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THE IMPACT OF THOMAS KELLY ON AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIFE

E. GLENN HINSON

I AM DEEPLY TOUCHED AND HONORED to be invited to speak on the occasion of Thomas Kelly's 100th birthday in the college from which he received his B.A. degree, and where he once taught, and to do so in the presence of some who knew him personally and who belong to the same tradition. I never met Thomas Kelly and would have been only nine years old when he died, but in some ways I feel that I do know him through the frequent conversations I have had with him through his writings and through my work on a biography of Douglas and Dorothy Steere. A person's writings hardly substitute for personal contact, but Thomas Kelly communicated so authentically through his published addresses that most readers feel they know him.

My assignment is to speak about the impact of Thomas Kelly on American religious life. Forgive me if I approach the subject in a personal way, focusing on the impact of Thomas Kelly on myself, the many students I have led through *A Testament of Devotion* and perhaps the testimony of one or two other persons. Sadly, his death at age 47 curtailed the impact he may have had. Yet despite the brevity of his life he made his mark and still makes it through that marvelous classic *A Testament of Devotion*. It is remarkable that any writing should stay in print more than fifty years as this work has. Durability alone would certify this work as a classic of Christian devotion, but something else must account for its durability, and that is the subject of this address.

In classes on classics of Christian devotion which I have taught since the early 1960s, students without fail have voted *A Testament of Devotion* the classic that helped them most to find a meaningful way to live out their commitment to God in all of life. My own experience would confirm their judgments. Kelly ranks at the top in the face of stiff competition: Augustine's *Confessions*, the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*, Teresa of Avila's *Autobiography* or *Interior Castle*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God*, Pascal's *Pensees*, John Woolman's *Journal*, Søren Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*, Teilhard de Chardin's *Divine*

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Milieu, Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*, or the writings of Thomas Merton. If someone comes seeking spiritual guidance and wanting something to read, I invariably ask first if that person knows *A Testament of Devotion*

What is the appeal and the power of Thomas Kelly as seen in *A Testament of Devotion* or other writings and, in his life? In reading *A Testament of Devotion* many, I think, have had the experience which John Bunyan had in reading Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians: "I found my condition, in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart."² Thomas Kelly "speaks to our condition" in a simple and yet profound way out of authentic experience of God, self, and the world with insights drawn from the rich stream of spirituality which runs through the Quaker tradition.

SIMPLE AND YET PROFOUND

What stands out on first reading of *A Testament of Devotion* and other writings of Thomas Kelly is the simple and yet profound way in which he spoke and wrote. He spoke and wrote from the heart, not just from the head. Kelly was not a sound biter, but you will find memorable phrases which lock onto your mind and haunt you like a graceful melody. They penetrate. They make you say, "Aha! Aha!" as they turn on an inner light. Obvious are those he made titles of his addresses: the Light Within, Holy Obedience, the Blessed Community, the Eternal Now, and the Simplification of Life. But within each of those lie others which touch responsive chords: "amazing inner sanctuary," "Shekinah of the soul," "Presence in the midst," "internal practices and habits of the mind," "holy blindness," "a holy Center where the breath and stillness of Eternity are heavy upon us," "life beyond fevered strain," "the whole wheat bread of life."

Thomas Kelly, however, could craft statements of incredible beauty, replete with poetic imagery and insight. Here are some examples:

Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. (29)

He plucks the world out of our hearts, loosening the chains of attachment. And He hurls the world into our hearts, where we and He together carry it in infinitely tender love. (47)

The heart is stretched through suffering.... The Cross as dogma is painless speculation; the Cross as lived suffering is anguish and glory. Yet God, out of the pattern of His own heart, has planted the Cross along the road of holy obedience. (71)

I have in mind something deeper than the simplification of our external programs...through which so many pantingly and frantically gasp. These do become simplified in holy obedience.... But there is a deeper, an internal simplification of the whole of one's personality, stilled, tranquil, in childlike trust listening ever to Eternity's whisper, walking with a smile into the dark. (74)

Yet neither phrases nor occasional sentences explain the vital way this book reaches out and shakes people, forcing them to take a new look at their own lives and commitments. Many have found traditional patterns of devotion often go stale, like bread left exposed to the air for a couple of days. Many would share D. Campbell Wyckoff's confession:

The devotional life presented problems until Thomas R. Kelly's guidance showed what it could be. Devotional practices that were urged on me seemed artificial and alien, as if I had to primp to meet and serve God.... Devotional literature invited me to think and say things that simply did not ring true, and to do things that seemed... contrived, listless, pointless, and boring, while prayer and worship were real and vital.³

