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THOMAS KELLY: SOME NEW INSIGHTS

T. CANBY JONES

O God, thou art my God, early will I seek thee;
my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee
in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is,
To see thy power and thy glory, as I have seen thee
in the sanctuary.

Because thy lovingkindness is better than life,
my lips shall praise thee.

Thus will I bless thee while I live; I will lift up
my hands in thy name.

My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips,
When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate
on thee in the night watches.

Because thou hast been my help, therefore, in the shadow
of thy wings will I rejoice. (Psalm 63:1-7 KJV)

IVIVIDLY REMEMBER HEARING THESE WORDS burst forth from the lips of Thomas R. Kelly, both in meetings for worship and in the student group that met in his home. In two recent gatherings we have sought to recapture and understand more fully that thirst for God's presence which consumed Thomas Kelly both in his life and in his writings.

The first gathering was entitled "Renewing the Spirit of Community: Centennial Colloquium on the Life and Work of Thomas Kelly." This colloquium was held June 4-6, 1993, at the Thomas R. Kelly Religious Center of Wilmington College, Wilmington, Ohio, on the one-hundredth anniversary of Kelly's birth. Ron Rembert, associate

professor of religion and philosophy at Wilmington College, planned, hosted, and found funding for this centennial event. Funding was provided by the Ohio Humanities Council.

This issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* contains the four major papers delivered at that gathering. E. Glenn Hinson, professor of spirituality, worship, and church history at Baptist Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, opened with the keynote address on “The Impact of Thomas Kelly on American Religious Life.” The following day Elaine Prevallet, Roman Catholic sister of Loretto and director of Knobs Haven Retreat Center, Nerinx, Kentucky, presented a paper on “A Testament of Devotion A Personal Response.” She was followed by Howard R. Macy, professor of religion and biblical studies at George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon, with a paper entitled “Thomas Kelly: At Home in the Blessed Community.” The final paper included in this issue is a study of Kelly’s religious background and development by his son, Richard Macy Kelly, director of the AIDS program for the Baltimore (MD) City Health Department and author of *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*. His paper is called “New Lights and Inner Light.” Thomas Kelly’s daughter, Lois Kelly Stabler, was also present and delighted us with reminiscences of her father and her mother, Lael Macy Kelly.

The second gathering in which we gained new insights into Thomas Kelly and his message occurred at Quaker Hill Conference Center, Richmond, Indiana, April 15-16, 1994. It was a workshop called to take a fresh look at Kelly’s life and commitment as revealed through his sermons. Manuscripts of these sermons, written between 1919 and 1934, were found by Ron Rembert in the Haverford College Quaker Collection. The title of the workshop was “Love Held Him There,” a phrase from the most striking of Kelly’s sermons. The sermon was built around the quotation from Catherine of Siena, “For nails could not have held the God-man to the Cross, had not love held him there.”

In what follows I will discuss things learned about Thomas Kelly’s life, character, and thought, both from the 1993 Colloquium and the 1994 Workshop. I should mention that Josh Brown, pastor of West Richmond (Indiana) Friends Meeting, with my help, is preparing a series of twenty-five Kelly sermons for publication in the near future. We turn now to consideration of the new insights about Thomas Kelly gained from the two gatherings, with special emphasis upon those papers that appear in this issue of *Quaker Religious Thought*.

Glenn Hinson stresses that after thirty years of teaching seminary courses on spirituality and Christian devotion Kelly's *A Testament of Devotion* ranks among the best of the Christian classics. In fact, it has done more to change lives among his students than any other. He thinks that Kelly speaks to our condition so effectively because of his simple and yet profound approach to a life of unreserved commitment to the immediate presence of God in our midst. In spite of the "turmoil and fitfulness of our time-torn lives," Kelly affirms, "God can be found!" Elaine Prevallet agrees with Hinson, that Thomas Kelly reaches our hearts because he speaks as an "authentic." Not a person ready to share "knowledge about religious phenomena and experience," Kelly communicates direct acquaintance with and the immediate experience of practicing God's presence. Howard Macy joins Prevallet and Hinson in stressing the centrality of experiencing and living in "the Beloved, or Blessed, Community" to the realization in us of "God-enthralled lives." Kelly expresses it: "We know that these souls are with us, lifting their lives and ours continuously to God....It is as if...we were within them and they were within us. Their strength, given to them by God, becomes our strength, and our joy, given to us by God, becomes their joy. In confidence and love we live together in Him."¹

