

Book Review

Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: a Way to God*. Originally published by Image/Doubleday, now published by Bantam/Doubleday.

Sadhana is a classic guide to prayer, first published almost half a century ago and still going strong and in print. The reading line on the cover, 'Christian exercises in Eastern form' may puzzle, scare or even offend some people. Some might wonder what 'exercises' could possibly mean in this context. Others will recall Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and perhaps reject the idea they could possibly have any commonality with anything 'Eastern'. Yet others might recall Ignatius' *Exercises* and want to steer clear of anything resembling them. Perhaps, though, you are intrigued.

Sadhana has lasted because of the wide range of helps it offers to anyone who prays, explained in straightforward fashion. After a brief introduction, de Mello presents 47 ways of praying, grouped into four broad categories. Many of these are methods of prayer that have been used for centuries, if not millennia, by Christians, such as Ignatian contemplation (imagining a scene from the life of Christ as if you were a participant in it and meditating on it) or what de Mello calls 'the Benedictine method', which is *Lectio Divina* (and whose origins might be better described as Carthusian than Benedictine). There are exercises based on the approach described in the fourteenth-century English classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (these days better known as Centering Prayer) and the Jesus Prayer, described in the Russian Orthodox classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, whose origin is the publican's prayer of Lk 18.10-14. One method de Mello learned from an Evangelical pastor. Others could barely be described as 'methods', being simply instruction in common forms of prayer known and used by all Christians, such as intercession and petition.

However familiar these are, though, de Mello's brief commentary on ways of using them infuses them with a fresh perspective and new life. If you worried that *Sadhana* might not be Christian enough for you, a brief glance through it will be sufficient to indicate it is a concise guide to forms of prayer many Christians will already be familiar with, presented in a form that is not only fresh but handy—there are dozens of books out there on *Lectio Divina* and Centering Prayer but many of them seem to make essentially simple techniques more complicated than they need to be. De Mello's presentation may not be the last word on these subjects, but it's a better place to start than most others I know of.

Still, the 'Eastern' bit of the reading line may raise the hackles of those who fear syncretism: is this form of prayer going to turn me into a Hindu by stealth? There is really no reason to worry, if that's your concern. While some exercises are based on forms of devotion rooted in Eastern religious traditions, there is nothing about these that runs counter to any Christian principle. Take, for example, the 'Thousand Names of God' exercise. De Mello acknowledges that this derives from a Hindu form of prayer: 'Devout Hindus may take the trouble to memorise the thousands names of God in Sanskrit'. Let that sink in: their spiritual practice entails learning by heart 1000 names for God in a language they don't actually speak, so that they can dwell on the meaning of these names and grow in love of the one so named. You could reject this idea on the grounds it didn't

spring up from within the Christian tradition, or you could wish that we Christians would be devoted enough to our faith to keep our minds focused on God with such fervour.

Because Christianity doesn't have a parallel practice, and De Mello doesn't give examples of what these Sanskrit names are, he simply suggests that one invent 1000 names for Jesus, such as 'my rock', fortress, strength, peace'. Those are all Biblical terms for God, so they're not really 'invented'. Others which he suggests may not be exactly in the Bible ('my song') but are certainly in keeping with its spirit. If Christians never developed a devotion to the names of God similar to what Hindus have, that doesn't mean that what de Mello borrows from Hinduism is somehow dangerous to Christians. It may be something we can learn from: what if all Christians went through our days murmuring in our hearts 'Jesus, my joy, my peace, my strength, my song'? How might the world we all inhabit be different? It surely wouldn't be worse!

The part of *Sadhana* that may most puzzle Christians, however, is the most neutral section, neither explicitly Christian nor explicitly anything else: the awareness exercises. These may involve, for example, nothing more than relaxing the body and becoming aware of the sensations within it. Most people, when offered such a technique as a method of pain control by a doctor, wouldn't spurn it. For some Christians, it only becomes problematic when suggested as a form of prayer. De Mello addresses such objections in the only section of the book, other than the short introduction, that is devoted to some form of theory rather than explanation of a method of prayer. His explanation is persuasive, but even the reader who continues to be sceptical of the spiritual value of such exercises will find plenty of other possibilities in *Sadhana* to make it worthwhile.

There are many enemies of the life of prayer. One commonly besetting the person new to the discipline of regular prayer is where on earth to start. *Sadhana* has 47 answers to that problem. Another is boredom: I'm in a rut. I do the same thing every day and right now, it feels so mechanical. *Sadhana* has 47 answers to that, too. Even if some of those 47 are down there with you in your particular rut, you'll still have lots of other possibilities and the way de Mello describes well-known forms of prayer may lead you to see them in a new light.

Overall, this is one of the best books on prayer I know of, because it is so oriented to the *practice* of prayer, rather than talking *about* prayer. It should have a place on the shelf of any Christian who desires a deeper life of prayer. Highly recommended.