

The Suspicious and Timely Death
of
Father Anthony de Mello, SJ

from
mothandrust.tk

There seems a depressing inevitability about the fate of those who would challenge the established order, and engage popular support. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X come readily to mind, and of course President Kennedy. Undoubtedly people who had made powerful enemies but had also polarised various social, religious and political groups enough to conjure a host of scapegoats and confusion. Where the heavy finger of blame points in only one direction, subtler methods are required.

*

Tony was a rising star in the Catholic Church. OK, at 55 he was no spring chicken, but nevertheless by comparison to the higher orders, he was youthful indeed. Tony founded the Sadhana institute in 1973, which over the years gained an international reputation, along with its founder. Tony found himself frequently jetting around the world giving conferences and talks and gaining ever more popularity with an increasing audience.

Tony captivated audiences with simple stories, parables and sayings from across culture and religion: Chinese, Indian, American, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist... using them as gateways to understanding, windows upon awareness. Moreover, Tony held a deep appreciation for scripture, the messages, signposts held within, and the early Christian mystics whose writings he blended seamlessly with spiritual wisdom, from wherever it came.

Come the mid '80s, although resistant at first, Tony allowed occasional recordings of his talks. In 1986 he gave his first videoed conference, 'Wake up to Life!', held over four days in New York. It was an enormous success, Tony appeared to be going places.

*

I knew nothing of Tony at this time, I'd been C of E and lapsed somewhat. In fact I'd found more sense in Daoism and Buddhism so had focused my spiritual journey there. When it came to Catholicism, my connection, hence understanding, had consisted of little more than, 'In God's Name' by David Yallop¹ (arguing Pope John Paul I was assassinated because he was about to curtail the Vatican Bank's money laundering for the Mafia and return the Church to the poor), 'The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail' by Michael Baigent et al.² (which, amongst other things, examines the construction and editing of the Bible and Rome's attempts at exterminating dissidence), and 'Father Ted'³, so 'followers of the faith' were unlikely to be top of my reading list.

1 Yallop, D. (1984) *In God's Name: An Investigation into the Murder of Pope John Paul I*

2 Baigent, M. Et al (1995) *The holy blood and the holy grail*.

3 Hat Trick Productions for Channel 4, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Ted

Not long after the Internet came into being, a friend who is prone to such things, sent me a quote from Anthony de Mello:

“You are so proud of your intelligence”, said the master. “You are like a condemned man proud of the vastness of his prison cell”.

I liked it very much. It sat comfortably with someone who, at least academically, was intellectually challenged. In fact, it was a great source of comfort as I fought my way through three years of International Relations Theory at university.

Never really thought any more about it after uni, until browsing in a London book store, wanting something for my return journey to Aberystwyth, when I came across 'Sadhana: a way to God - Christian exercises in Eastern form'⁴. When I read Anthony de Mello was a Jesuit priest I almost returned the book to the shelf, almost, but... something stayed me. It is important, as I would hear Tony tell me, just a day or so hence, not to let prejudice stain my window.

Sadhana was a joy. To be honest it transformed my picture of what Christianity could be. Tony made such simple, wholesome sense, seamlessly tying east and west. In fact, what Tony was saying, seemed to me the antithesis of Catholicism as I had understood it.

And indeed, although willing to reappraise my opinion, given the shining beacon of Tony, and as I was to discover, some remarkably brave nuns and priests in Latin America, I could find little, or nothing, to substantially challenge my original position. For as I examined recent Papal decisions and actions in relation to censoring and silencing campaigning priests, organised crime, child abuse, financial dealings, power... the actions appeared as autocratic, unanswerable, arbitrary as ever. With the fearsome Herr Ratzinger appearing as Pope John Paul II's henchman for throttling dissidence.

*

Tony must have been a big, big problem. Tony would not be silenced, he was here to dance his dance. He spoke his truth in a simple, logical, understandable way, engaging with increasing numbers as word spread. His 1986 tour of the US, as mentioned above, was a huge success. Unfortunately, all the video footage of the four day conference was destroyed, leaving just eight hours of audio (of which most would be published as 'Awareness' some three years later).

1987, a year on, Tony is back in the States, ready for his summer tour. Surely this year there would be no such accident, backups would be made, safeguards put in place. 'Tony, the video' was about to go public through every Catholic bookshop worldwide! A most unpalatable prospect for the powers that be.

*

4 de Mello, A. (1985) *Sadhana: A Way to God – Christian Exercises in Eastern form*

It would be a futile exercise to attempt to uncover any validity behind the possible assassination of Tony. As a priest within the Jesuit order, he would be effectively encased within their system. Their meals, their autopsy, their press release, no need for external examination. So we see motivation, means and method, but that is all, and as Tony would advise us, one must keep an open mind, open to, and awareness of, each and every possibility and eventuality.

Assassination or not, for Herr Ratzinger, Tony's death was a timely 'Godsend'. Unfortunately for Ratzinger, Tony's work did not dry up. Posthumously published works appeared and interpretations also began to surface. He was not best pleased. On Ratzinger's request the Vatican banned Tony's books, however, finding the ban unworkable, this was transmuted to a 'Notification', penned by Ratzinger and authorised by Pope John Paul II, placed in all Tony's books warning Catholics away from such dangerous and subversive teaching^{5&6}. (see below)

*

Tony represented a potential schism in the Church, encouraging people to become aware, to think for themselves, rather than let the Church, or any ideology do it for them.