Surprisingly, Wyckoff had read Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God* whose central idea Thomas Kelly reformulated, without catching on. Reading the "Kellyized" version that proposed living life on the level of activity and on the profounder level of "prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings" (35)—he got it! Wyckoff continues:

There is nothing artificial, alien, or boring about this. It is fresh, living, and real. The meeting with God is at both levels, but the meeting at the profounder level is definitive. The devotional life is lived at both levels in faithfulness, but the source of the devotional life is in the depths.⁴

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AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION

Thomas Kelly could communicate. He could take old ideas and re-cycle them and make them new and attractive to another generation in much the same way Thomas Merton did and still does. But, like Merton, Kelly was doing more than recycling. He authenticated what he learned through experience, or, more accurately, God authenticated through Thomas Kelly what he was learning through experience.

A Testament of Devotion is the word of one who knew. It is not a “You have heard it said” but it was an “I say to you.” It rings with authority. It is not a mouthing of platitudes; far from it, it is the message of a person who knows, telling them what they need to hear, what their own experience will confirm.

The five essays of *A Testament of Devotion* overlap one another, for Thomas Kelly did not live to weave them into his intended book before he died. His colleague and friend Douglas Steere chose simply to gather them into a book “without any of the cutting or clipping or the critical revision which Thomas Kelly would certainly have given them had he lived.”⁵ Its unfinished character adds authenticity. It requires the reader to hear Thomas Kelly speak and to engage him and others in dialogue about the Eternal transecting time. Here I must confess that I find the decision by Harper and Collins to publish a condensed version with a new introduction by Richard Foster quite distressing. Heaven help us when we must tamper with an already slim classic by reducing it to sound bites and stripping it of a wonderfully sensitive memoir by one who knew him well!

Some passages stand by themselves, verifiable only by those who have had the same profound experience Thomas Kelly had. In a letter written from Germany in the summer of 1938, he described directly what lay behind the boldness with which he spoke.

What I want to say does not grow out of any specific external influence—it seems to grow out of an internal influence, which is so overwhelming that I can only recognize it as God working within me. . . I was much shaken by the experience of Presence—something that I did not seek, but that sought me.⁶

That shaking experience came on the heels of Thomas Kelly’s crushing blow at Harvard in the fall of 1937 when he blacked out on his oral examination for the Ph.D. in philosophy and his examiners refused him a second chance. In what was to have been his crowning moment,

the ultimate goal of his quest for adequacy, he had failed. Out of failure, however, came a far greater certification, what Richard Kelly described as a change “within the very foundation of his soul.”⁷

Thomas Kelly’s depiction of “profound mystical experience” stands as one of the great monuments of the encounter of a human soul with the Other.

It is an overwhelming experience to fall into the hands of the living God, to be invaded to the depths of one’s being by His presence, to be, without warning, wholly uprooted from all earth-born securities and assurances, and to be blown by a tempest of unbelievable power which leaves one’s old proud self utterly, utterly defenseless....Then is the soul swept into a Loving Center of ineffable sweetness, where calm and unspeakable peace and ravishing joy steal over one....In awful solemnity the Holy One is over all and in all, exquisitely loving, infinitely patient, tenderly smiling. Marks of glory are upon all things, and the marks are cruciform and blood-stained....Death comes, blessed death, death of one’s alienating will....

One emerges from such soul-shaking, Love-invaded times into more normal states of consciousness. But one knows ever after that the Eternal Lover of the world, the Hound of Heaven, is utterly, utterly real, and that life must henceforth be forever determined by that Real. (56-57)

Such testimonies need no props. They stand alone.

Thomas Kelly was a master of the simple method, if we can call what he proposes a method. Like Brother Lawrence, he erases those lines we are prone to draw between religious life and the life of every day and gets us to bring our ordinary activities down to “the deeper level of divine immediacy of internal communion and of prayer.”⁽³⁷⁾ He nudges us from alternation between activity and communion with God to simultaneity—quietly focusing on God while we engage in our activities. Indeed, he insists, “There is no new technique for entrance upon this stage where the soul in its deeper levels is continuously at Home in Him. The processes of inward prayer do not grow more complex, but more simple.”⁽⁴³⁾ His approach will not take us from the world to God. Rather, it will effect a healthy detachment and reattachment to the world in God.

