

# **An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections. E.J.Dwyer, Newtown NSW, 1993, xii – 227 pages.**

Here's a book review Ed did during his time in Australia.  
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Tony Kelly is an Australian Roman Catholic, a member of the Redemptorist order. In this proposal for an expanding theology, we have his blueprint for making connections between Christian theology and today's discoveries in cosmology and ecology. Those last two "-logies" (cosmo and eco-) still get scant attention from theologians. Au contraire among the eco- and cosmo-scientists. Their own discoveries are nudging them into God-talk—and not unwillingly. So it is high time that theologians join them for the common agenda in a world of connections. Cosmologists probing our galactic universe and the emergence of life on this tiny, tiny planet are already using the language of mystery, adoration, value, meaning when they talk about their own craft. Whose rhetoric is that really? Eco-scientists, with more grounds for alarm than the cosmologists have, need to talk about the one (and only one) web that encompasses our biosphere, humanity's blindness about living in partnership with creation, the need for wills to be changed, not just minds. Does that sound like theology's stock in trade—creation, sin, bondage of

the will or doesn't it? The fields are ripe unto harvest. So Kelly takes us out into those fields and shows us how to swing theology's sickle—not to cut down the other -ologists (for they are not enemies) but how to harvest collaboratively with them. For they are already working as colleagues on the common agenda of the planet: articulating faith in a world of connections.

Kelly is one of today's avant-garde theologians, Neo-thomists of a very specific sort, getting all three of the “-logies” together. To do so you have to know something, and he manifestly does. His conversation partners come from everywhere—classical to contemporary theology (of course) but also modern scientific research, poetry, metaphysics, to recent research on human sexuality and Becker's classic study of our denial of death. His theological anchormen (sic!) are all Roman Catholics: Teilhard (no surprise), Rahner, Lonergan, Segundo. Feminist authors are in the mix for the ecology sections, and non-Roman men (Macquarrie, Meeks, Moltmann, Polkinghorne, even Lutheran Joseph Sittler) are cherished conversation partners. But the long discussions are with the anchormen (Teilhard et al.) all in their own way drawing on Aquinas' medieval Summa as they push toward a contemporary one—someday.

The motto for the enterprise is not new: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Kelly's fulcrum term is “connections.” He traces seven “circles” of connections. Some arise from today's global culture, e.g., the pressure from many sides today [even New Age religion] to “get it together.” In other circles he connects the “-logies” in images and language that startles and intrigues. E.g., Incarnation surfaces in “the Word and the worlds of meanings.” The Creed's first article leads to “Creation and the Big Bang.” Extending the “frame of reference” of the Trinity we have “Ultimate reality as relational.” And like Jesus at Cana he saves the best till last: “The eucharistic universe: the Real Presence in the real world.”

An Expanding Theology is a text that tingles, a vademecum for dialogue with partners on the cutting edge of science, a tome that teases theologians into new vistas, new connections. In short, a joy to read. Yet for all of that Kelly's expanding theology is less than expansive, yes, sadly shrivelled, at one crucial point: the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Not that they never get mentioned, but this climax of Jesus' Messiahship plays no substantive role whatsoever in the theology Kelly connects with the other two -logies.

The incarnation is all the theology, all the good news, we get—or need—in Kelly's connections. His linchpin for linking the three “-logies” happened at Bethlehem as God crossed the fundamental boundary by enfleshing his Son. Initially it is no great surprise that St. John is his favored evangelist, his canon-within-the-canon. But sadly he never goes beyond the prolog! It's hard to imagine that John could be convinced that the “hour” Jesus moves toward, the “glory” that is the cross, or Jesus' “tetelestai” (“case closed”) at the end mark no significant move beyond “mere” incarnation .

I counted 8 references to Christ's cross and resurrection in the book. Several appear in lists of “the rhetoric of the Christian tradition.” In the five mentionings where Kelly puts a predicate to cross-and-resurrection, the best he can say is that “Incarnation goes to the point of crucifixion [wherein]...the Father is revealed as having no self-disclosure in this world other than...the selfless love of the Cross” (p. 163). Good Friday/Easter reveal (unveil) more vividly than any other uncovering, that God is and always has been selfless love. But nothing new, no action never before done, occurred on that weekend.