Prevallet highlights the integration of inward and the outward as a very important characteristic of Kelly's life and message. She stresses the creative interplay between the depths of our lives, in which we live in constant communion with God, and the external involvement with human needs, which we find so exhausting. She emphasizes with Kelly that it is at "the deep level of prayer and divine attendance...that the real business of life is determined." The implication is clear. Social concerns, no matter how altruistic, will not "move mountains" unless they originate in a life of continual prayer. Prevallet is also thankful for Kelly's wisdom in saying, "We cannot die on every cross, nor are we expected to." God shapes specific tasks, fitted to our capacities and talents, for us to carry out. The rest we leave to others.

Howard Macy drives home Kelly's Quaker use of the Scriptures. Hungrily we read the Scriptures "to find new friends for the soul," Kelly says. We hunger to live in the same life and power in which the prophets and apostles lived. They, through the medium of Scripture, become our spiritual guides and mentors. Macy expresses it in an unforgettable sentence. "So we read the Bible, then, to be joined to part of the Blessed Community and feel our way back to the Source,

so that the same ‘Living Spring’ may bubble up within us.” We find the same kind of fellowship with the saints through the ages since Scripture.

From Richard M. Kelly’s “New Lights and Inner Light” we learn much of the religious background of Thomas R. Kelly and his forebears. Contrary to the conviction of Thomas Kelly’s mother, Madora Kersey Kelly, that the Kelly ancestors were Scotch-Irish Quakers, Richard Kelly demonstrates that the Kelly family of the Schooley community near Londonderry, Ohio, were “New Light Presbyterians” or “Christians” later known as “Disciples” or “Church of Christ.” They were converted to Quakerism by the preaching of Quaker evangelists in 1868. Richard Kelly thinks that the mainline Protestant element of his father’s faith derives from that Presbyterian background and is a major reason for the appeal of Kelly’s message to a wide spectrum of people. A second important element of his father’s faith—and its appeal—was the evangelical holiness Quakerism in which he was reared. A third element in that wide appeal was his deep acquaintance with the mystical and inward prayer life of the Christian tradition, first introduced to Thomas Kelly by Rufus M. Jones at Haverford College.

A fourth element in Thomas Kelly’s wide appeal Richard Kelly traces to his father’s two trips to Germany. Tom and Lael Kelly were sent first to Berlin by the American Friends Service Committee, to found a Friends Center there as a follow-up to a Quaker child-feeding in Germany during the years following the First World War. This writer believes that the German experience added a cosmic dimension to Thomas Kelly’s experience of Christ, and opened him to cosmic truths in the world’s great religions and philosophies. In his second visit, to Nazi Germany, in the summer of 1938, Thomas Kelly was so overwhelmed by the oppression and suffering of the German Jews, Quakers, and other Christians with whom he met that he felt “ploughed into the furrows of the world’s sufferings.” He also learned from their heroic courage what it means “to rise radiant in the sacrament of pain.”

From Lois Kelly Stabler, Thomas Kelly’s daughter, as well as from his son Richard, we learned many foibles of Kelly’s character, some positive and some negative. For example, his condescension toward the restrictive evangelicalism, provincialism, and low scholarly standards of the midwestern United States where he had been reared, was very pronounced. Also, as his son insists, Thomas Kelly was an intellectual elitist at that time. Richard Kelly also reports that his mother, Lael Kelly, with some amusement worried whether there would be

“enough Ph.D.’s” in their Brightwater, Maine, vacation community to satisfy her husband! On a more positive note, as Douglas Steere makes clear in his biographical memoir prefacing *A Testament of Devotion*, throughout all of Thomas Kelly’s adult life, with the exception of the last three years, Kelly had a driving ambition to become a recognized philosopher in the academic world. On the really positive side, laughter and joy in living were outstanding characteristics of Kelly. This included the freedom to laugh at himself. This same happy atmosphere prevailed in the Kelly home and family. Lael Kelly, a person of great warmth and strength in her own right, contributed much to that happy atmosphere.