I don't know whether Thomas Kelly ever thought of himself as a spiritual guide or spiritual friend, but I believe he was a master. Students did not confine their contact to his classroom or office but sought him out at home. Like other great spiritual guides, he knew himself as a needy person and fellow struggler. He was well aware that most would not arrive at holy obedience by way of profound mystical experience, but rather would have to surrender to the Divine Will "bit by bit, piecemeal and progressively." (59) First comes a vision of such a life, next immediate obedience, confirmed by little formulae of submission: "'Be Thou my will. Be Thou my will,' or 'I open all before Thee. I open all before Thee.'" (61)

But Tom Kelly knew well that we can slip and forget God and reassert our egos and revert to our own clever schemes. If this happens, he says gently, we are not to waste energy flagellating ourselves. Rather, we should begin again just where we are. Finally, he urges us to relax. "Take hands off. Submit yourself to God. Learn to live in the passive voice—a hard saying for Americans—and let life be willed through you. For 'I will' spells not obedience." (61)

Here is advice that is real, attainable, possible. Tom Kelly had in mind the same devout and holy life William Law urged, but his approach surpassed Law's in its simple workability. Both Law and Kelly rightly fingered intention as the key to the devout life. But where Law sought to dispel halfheartedness of intention through rigorous regimen, Tom Kelly did so through gentle encouragement of attentiveness to God, being guided by the Light.

Out of the authenticity of Kelly's own religious life emerges a remarkable relevance. Who in our own time has identified and addressed so well the burning desire of people for simplification of life, for community, and significant social service or action? Thomas Merton, Douglas Steere, a few others, but not many.

The very word "simplification" strikes a tender chord, and Tom Kelly's counsels increase our longing and our hopes for it. Not just cutting down calendars but "a deeper, an internal simplification of the whole of one's personality" is our soul's sincere desire. And with Kelly as our guide we find welling up within a confidence that our "wistful longing" to "slip into that amazing Center where the soul is at home with God" (74) might occur.

In this violent, fractured, and strife-torn world how our hearts long for community, fellowship, for koinonia. Superficial understandings abound, but Tom Kelly will not allow such definitions when he speaks about “The Blessed Community.” Here is “a wholly new alignment of our personal relations,” a meeting with lives that are “already down within that Center which has found us,” “amazing group inter-knittedness of God-enthralled men and women who know one another in Him,” “lives immersed and drowned in God,” persons “related to one another through Him, as all mountains go down into the same earth,” where authority is centered “not in man, not in the group, but in the creative God Himself.”

Those of us who agonized so ardently during the 1960s for changes in the social order find ourselves chastened and redirected by Tom Kelly’s call to give priority to the Eternal Now, “the Eternal breaking into time, which transforms all life into a miracle of faith and action.”(89) In this lies “the true ground of social endeavor,” he says. “Time is no judge of Eternity. It is the Eternal who is the judge and tester of time.”(91) Yet this is no summons to abandon “this maimed and bleeding world while we bask serenely upon the sunny shores of the Eternal.”(91) Rather, it is a recognition that human beings, in their preoccupation with everyday affairs, fail to discover the Eternal breaking into or transforming all those activities. In the words of Thomas Merton they do not seek the spring from which the stream of human activity must flow. Thence, even “religious people do not with sufficient seriousness count on God as an active factor in the affairs of the world.”(97) “The invading Love of the Eternal Now must break in through us into this time-now.”(100) The experience of Presence leads to joy, love, and peace. Such peace leads not to inaction but to action.

In the excerpt Ron Rembert read from Thomas Kelly’s sermon this evening we have heard another word which speaks to the condition of many today, a challenge to world citizenship. How astonishing that more than sixty years ago Tom Kelly was asking so urgently in Ludlow Falls, Ohio, whether his hearers lived only in their own apartment, their little town, or their country, ignoring the struggles going on in Europe, the “economic exploitation of Africa,” Chinese aspirations, and the rest of the world. Or whether they as Christians could enlarge their horizons to see that Buddhists, Mohammedans, Confucianists, Taoists, and Shintoists might also be “struggling toward the light of Truth, that they, too, want to get into touch with God.” How

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prophetic these words sound in this era when we may be witnessing the change of consciousness which emerges from awakenings, namely, global awareness.

OUT OF THE QUAKER TRADITION

What I have been trying to say is that Thomas Kelly impacts our lives in significant ways both because he communicated profound insights in simple and yet elegant prose and because he had something authentic and relevant to say based on his own knowing. To these points I want now to add a third, that is, that he speaks not just out of his own experience but out of the profound experience of a tradition, the Quaker one, which is itself rooted in the contemplative tradition extending through the ages.

