Becoming Aware: Creating an Eco-Spirituality Through the works of Anthony de Mello, SJ

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Introduction

Anthony de Mello was an Indian Jesuit Priest who taught awareness is the key to expanding and deepening our ideas of spirituality; to ultimately create an intrinsic bond with both nature and God. By looking at selected ideas and stories from de Mello’s body of writings, we can gain a greater awareness of nature, self, others, and of a centered reality that bolsters one’s faith and awakens our sense of Eco-Spirituality. An increase in awareness can result in deepened Eco-Spirituality because awareness can result in a celebration of the wonder and awe that is human existence, which in turn can create a greater response of environmental stewardship. Within this poster I will use select excerpts of de Mello’s writing and ideas of spirituality to demonstrate how his teachings can be interpreted through an Eco-Spiritual lens.

Methodology Continued

The Question – The Song of the Bird

Said the monk, “All these mountains and rivers and the earth and stars—where do they come from?”

Said the master, “Where does your question come from?”

Translation to Eco-Spirituality:

This short story of de Mello’s reminds us to search within ourselves to find the fulfillment we desire. Within the Christian faith, all beings are created in the image and likeness of God. By looking inwards, we can find the source of all of nature’s bounty.

The Temple Bells – The Song of the Bird

The temple was built on an island and it held a thousand bells. Bells big and small, fashioned by the finest craftsmen in the world. When the wind blew or a storm raged, all the bells would peal out in a symphony that would send the heart of the hearer into raptures.

But over the centuries the island sank into the sea and, with it, the temple bells. An ancient legend said that the bells continued to peal out, ceaselessly, and could be heard by anyone who would listen. Inspired by this legend, a young man traveled thousands of miles, determined to hear those bells. He sat for days on the shore, facing the vanished island, and listened with all his might. But all he could hear was the sound of the sea. He made every effort to block it out. But to no avail; the sound of the sea seemed to flood the world.

He kept at his task for weeks. Each time he got discouraged he would listen to the village pundits, who spoke with vehemence of the mysterious legend. Then his heart would be alight... only to become discouraged again when weeks of further effort yielded no results.

Finally he decided to give up the attempt. Perhaps he was not destined to hear the bells. Perhaps the legend was not true. It was his final day, and he went to the shore to say goodbye to the sea and the sky and the wind and the coconut trees. He lay on the sand, and for the first time, listened to the sound of the sea. Soon he was so lost in the sound that he was barely conscious of himself, so deep was the silence that the sound produced.

In the depth of that silence, he heard it: The tinkling of a tiny bell followed by another, and another and another... and soon every one of the thousand temple bells was pealing out in harmony, and his heart was rapt in joyous ecstasy.

Translation to Eco-Spirituality:

Within the story of The Temple Bells, de Mello presents a beautiful image for how one can catch glimpses of God within creation. The temple and bells described in the first paragraph serve as metaphors for the Kingdom of God and his creation. Before the sinking of the temple, the marvelous sound of the bells would ring in the hearts of anyone who listened. However, once the island sank, the sound was no longer audible. Similarly, when God first created the world, nature and all aspects of life were revered for their wonder and beauty. Nevertheless, as time went on, this sense of spiritual connection with God through nature was lost. However, by becoming aware and taking the time to listen and be present with nature and life around us, de Mello asserts we can restore our connection with Eco-Spirituality, to hear “the thousand temple bells...pealing out in harmony.”

Methodology Continued

Serps and Doves – The Way to Love

Observe the wisdom that operates in doves and in flowers and trees and the whole of Nature. It is the same wisdom that does for us what our brain could never do. It circulates our blood, digests our food, pumps our hearts, expands our lungs, immunizes our bodies and heals our wounds while our conscious minds are engaged in other matters. This kind of Nature-wisdom we are only now beginning to discover in so-called primitive peoples who, like the dove, are so simple and wise.

We who consider ourselves more advanced have developed another kind of wisdom, the cunningness of the brain, for we have realized that we can improve on Nature and provide ourselves with safety and protection and length of life and speed and comfort unknown to primitive peoples. All of this thanks to a fully developed brain. Our challenge is to recapture the simplicity and wisdom of the dove without losing the cunningness of the serpentine brain.

Translation to Eco-Spirituality:

In this excerpt from de Mello’s short-story, Serps and Doves, he affirms a need to observe and rekindle our relationship with nature, as a way to embrace our relation of self. We have fallen into an anthropocentric mindset rather than a biocentric one, where we view ourselves interconnected will all life on earth. Father Thomas Berry, a renowned cultural historian and Catholic priest, supports this in his works by affirming that the destiny of humans cannot be separated from the destiny of earth. Nature is a part of who we are and without it we will fall into conflict over trying to control it.

Conclusion

De Mello’s concept of spirituality involves waking up to an awareness of the beautiful wonder that is nature and human existence. The showcased short stories and ideas from his selected works highlight how our ideas of faith can be shifted to incorporate a greater sense of Eco-Spirituality, in turn strengthening and building our relationship with God. His writings serve as a reminder that God is present in all aspects of life, as “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” De Mello’s works can be used to teach and remind us of this lost sense of reverence for creation, as well as to spread and renew our connectedness with Eco-Spirituality. By cultivating an interrelationship with nature, we will inevitably develop a greater awareness of and desire for environmental stewardship. De Mello reminds us that we are all creatures of earth, and it is our job to ensure that God’s creatures are loved and cared for the same way God loves and cares for his people.

References

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