Lois Stabler pointed out the two best things that happened to her father. The first was his marriage to her mother, Lael Macy Kelly. The second “best” thing to happen was his blanking out at his Ph.D. oral exam at Harvard in 1937. This scholarly disaster suddenly and gloriously freed Thomas Kelly to become the totally spiritual person he had in the depths of his being longed to become. Thereafter new spiritual power and authenticity flowed from his words and reached new depths in the hearts of eager audiences.

We spent much time in group discussion both at the 1993 Colloquium and the 1994 Workshop seeking to understand the significance of Thomas Kelly’s failure to pass his orals for his second Ph.D. degree, this one at Harvard University. With his dream of becoming a “world recognized philosopher” shattered, Tom was on the point of suicide. Brought back to reality by the unconditional acceptance and support of his Haverford College colleagues, Kelly blossomed into the “spiritual authentic” that those of us who knew him then, and those who know him through his writings, now recognize. The kind of life at both the outward and inward levels, so eloquently described by Elaine Prevallet, became a dominant characteristic of Thomas Kelly.

At my suggestion following the Colloquium, Ron Rembert made a study of both Kelly doctoral theses. The first one, at Hartford Seminary in 1924, was entitled “The Place of Value-Judgments in the Philosophy of Hermann Lotze.” The second one, at Harvard in 1937, was entitled “Explanation and Reality in the Philosophy of Emile Meyerson.” At the Quaker Hill Workshop in 1994 Ron Rembert reported that the Harvard thesis on Meyerson was exceedingly technical and did not reflect the fresh cosmic vision and concern we associate with Kelly. By contrast the 1924 thesis on Lotze does so, he said. Rembert selected for emphasis the most striking quotation he found

from the Lotze thesis. “It is a fundamental thought in Lotze’s mind that reconciliations are more nearly the truth about reality than conflicts. He is deeply convinced at the start that a harmonious relation does exist, and so seeks to vindicate his faith.” We spent considerable time at the workshop thinking out the implications of this statement.²

An important facet of Thomas Kelly’s concern which deserves further study, and which we did not focus on in our 1993 colloquium or our 1994 workshop, is Kelly’s deep interest in East Asian and South Asian philosophy and religion. He took advantage of his time of teaching in Hawaii to steep himself in Chinese and Indian philosophy and as a result developed a course in each of these fields to teach at Haverford College. Several of Thomas Kelly’s sermons before the trip to Hawaii also reflect this concern.

To Thomas Kelly the cosmic Light of Christ, which so fully suffused his life and thought, knows no cultural limits. Beyond its Middle Eastern origins and West European cultural expressions this Light is found shining in some form in the lives of all persons in all cultures.

Perhaps the most important outcome of both gatherings, the Colloquium and the Workshop, in the opinion of this writer, was the characterization of Thomas Kelly as an “evangelical mystic.” This writer has never heard of anyone so characterized before. In his paper, Richard Kelly clearly demonstrates that his father never lost the evangelical fervor of his youth, even though it came to be expressed in more cosmic terms. In our Quaker Hill Workshop we became convinced that the sermons of Thomas Kelly (1919-34), which we were studying, never lost that call to complete commitment to God we associate with A Testament of Devotion. The fact that his most moving sermon is based on a text from a medieval saint and mystic, Catherine, only confirms this judgment. Furthermore, Glenn Hinson sees Thomas Kelly as having recaptured mainstream Quaker spirituality, and he considers that present day Quakers neglect him at their peril.

Is “evangelical mystics” what Thomas Kelly is challenging all of us to become? Savor the following essays and decide for yourself.

NOTES

1. *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), pp. 86-87.
2. Cited in *Practiced in the Presence, Essays in Honor of T. Canby Jones*, edited by D. Neil Snarr and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1994), p. 127.