

***Dangerous Ideas, Wicked Problems and Great Mysteries:  
Conversations with Kelly in Darwin***

Herbert Kelly's *The Gospel of God*, was published in 1928. It was based on his addresses at Swanick in 1927. The book reads like a clarion call for engagement with the world. Kelly, in prophet like manner, does not mince words. His writing is direct, unsophisticated, gritty and open-ended. Kelly reveled in provocative statements and questions. He was intent on getting people to think hard, to probe and develop their ideas. *The Gospel of God* is not an easy read but it is an important work.

I was struck as I engaged with Kelly with the frankness of the fundamental questions that occupied him: 'What does God do? Does God do anything, or is God only another name for ideals? Is God's purpose something which God is doing, is carrying out, or only something which he would very much like us to have, but which he is powerless to effect, and wishes you would do it for him?'<sup>1</sup> The older I am the more such honest questions press home to me. These questions persist; they invite even demand our engagement. The week following the SSM meeting in Darwin this year I spent a week at a roundtable with women and men leaders from Government, business, education, defence and it seemed one lone church person! The majority of participants were avowedly non-religious. However what intrigued me was the desire of quite a number to raise matters of spiritual import with me. Kelly's questions were not far from their lips and in some cases directly raised. They were haunted by such God questions and they wanted to talk, and talk and talk! Kelly's questions struck a raw nerve. Interestingly these questions emerged through intense discussions of issues to do with the 'good life', the nature of moral responsibility, human capability and self-deception, economic justice, freedom and dissent. All matters relevant for those who assume responsibility for leadership in society. A recurring theme was what it means to be a human being and this repeatedly became the base for probing into the eternal and divine realities. Kelly's questions are buried in the very human questions about the purpose of our life and the nature of moral agency. I was reminded yet again how important it was for a Herbert Kelly to insist on the God question.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel of God*, SCM, 1959 edn, p. 10f.

It was the very plainspoken nature of Kelly's prose that I found arresting. In a memoir by Brother George Every in the opening section of Kelly's book we were reminded that Kelly was always asking whether 'God is big or little' (22). Frankly this is precisely the question I have been asking more and more the longer I have been on the spiritual journey into decade number seven! The question appears child-like. But I ask it over and over again as an adult. On the one hand we have to reckon with the infinite identity of the God of an expanding cosmos – the eternal divine being is most assuredly big. On the other hand we have to reckon with the God of the little; the very little; the God of the seed of new life in Jesus born of Mary. The radical particularity of the divine presence – minute, intimate – and the radical expanding transcendence of the eternal; such are the infinite boundaries of the God who evokes worship and awe.

Kelly was right to ask whether God was big or little. In truth the answer is a both/and. In truth the answer is too much for the human mind. The path of humility seems the only way forward. As Kelly said, 'I am a learner' (13). Kelly's God questions lead us into questions of moral responsibility as our way of participating in the life of the eternal in the here and now. So we are not surprised to discover that for Kelly the key thing is 'to follow God's ways' in the world. It was a phrase that became the title of a book of essays (*God's Ways with the World*) by a remarkable theologian and personal mentor of mine, Daniel Hardy who dies in 2007. Kelly wanted to know God's ways; Kelly wanted to follow God's ways; Kelly wanted to join in God's ways; and perhaps just as importantly Kelly wanted others to join also. This was the human project that helped to make sense of what Kelly called 'the riddle of life' (41).

Engaging with Kelly's thought generated the above kinds of responses in those who gathered for a few days in Darwin last month to wrestle with theology in the public forum. As I pondered Kelly for today I observed three preoccupations of Kelly that struck a cord with me for our present situation: dangerous ideas; wicked problems and great mysteries. The Chapter discussed these three themes in the light of *The Gospel of God*.

I wondered what was the dangerous idea that Kelly identified? Dangerous ideas are those ideas that propel people and groups into great conflict. I was alerted to this idea by a colleague who sent me an

article on the subject.<sup>2</sup> In the Abstract of the article the authors stated: ‘The toll in death, suffering, and displacement caused by conflicts engaging groups defined by ethnicity, nationality, religion, or other social identities has reached staggering proportions over the past decade. With expertise in research and intervention, psychologists have critical contributions to make to more fully understanding and more effectively confronting this distressing global phenomenon. The authors focus on the parallels between the core beliefs of individuals and the collective worldviews of groups that may operate to trigger or constrain violent struggles. On the basis of a review of relevant literatures, 5 belief domains—superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust, and helplessness—are identified as particularly important for further study’. The Chapter discussed these ideas and their relevance for the issues facing the world today. The idea of superiority of certain ethnic, cultural or religious groups as being superior to others would be an example of a dangerous idea that generates significant conflict today.

