

# Society of the Sacred Mission

## FATHER KELLY AND POSTMODERNISM

By Margaret Dewey SSM

When our SSM colleges closed (Kelham in 1973, St Michael's House in 1983), it seemed to many that the Society had lost its *raison d'être*. But it was in 1935, in the heyday of Kelham, that Father Kelly wrote: 'It is nigh forty years ago—about 1898—that I began to realise that the work of Mildenhall was not so much to make "clergy of the humbler classes" (as a Cambridge don once put it) but *to revive the idea of theology*.'

In his theological vision Kelly was, in his lifetime, swimming against the tide of a scepticism rooted in what is still popularly called the 'modern' scientific world view. At Oxford (where he had read history) Kelly had learnt to see 'the whole creation as God's province' and 'the whole of history as the drama of the purpose of God.' This is technology as understood throughout European history until the Enlightenment, as the 'Queen of Sciences' which unites and gives meaning to all the others. But in the world view of Newtonian physics, truth was to be found by reducing things to their component parts and studying the parts and the mechanisms by which they interacted. With human knowledge thus fragmented, theology had become just one specialised academic subject among many others.

It was only when Kelly began presenting men for ordination in England (not just for the overseas 'mission field') that he came up against the theological establishment, saw what had happened to their discipline—and rejected it. To us, theology was not a technical and professional knowledge. We were studying God's view of human life—what God was doing on the Somme, and at Westminster, and at Tilbury Docks ... I do not want to know what you can do with Christ in a church (building) half so much as I want to know what Christ is doing in the street ...

'This Kelham Technology of the will of God in the world was a Kelham gospel to the world. I do not mean that only Kelham believes it. Every orthodox Christian admits that it is in some sense orthodox doctrine—(but) we had shaped our whole ideals on it: We had made it the basis of our education—in that, I think, we were alone. (*Ad Filios*, 1920)

SSM is unique among religious communities in having the doing of theology as one of its principal aims. When our colleges closed, what the Society lost was not its *raison d'être*, but only the most obvious way of fulfilling it. How, *now*, are we to make Father Kelly's idea of theology and the SSM traditio known? What is its relevance in the post-modern world of today—the world of quantum physics?

In subatomic physics, there are no 'objective facts', only indeterminacy and paradox. According to the type of experiment, all the basic constituents of matter—electrons, protons, neutrons—behave sometimes as particles, sometimes as waves. Light, hitherto understood as 'light waves', in a certain type of experiment behaves unmistakably as a stream of particles or 'quanta'. There is no real answer to the question 'What *is* light?' or 'What *are* electrons?' The Danish physicist Niels Bohr concluded that any statement that seems to say something about the intrinsic nature of an object in fact only describes how it is observed to interact under certain circumstances. We cannot know what light 'is' when it is not being observed interacting with its surroundings.

Werner Heisenberg (who worked with Bohr) discovered that you cannot measure accurately both the position and the motion of an electron at the same time, for the more accurately you determine the one, the more uncertain the other becomes ('Heisenberg's uncertainty principle'). Bohr saw that the 'wave' and 'particle' views are complementary, and that *both* must be accorded equal status (Bohr's 'complementarity principle'). Seen thus, the paradox disappears: the contradictions only arise when we try to fuse the two types of observation into a single mental picture of 'what the object *is*'. Bohr said the nature of human knowledge is such that we must stop short of such abstractions: this is the frontier of the knowable.

Meanwhile in the humanities there has been a conscious attack on the whole 'Enlightenment project'. The first shots were fired in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Friedrich Nietzsche, but the real assault came in the 1970s in the realm of linguistics, with the rise of a literary theory known as 'deconstruction'. Deconstructionists say that meaning is not inherent in a text, but depends on the perspective of the interpreter. They attack the assumption that there is a substantial convergence between 'reality' and our description of reality: they insist that we can never get to a 'reality' which exists prior to our perception of it. Which is exactly what Bohr said about physics.

According to another physicist, Fritjof Capra, the crucial feature of quantum theory is that the observer is not only necessary to observe the properties of an atomic phenomenon, but is necessary even to bring about those properties. My conscious decision about how to observe, say, an electron, will determine the electron's properties to some extent ... The electron does not have objective properties independent of my mind. In atomic physics, the sharp Cartesian division between mind and matter, between the observer and the observed, can no longer be maintained.' (*The Turning Point* Wildwood House, 1982, p.77).

But the old world view dies hard. The Enlightenment faith, that through science and technology human reason will enable us to control nature and bring peace and growing prosperity to all, is still preached by politicians, proclaimed by the mass media, and practised by economists—blind to the environmental and social costs of unlimited growth.

And biblical literalists still look in the Bible for 'objective facts' in the manner of Newtonian science. The quest for certainty is powerfully attractive, but the conversion of St Paul stands for all time as a warning that certainty can be mistaken. When asked how we know what the will of God is, Father Kelly would reply, 'We never do—and that's the giddy joke!'

In 1992 Hilary Greenwood summarised our SSM technological tradition in terms of three characteristics of our found: 'a reverent agnosticism in all things, including human morals, a tendency to teach and mediate with paradoxes; and (the ultimate paradox) a lightly flippant attitude to human religion, eclipsed by a loving trust in the God of paradoxes.'

Quantum physics was only just emerging in the 1920s and 1930s, but Kelly's reverent agnosticism accords well with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and his teaching in paradoxes, with Bohr's insistence on complementarity as the way of knowledge. And it was Kelly's growing awareness of the inadequacy of words to convey the reality of God which led him to adopt his increasingly elliptical and paradoxical style ('What *does* Father Kelly mean?'): in his recognition of the inability of language to convey 'reality' Kelly was fifty years ahead of the deconstructionists.

Melvyn Matthews has recently called for the retrieval of the 'mystical way'—the deep contemplative Christian tradition at the heart of the scriptural and liturgical life of the whole

Church, as understood from the time of the Desert Fathers until the Enlightenment: 'Mysticism is a form of deconstruction, a way of deliberately unravelling the falsities to which devotion and religious practice, and religious speech, are prone.'

Retrieval of the mystical tradition, and taking postmodern insights seriously, 'together can enable the Church to restate its life and to model the way of Christ so that those who are unable to tolerate the current vogue for 'modernisation' in the church will be able to hear a different drum, and to know that God is still a possibility for them.'

Matthews sees in postmodernity 'a supreme opportunity for the reinstatement of the primary task of theology, that is, to interpret the whole world as being ultimately under God, and only ultimately comprehensible when the transcendent reality of God is fully recognised.' (*Both Alike to Thee* SPCK 2000)

It seems that Father Kelly's idea of theology is an idea whose time has come. And his willingness to live with uncertainty and paradox, in loving trust in the God of paradoxes, is a way of discipleship for the postmodern age.