“To doubt”, Tony argues, “is infinitely more important than adoration... to question is so much more important than to believe”.⁷

Everywhere people are searching for objects to adore, but I don't find people awake enough in their attitudes and convictions. How happy we would be if terrorists would adore their ideology less and question more. However, we don't like to apply that to ourselves; we think we're all right and the terrorists are wrong. But a terrorist to you is a martyr to the other side.⁸

The process that we use for making a St. Francis Xavier could be exactly the same process used for producing terrorists.⁹

What is scripture, then? It's a hint, a clue, not a description. The fanaticism of one sincere believer who thinks he knows causes more evil than the united efforts of two hundred rogues. It's terrifying to see what sincere believers will do because they think they know. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a world where everybody said, “We don't know”?¹⁰

Unfortunately Tony's observations on the scriptures did not survive the accident, but having gone over the eight remaining hours of the 'Wake up to

5 <http://users.tpg.com.au/adsligol/tony/index.html>

6 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_de_Mello_\(priest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_de_Mello_(priest))

7 Awareness, Disk 7, Track '06 Assorted Landmines'

8 Awareness, Disk 7, Track '06 Assorted Landmines'

9 Awareness, Disk 1, Track '08 The Masquerade of Charity'

10 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '06 Arriving at Silence'

Life!' conference tapes times past counting (cutting, splicing, reordering, editing... (it appears as if no one cared for these recordings) a long and would be tedious process, if not for the joy of listening to Tony and his insights) the few biblical observations which did survive paint a remarkably different picture to the one presented as Truth by religious hierarchy.

“Sleeping people read the scriptures and crucify the Messiah on the basis of them.”¹¹ Tony is not limiting his observation to lay people, but challenging all, citing examples of priests and religious scholars who, through the Bible and enculturation, lose sight of deeper meaning, preferring attachment to understanding.^{12&13}

Awareness, awareness, awareness – the message is so simple, yet complex as life itself. To find awareness one must first shatter illusions, get deprogrammed, remove the control that society has imposed. So what about Tony's awareness? Tony's deprogramming? Tony's society?

One can of course only speculate, and it is most difficult to see that which surrounds us, pervades us (like, to use one of Tony's analogies, the little fish in the ocean: “Excuse me, I’m looking for the ocean. Can you tell me where I can find it?”¹⁴), however, from examining Tony's words, I believe he was under few illusions about Catholicism, and the ruthlessness of its hierarchy.

One might even suggest he was poking fun or taunting them, with all his talk of awareness, understanding, discovery, and not taking the Bible literally, which flies in the face of those with an interest in power and control, who prefer blind obedience and subservience. Further, in his condemnation of religion Tony suggests the Church falls prey to idolatry: a mental idol, producing “the more dangerous idol worshippers”.¹⁵

“All revelations, however divine, are never any more than a finger pointing to the moon... When the sage points at the moon, all the idiot sees is the finger.”¹⁶ Tony is not of course limiting his observation to Catholicism or Christianity but religion in general and the idols: texts, symbols, rituals, which too often become a “barrier to getting in touch with reality, because sooner or later we forget that the words are not the thing. The concept is not the same as the reality. They’re different... The final barrier to finding God is the word “God” itself and the concept of God.”¹⁷ “You miss God because you think you know. That’s the terrible thing about religion.”¹⁸

Tony is universally scathing of nations and governments of all kinds, “I don't know of one government, not one, that is selfless, individuals perhaps, but

11 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '03 Sleepwalking'
12 Awareness, Disk 7, Track '06 Assorted Landmines'
13 Awareness, Disk 8, Track '01 The Land of Love'
14 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '06 Arriving at Silence'
15 Awareness, Disk 5, Track '06 Getting Concrete'
16 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '06 Arriving at Silence'
17 Awareness, Disk 5, Track '05 Hugging Memories'
18 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '06 Arriving at Silence'

governments, oh, oh, oh"¹⁹. Can Tony, in his awareness, be overlooking the government in Rome?

I wondered at his tenacity, fearlessness, abandon, and I am tempted to say foolhardiness, as he jokes, perhaps?, of becoming Pope²⁰ (edited out of the book), questioning the honesty and capacity of priests²¹ and pouring scorn on weeping for one's sins - "a great religious distraction", says Tony. "That's not what repent means: wake up! Become aware! What's the use of weeping for your sins, which you committed while you were asleep anyway?"²² But, Tony also informs us, you cannot truly live until you have abandoned fear, and fear of death.²³

And Tony shows no fear, as he enters into the heat of battle, with his heart at the lotus feet of the Lord²⁴ ("should I battle my relatives? Go right ahead, do your duty"²⁵).

He is not threatened by criticism, he does not care what you think of him or what you say about him. He's cut all those strings: he's not a puppet any longer.