But what was Kelly’s dangerous idea? Might it be the problem of religion? Kelly certainly hammered away at this matter. For him religion was a very different thing from the reality of God. George Every recalls Kelly’s opening remarks at the Swanick addresses, ‘I am going to talk to you about God. Some of you think that means religion, which is not quite the same thing’ (10). He spoke of ‘the world force, the ultimate of all thinking, which in the end disposes of all man proposes’ and he contrasted that ‘the religious side of our craving to escape the world problem...(11). For Kelly ‘the cult of religion’ was essentially narcissistic and ended in the idolatry of the self. This might have sounded harsh to those who heard it. But on the Continent at the same time Karl Barth powerfully echoed the same theme. Indeed one bishop compared Kelly to Barth (33). When religion takes the place of the living God we are captive to a truly dangerous idea. Kelly felt that theology, concerned as it was with the vision of God in the world, ought to guide religion to keep it focused on God. I sense that for Kelly the antidote to religion was a vibrant engaged public theology.

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<sup>2</sup> Roy J. Eidelson & Judy I. Eidelson Bala Cynwyd, ‘Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs That Propel Groups Toward Conflict’, *American Psychologist*, March 2003, pp. 182-192.

What about 'wicked problems'? Did Kelly have one that he wrestled with? The phrase 'wicked problems' has been the subject of discussion in recent years. It describes problems that do not admit of any final resolution. Wicked problems are not necessarily morally evil problems but they are complex, they evade clear definition, they inevitably involve trade-offs between conflicting goals, when addressed they generate unforeseen consequences, they are unstable, they have no single solution, dealing with such problems requires capacity to change, work collaboratively, and live with high degree of uncertainty. I proposed the migration of 50 million people on the planet and asylum seekers as a wicked problem. Clearly such a problem does not admit of a single simple solution however politically expedient this may be. Did Kelly have a 'wicked problem'? I wondered whether he stated it in the first sentence of *The Gospel of God*, 'This book is concerned with the most common-place subject possible, which has been called the Riddle of Life, and by some people the Riddle of the Sphinx' (41). He followed this up with that haunting question for our times, 'Is there any meaning or purpose for life? How can we find or follow it?' Kelly seemed to be hovering around a wicked problem when he notes that 'It is the essence of a riddle that many possible or apparent answers suggest themselves, and they do not fit it'. Moreover the problem 'is a desperately serious question for us all.' So the riddle of life is for Kelly 'finding a life-purpose'. This I believe was his 'wicked problem'.

*The Gospel of God* is not so much an answer as a way of unfolding the depth of the problem and the impossibility of finding a single solution. I say this notwithstanding his clear affirmation of the gospel of God. For surely here is the single, simple solution to the riddle of life. Kelly might be tempted to say 'yes but'. This leads me to the third in our trilogy, 'great mysteries'. What was Kelly's? I found a sentence that might offer a clue: 'I reckon God's best love is for comfortably stupid people-seeing what a lot of us he makes. I am in love with this Gospel' (120). Here is the 'great mystery', the love of God for the foolish and stupid. For Kelly the possibility of redemption was embedded in God's love for such a humanity. It echoed for me in the words of Scripture: 'Without any doubt the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory' (1 Timothy 3:16). This is the ancient great mystery comes to the incarnation of God – taking flesh, pitching his tent in the midst of the foolish and stupid, revealing God's ways. I do

believe this great mystery was the undergirding reality for Kelly's life and work. It empowered him and gave him strength to endure in prophetic mode till the ripe old age of 90. It raises a question for us. What is the great mystery that empowers our life and work? Can we share in Kelly's vision? Where will it lead us? Who will dare to follow God's ways? Who will try to discover what God is doing in the world? Who will join in the challenge? Good questions that Herbert Kelly leaves us with. As Kelly would say, it's up to each one of us to get off our backsides and figure out the answers that make sense of the gospel of God today!

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