It seems to me very important for Quakers to recognize that Thomas Kelly, whom they cherish, planted his tree beside their living stream and sank his roots deep into their soil so that he could draw nourishment from it. I think it would be fair to characterize Thomas Kelly as an enthusiast for the Quaker tradition. He had an ecumenical spirit, but that did not prevent him from making a case for his own tradition when he perceived that it offered something vital other traditions may have neglected or denied. The central experience of the Light Within, for instance, though “the special property of no group or sect,” he judged, has not fared well in other traditions.

Roman Catholics have treasured this practice, but have overlaid the authority of the Light Within by a heavy weight of external ecclesiastical authority. Protestant emphasis has grown externally rationalistic, humanistic, and service-minded. Dogmas have replaced the emphasis upon keeping close to the fresh upspringings of the Inner Life. (33)

These comments indicate that Kelly was an enthusiast of the mystical tradition of Quakerism, which Rufus Jones articulated so well when Tom came to Haverford College in 1913, and which contrasted with the variety he had grown up with in Ohio.⁸ He did not equivocate. At the center of everything he placed the principle of immediacy.

The Society of Friends arose as a rediscovery of the ever-open inward springs of immediacy and revelation. George Fox and the Quakers found a Principle within men [and women], a Shekinah of the soul, a Light Within that lights every man [or woman]

coming into the world....Aflame with the Light of the inner sanctuary, they went out into the world, into its turmoil and its fitfulness, and called men [and women] to listen above all to that of God speaking within them, to order all life by the Light of the Sanctuary. (33)

This Inward Principle, Kelly believed, stands at the heart of the whole tradition and should govern everything else. For him confirmation came from George Fox, Isaac Pennington, William Penn, John Woolman, and Rufus Jones—and from his own experience.

If I do not mistake the thrust of most of his lectures and addresses, Thomas Kelly was trying hard to pull Quakers back toward the mainstream, to get them to sink their roots down in this central conviction, and thus to reorient what they were doing. We have already observed how he began and ended his thought in appeals to inward orientation: living life on two levels simultaneously, obeying God in all we do, being interknitted with others in the Blessed Fellowship, attending the Eternal Now in the temporal now, and simplifying life from the Center. In his exuberant way he never ceased sounding this call. In a sermon preached at West Richmond (Indiana) Meeting in July 1926, long before he experienced the “earthquake” which supercharged his religious life he spoke about the central principle of the Quaker tradition: “that the human is in contact with the divine, nay that the very spring and fountain of our inner life and consciousness is the Eternal Spirit.” So George Fox and the early Quakers discovered. Today, however, he charged, Quakers hear little of that and it sounds strange in their meetings. The religion of the Spirit must be found again, he asserted, and not as coming from the past, but as a living experienced reality today.⁹

Although he had exposure to the idea that “Quakerism is essentially a mystical fellowship, which transcends the ordinary barriers of religious organizations,” Thomas Kelly admitted in a letter written to Harold H. Peterson in 1928 that he did not appropriate and assimilate it inwardly until he and Lael spent a year or more in Germany doing mission work under auspices of the American Friends Service Committee, 1924-25.¹⁰ Before that, while teaching at Wilmington College, he was only a “Quaker denominationalist.” This expansion of his mind made him uncomfortable at Earlham College and among midwestern Quakers, who were not ready for such a radical expansion in their thinking. He and Lael soon experienced “a sense of isolation, a great loneliness” as he tried to recall Quakers to the centrality of the

Light Within. Such experiences caused him to withdraw and dampen his interest in external institutions where he expected to be able to find fellowship. It distressed him to find Quakers “caught up in the general stampede toward service—a splendid thing—but such service does not always grow out of a more profound experience of the presence of God.”¹¹ He was confident recovery of the Light would occur. Meanwhile, he looked to the East.

The Kellys moved East in 1930 when he obtained a two-year leave from Earlham to study at Harvard in pursuit of a Ph.D., but Thomas Kelly probably did not have much opportunity to recall Quakers to their roots until he secured a teaching position at Haverford in 1936. In the interim he returned in 1932 to Earlham to teach three more years, and then spent one year in Hawaii, all the while working furiously to complete his dissertation at Harvard. Richard Kelly has remarked that “the five years following his return to Earlham were the darkest in his experience.”¹² He experienced severe health problems both in Richmond, Indiana, and in Hawaii. Disappointment at having to return to the Midwest, to low intellectual standards and restrictive evangelicalism, plunged him into depression. The invitation to take the place of Elton Trueblood on the faculty at Haverford lifted his spirits, but then came the crushing disappointment at Harvard, the goal of many years of endless toil and deprivation for himself and his family.

