that the Latin American model is not indigenous, but she seems oblivious to the irony of the recent affiliation with the *Italian* Camaldoli order—or the fact that many of the pioneering indigenizers were *western!*

This is a fair and engaging biography, and the criticisms above reflect the extent to which Spink is successful in stimulating the reader to a deeper interest in Griffiths. My own hope would be that Spink's work will spur someone to write a more penetrating and rigorous biography, but with her regard and sympathy for a man whose complexity, charm, depth and prophetic nature rightly shine throughout this book.

GAVIN D'COSTA

**JOURNEY TO FREEDOM. THE PATH TO SELF-ESTEEM FOR THE PRIESTHOOD AND RELIGIOUS LIFE** by J.G. Sullivan. *Paulist Press*. 1987. Pp 179. \$8.95.

If one talks to a collection of priests in Britain about personal relations, feelings and emotions, one gets a variety of responses from the few who appreciate their importance to the many who hardly recognise their significance. If one goes to a seminary and looks at the training of clergy, it is unlikely that the emotional formation of its members will be a priority.

Despite the increasing awareness of the Church as a community of the People of God in which availability, love and sacrifice are the prominent credentials, priests are still trained mainly to offer the Sacraments and preach the word of God. Admittedly this is happening within the context of a widening understanding of liturgy in which relationships and feelings are more prominent but the form they take is often symbolic and does not impinge on the life of the participants. Looking at my own parish, after twenty years of Vatican II, the parishioners have hardly grasped that the Church as a community implies deep interaction between its members.

At the centre of this interaction lies the priest. As his authority based on status and power is stripped of its significance, what is left is the capacity to be Christ-like in the sense that Jesus had an enormous capacity to relate, love and experience empathy with his people. The priest is needed less and less as a leader and more and more as a person who can be a catalyst of love in the community he serves. This means a great deal more than being a dispenser of the Sacraments, and a preacher of the Word. It means that his personality must be mature, free and available to relate in depth with his people.

Despite the increasing importance attached to psychological evaluation before men and women are accepted for the priesthood and