"He's terrifying. So we've got to get rid of him. He tells the truth: he has become fearless: he has stopped being human."

Human! Behold! A human being at last! He broke out of his slavery, broke out of their prison.²⁶

This is Tony from 'wake up to life, 86'. Jesus appeared as the immediate example in my mind, but the more I examined Tony's words the more I found challenges to Rome, its orthodoxy and references to their potential response. Is it in any way possible that Tony could be blind to the anger his perspective generated amongst Church hierarchy? Or is he predicting his fate?

Tony finishes the conference with his wonderful story of 'the man who invented fire', who shared his invention with the cold and hungry and so enraged and terrified the priests that they got rid of him.²⁷ Again, this could be reference to Jesus, yet it might just as readily apply to the man who rediscovered it.

19 Wake up to Life, Disk 1, Track 06

20 Awareness, Disk 1, Track '08 The Masquerade of Charity'

21 Awareness, Disk 1, Track '08 The Masquerade of Charity'

22 Awareness, Disk 2, Track '05 The Illusion of Rewards'

23 Awareness, Disk 7, Track '03 The Death of Me'

24 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '01 Four Steps to Wisdom' – see also, Bhagavad-Gita

25 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '01 Four Steps to Wisdom'

26 Awareness, Disk 4, Track '01 Four Steps to Wisdom'

27 Awareness, Disk 8, Track '01 The Land of Love'

Herr Ratzinger's notification, issued in 1998 gives us the plain facts of how Church authorities felt about Tony's perspective. But such a document could never be published while Tony was alive, for its arguments are specious, dishonest and easily undermined. And Tony, master of scripture and interpretation would have torn them to shreds, citing biblical scholars and canonized saints: the likes of Augustine, Saint Ignatius and most particularly, Saint Thomas Aquinas, 'the prince of theologians', together with self evident truths. Church authority would have appeared as fools, or as the liars and hypocrites that they are.

Notifications Concerning Writings of Fr. De Mello, SJ

NOTIFICATION CONCERNING THE WRITINGS OF FR. ANTHONY DE MELLO, SJ

June 24, 1998

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

The Indian Jesuit priest, Father Anthony de Mello (1931-1987) is well known due to his numerous publications which, translated into various languages, have been widely circulated in many countries of the world, though not all of these texts were authorized by him for publication. His works, which almost always take the form of brief stories, contain some valid elements of oriental wisdom. These can be helpful in achieving self-mastery, in breaking the bonds and feelings that keep us from being free, and in approaching with serenity the various vicissitudes of life. Especially in his early writings, Father de Mello, while revealing the influence of [Buddhist](#) and [Taoist](#) spiritual currents, remained within the lines of Christian spirituality. In these books, he treats the different kinds of prayer: petition, intercession and praise, as well as contemplation of the mysteries of the life of Christ, etc.

But already in certain passages in these early works and to a greater degree in his later publications, one notices a progressive distancing from the essential contents of the Christian faith. In place of the revelation which has come in the person of Jesus Christ, he substitutes an intuition of God without form or image, to the point of speaking of God as a pure void. To see God it is enough to look directly at the world. Nothing can be said about God; the only knowing is unknowing. To pose the question of his existence is already nonsense. This radical apophaticism leads even to a denial that the Bible contains valid statements about God. The words of Scripture are indications which serve only to lead a person to silence. In other passages, the judgment on sacred religious texts, not excluding the Bible, becomes even more severe: they are said to prevent people from following their own common sense and cause them to become obtuse and cruel. Religions, including Christianity, are one of the major obstacles to the discovery of truth. This truth, however, is never defined by the author in its precise contents. For him, to think that the God of one's own religion is the only one is simply fanaticism. "God" is considered as a cosmic

reality, vague and omnipresent; the personal nature of God is ignored and in practice denied.

Father de Mello demonstrates an appreciation for Jesus, of whom he declares himself to be a "disciple." But he considers Jesus as a master alongside others. The only difference from other men is that Jesus is "awake" and fully free, while others are not. Jesus is not recognized as the Son of God, but simply as the one who teaches us that all people are children of God. In addition, the author's statements on the final destiny of man give rise to perplexity. At one point, he speaks of a "dissolving" into the impersonal God, as salt dissolves in water. On various occasions, the question of destiny after death is declared to be irrelevant; only the present life should be of interest. With respect to this life, since evil is simply ignorance, there are no objective rules of morality. Good and evil are simply mental evaluations imposed upon reality.

Consistent with what has been presented, one can understand how, according to the author, any belief or profession of faith whether in God or in Christ cannot but impede one's personal access to truth. The Church, making the word of God in Holy Scripture into an idol, has ended up banishing God from the temple. She has consequently lost the authority to teach in the name of Christ.

With the present Notification, in order to protect the good of the Christian faithful, this Congregation declares that the above-mentioned positions are incompatible with the Catholic faith and can cause grave harm.

The Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, approved the present Notification, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Rome, from the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 24, 1998, the Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist.

+ *Joseph Card. Ratzinger, Prefect*

- *Tarcisio Bertone, S.D.B.,
Archbishop Emeritus of Vercelli
Secretary*

from: <http://mothandrut.tk>