What happened in the months following this experience, however, when he was “shaken by the experience of Presence—something that I did not seek, but that sought me,” gave Thomas Kelly a certification (that success at Harvard could never have given) to pursue his urgent summons to Quakers to begin from within. Now he knew personally and experientially the truth and power of that tradition.

In Germany during the summer of 1938, strengthening Friends suffering from Nazi oppression, he experienced “an increased sense of being laid hold on by a Power, a gentle, loving, but awful Power.”¹³ In that “soul-overturning summer” he discovered some simple souls who had “found all the power of Apostolic days in the early Church,” who “had plumbed the depths of religious experience.”¹⁴ Sowed in the furrows of this suffering he could now speak with an authority he had not possessed before. In the winter of 1940-1941 he gave four addresses on “Reality of the Spiritual World” in which he wrestled with the question as to how we can know God is real. He found the answer not in rational proofs but in experience, “the one the Quakers primarily ap-

peal to” and “upon which the mystics of all times rest their testimony.” Skeptics who have not had such experience may raise questions, but those who have had them will have all the confirmation they need. “In such times of direct experience of Presence, we know that God is utterly real. We need no argument.”¹⁵

REFLECTIONS

I would claim too much to suggest that Thomas Kelly has had a far reaching impact on American religion. During his all-too brief life, he spoke almost exclusively to Quakers, and I suspect that his deepest and most significant impact will always fall heaviest upon those who identify with that tradition. Whether Quakers of the Midwest have caught on to what Kelly did his best to open to them when he taught at Wilmington and Earlham is something others will need to judge. Richard Foster’s introduction to the abbreviated edition of *A Testament of Devotion* seems not to reflect a real grasp of Kelly’s main concern, viz. to live life from the Center “where the breath and stillness of Eternity are heavy upon us and we are wholly yielded to Him.” (74)

Nevertheless hundreds and thousands of persons have benefited and will benefit from practical insights which fill *A Testament of Devotion*, just as so many have gained from the writings of Thomas Merton. The way in which both Kelly and Merton help most, however, is by leading people to the contemplative stream which meanders through the Benedictine and the Quaker tradition and enticing them to drink from its refreshing waters.

For almost thirty years now I have tried to introduce students, ministers, and lay persons to these two Toms. I am disappointed that more persons know Merton than know Kelly. Part of the reason for Merton’s fame is that he wrote far more prolifically. Today there are sixty or more books circulating under his name. Another part is that Merton has had a much larger ready-made constituency in Catholic religious orders than Kelly has had among Quakers and interested Protestants. Still another part is that Merton has had advocates who have organized efforts to remember him and to promote his ideas. Merton enthusiasts founded the International Thomas Merton Society, which holds conferences every two years. But lovers and beneficiaries of Thomas Kelly have not organized an advocacy group for him. As one of those who took part in organizing the International Thomas Merton

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Society, I have been wondering whether this might not be a time for starting a Thomas Kelly Society. Kelly will not be forgotten if no such advocacy group exists, for he has spoken too profoundly for us to forget. But just as he has gifted so many of us by leading us to this vital stream of spirituality, we may grace others by leading them to Thomas Kelly. Quakers are not numerous, but when they put their minds to it, they are unsurpassable as organizers and advocates. When it comes to promotion of Thomas Kelly, here is one friend who would like to be a charter member of a Thomas Kelly Society.

NOTES

1. *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941). Subsequent references will be cited in the text by page numbers.
2. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, p. 129.
3. D. Campbell Wyckoff, "Learning and Teaching in the Spirit," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, n.s. 7 (February 1986), p. 43.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
5. Douglas V. Steere, "A Biographical Memoir," in *A Testament of Devotion*, p. 28.
6. In Richard Kelly, *Thomas Kelly: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 102.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
9. Sermon, West Richmond Friends Meeting, July 1926. Cited in R. Kelly, pp. 50-51.
10. Letter to Harold H. Peterson, American YMCA Secretary in Lahore, India, 1928. Cited in R. Kelly, p. 54.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
13. Letter to Lael Kelly, August 16, 1938. Cited in R. Kelly, p. 102.
14. Letter to Lael Kelly, August 31, 1938. Cited in R. Kelly, p. 105.
15. Thomas R. Kelly, *Reality of the Spiritual World* (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1942), p. 14.