

AWARENESS BY FR DE MELLO HAS SOME INTERESTING IDEAS ABOUT SELFISHNESS

The Catholic priest, Anthony De Mello, wrote a book called *Awareness* (Fount, London, 1997) that became a runaway success. Many retreat centres for Catholics based on his ideas have sprung up. The book is basically about self-help and has some similarities with pop psychology. I will discuss the merits of the book first and then the shortcomings and then how it fails to square with Catholic doctrine. De Mello was a psychiatrist and no one can expect even a priest one to be a real Catholic. The book says that suffering is caused by stupid thinking or delusions and that all you have to do to be happy is to be aware or see through this stupidity for happiness is not caused by you but is intrinsic. You just have to learn how to let it activate. It is there inside you all you have to do is let it out.

De Mello says that acting out of self-interest is good and healthy (page 24). He says we should not try to become unselfish but to have the right kind of selfishness. This kind of selfishness is just enjoying the happiness that is there when you detach yourself from everything and just accept whatever comes. It is selfish because it gives you real delight unlike running after people, fame and things. It is the only real selfishness. You obtain it by doing away with the idea that you need anything outside yourself and you do everything for a reason so the reason you do that is for your own happiness only so it is selfish. He says that until you wake up you are getting something outside yourself out of it and being dependent on something else to make you happy and that is bad (page 15) for it is searching for happiness that is already inside you.

He says there are three types of selfishness:

The first is the type that gives you the pleasure of pleasing yourself.

The second is the type that gives you the pleasure of pleasing others.

The third is the type that has you doing good to others to avoid feeling bad if you don't (page 25). He rejects the statement of those who do this that they hate hurting others and says this is nonsense for all people love it especially when somebody else is hurting somebody they don't like for it is safe for themselves. This is madness for it is possible to let others walk over you because you hate hurting them. However, he says the third type is not love because it is driven by guilt.

The second type is the variety he approves of but you need awareness to do it properly.

He says that people don't want to be happy. They want things like cars and successful jobs instead and they don't want to be cured of this for the cure is too painful (page 6). The truth is that they do want to be happy but they think these things are going to do the trick and win them happiness. Otherwise why would they bother? Nobody wants a car if they know it is going to make them miserable. They don't want the cure because they cannot see the cure working for the cure requires them to be detached from transient and material things and honours. If people don't want happiness then it follows that they don't want God - assuming the Christian propaganda that having God gives you complete happiness is true - and when they pray they are hypocrites.

His assertion that self-worth should have nothing to do with what successes you have had but if you have managed to be unconditionally happy (page 106). A person with a successful life and plenty of money and prestige who is not happy is not a real success at all. He is right if you can be unconditionally happy for that is better than being conditionally happy. Conditional happiness is weaker happiness than unconditional for it is always under threat.

He correctly observes that you are never in love with a person but only your judgment of them (page 8). You never trust anyone either but only your perception of them and when they do something bad to you, you accuse them of letting you down because you are angry because your judgment of them was incorrect and you hate being wrong. He does not go as far as to say that you never love God but only your image of God or your assessment of God for that would be betraying the truth that the vast majority of the human race are hypocrites and most servants of God are just promoting God out of pure manipulative arrogance and pride. Anyway, trust is not a compliment to the other person or God at all. It is praising yourself for judging them right. The Bible asks us to trust in God but this trust is a sham.

He correctly observes that when I feel that something is the case it isn't necessarily the case (page 79).

He correctly observes that conditional happiness is when you think you need your father or mother or wife or God and if you don't get them the way you want them you will refuse to be happy (page 10). He blames this on the conditioning we have got from society. He says that when somebody dies we should not grieve for them or for those who grieve. Grief is just feeling sorry for yourself not them (page 53). To grieve for those who grieve is silly for it is feeling sorry for those who

feel sorry for themselves.