Thus when Kelly interprets John's own crux passage, Jesus' own words about “a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying

so that it bears much fruit"(12:24), we hear that "Surrender to, participation in a larger vitality, giving oneself into the ground of the whole mystery, transformation into an ultimate coexistence, are all implied here" (p. 186). Kelly does not hear Jesus in this text announcing what he is about to do for us. Instead he hears Jesus telling us how we can do what he is about to do. "To enter into the 'chaos' of dying is to rise to a new level of being. It is to be drawn into the 'white hole' of Jesus' resurrection, the whole of creation transformed by the Spirit" (p. 186), a "cosmic process of 'transubstantiation'" (p. 171).

Kelly's most extensive theology of the cross comes as he speaks of Christian hope vis-a-vis death, "the piercing tragedy at the heart of our existence." "The crucifixion and death of Christ himself" is a "symbol." "In its deepest meaning, it is a theophany: the all-creative mystery reveals itself as compassionate love. In the deadliness of Jesus' death—as failure, isolation, condemnation, torture—transcendent love has become familiar with our problem of evil.

"But not to be defeated by its power. For the death of the crucified embodies the ultimate form of life as self-surrender to its all-inclusive mystery... It is precisely at that point that God is self-revealed as a love stronger than death, as the creative mystery that holds in being and fulfills all the best energies of life. Thus, the transformation of the Risen One [is] the 'white hole' in the world of death" (p. 189). And the last mention at the end (p. 200) "For Christian faith, the ultimate symbol for self-realization in the universe is...the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the death of the ego-self for the sake of a life of full relationality in the Spirit."

Ought we not ask Kelly to "expand" his theology of the cross. For example, bring it up to John's own cosmic theology, seen

already in everybody's favorite, John 3:16. The evangelist says that God's love is done in just this way— his son dying "for" the cosmos, lest the cosmos perish and die out on its own. That's not just a symbol. That's an action on God's part that changes the history of the cosmos from death to life.

Many elements in the Reformation era debates surface when Kelly gets a Lutheran reading. Herewith just a few: major concern with "evil," but not with "sin;" God as "an 'Other' creatively, graciously present in every moment" (p.17) but never *lex semper accusat*; Kelly's overarching axiom of "grace healing, perfecting and elevating nature" vis-a-vis Luther's proposed alternate axiom for theology: the proper distinction between God's Law and Gospel; faith, hope, and love, as "energies...for getting wisdom;" Faith itself as a "Yes to the divine mystery...unconditioned and without reservation," and the Reformation's alternate notion of Faith as trusting Christ." And most reminiscent of Luther and Melanchthon's allergy to scholastic axiom *facere quod in se est*, are Kelly's counsel in the face of a world of threatened species, human perils of extinction, alienation from within, the violence and hatreds that lie close to the human heart. He asks: "What can liberate us, redeem us. . . when the human species is in danger of lapsing into a form of self-hatred?" Answer: "Alienation from our biosphere and ourselves can only be remedied by the more critical self-appropriation of the best in ourselves in terms of art, intelligence, morality and faith" (p. 52).

My best hope would be for Kelly to be appointed to the Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogue in Australia. Lutherans dialogue members would be challenged and stretched (even expanded?) by the trajectories of his theological assertions. Kelly himself in the give-and-take could fatten up his theology of the cross and reflect on some of its spin-offs in the paragraph above. Some Lutheran theologians are already working out the connections of

Reformation theology to the “-logies” of the sciences (e.g., ITEST, the Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology, an international Lutheran-Catholic collegium based in the USA now 25 yrs. old). Imagine such collaborative conversation down under: Kelly not letting go of the incarnation and Lutherans keeping the passion and resurrection narratives front and center while both sets of partners push each other to articulate our Christian faith in a world of connections. Would that be “an expanding theology?” And how!

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