He says that most of those who go to a psychologist or psychiatrist want relief but don't want to be cured of their mental problem (page 12). When they hit rock bottom they become sick of their sickness and that is when they start to work on healing themselves. This approach would imply that therapists should focus on making their patients feel as bad as possible. Some of those people see advantages in being sick. Sometimes there can be a vengeful urge to pull other people down through having them worry about you and looking after you. But most of the time what is happening is the patients can't see light at the end of the tunnel or if they see it they cannot feel it and so therapy is not as helpful as it could be because each one has to help herself or himself.

He says that if you renounce anything you are really tying yourself to it (pages 15, 16). He says you are giving it power. He means that if you renounce sex you are trapped by sex in the sense that you will fight it as long as you renounce it. You are succumbing to its power by creating a struggle. He says it is only nonsense renouncing anything. Just see through what you should be rid of. See that it is an illusion and gives a promise of happiness that it won't keep. See that is all you have to do. All you have to do is become aware. But you might think that when you become aware you are renouncing unawareness! No you are just getting rid of unawareness but you are not renouncing it. Renouncing implies struggle against an attraction that you can't get rid of and that is why he says renouncing continues to give the renounced thing power over you.

De Mello says we are happy but we put things in the way. The things we put in the way block the happiness so that we cannot experience it.

Why should we regain this inner happiness? No regain is the wrong word. The correct word is reach for it is there but we are imprisoning it away from us. If we open the door it will be there. So why should we enjoy this intrinsic happiness? Because it is right or because it is nice?

Some might say that it can't be because it is right because we can't help the happiness. You might say we can help it because we can block it. But blocking it is the wrong way to deal with it. And yet it is the only way. We cannot help the happiness for it is intrinsic. An analogy. I am consciousness. If I put things in the way of my awareness eg alcohol or drugs or sleeping all the time, I am diminishing my awareness the wrong way. I cannot help being conscious. If I have to hurt a person by pulling out a tooth I can't help it. Same principle. I cannot argue that I can help it just because I walk away for walking away is not a legitimate option.

Some say that we cannot help the happiness but we can do something to receive it so it can be because it is right. So we have refuted it. If we should embrace the happiness because it is right then the right is more important than the happiness. This would be saying happiness is not good in itself. So how could it be good to be happy then?

If we embrace the happiness because it is nice and not because it is right then it follows that God is evil for not miraculously multiplying copies of Awareness so that everybody on earth can read it.

Both the right and nice options cause problems so mixing them together and embracing both doesn't help. If you splash ugly grey paint over a canvas and then splash ugly pink paint over it the result will still be ugly.

De Mello says you should not make demands on others for demands imply that you will refuse to be happy if they are not met. To make demands on them then is to disrespect yourself for you cannot love others if you don't love yourself and so it is not love. But God made demands on us in the Ten Commandments and Jesus did as well in his own. When Jesus said that those who die outside his love will go to Hell forever he was telling us to make ourselves unhappy if our demand for salvation was not met for how could we be happy if it was not? The implication is that God does not love. People want belief in God so that they can make demands on him for a life after death and for consolation in this one and make demands on other people often through a priest or minister. If demanding is wrong then so is serving God or emphasising him. Atheism would be a duty.

De Mello says that suffering makes you more selfish than ever before and makes you full of yourself and you can't help others as well with it either (page 104). Only awareness that material things and the people around you are not needed for your happiness but that happiness is inbuilt and is allowed to function when you get rid of the illusions is necessary and it frees you from your me side or from yourself. This makes suffering completely useless. Yet God created the power to suffer and the viruses and germs and other natural evils so God must be either evil or non-existent. If awareness is our salvation then why do we need De Mello's book to tell us that and why can't God make us learn these things by instinct like he makes us learn other things? For suffering to train us in the ways of God it would need to induce awareness but this never happens unless the person has read De Mello's book or something. The Church says that God cannot send suffering to Joe Bloggs no matter how much he needs its disciplinary power if Joe Bloggs needs his health to help other people. God sees that evil will be maximised if he sends Joe a sickness. This tells us that goodness is happiness. But if goodness is happiness then why has God not done better to stop evil?

