

Open Library of Humanities

The logo for the Open Library of Humanities, consisting of a stylized 'O' and 'H' in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**Guy Aiken, *A Testament of Devotion and Thomas Kelly, Augustinian Quaker* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 79.
ISBN 9789004459243. Paperback, £70.**

Mark D. Russ, University of Nottingham, UK, mark.d.russ@gmail.com

Book review of Guy Aiken, *A Testament of Devotion and Thomas Kelly, Augustinian Quaker* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 79. ISBN 9789004459243. Paperback, £70.



In this addition to the *Brill Research Perspectives in Quaker Studies* series, Guy Aiken offers an appreciative summation of the theology and spirituality of mid-twentieth century mystic Thomas Kelly. Aiken reviews the existing if small scholarship on Kelly and provides much biographical detail, particularly focussing on the theology and historical context of Kelly's classic essay collection, *A Testament of Devotion* (1941). Aiken's study is intended as a counterweight to the more overtly critical treatment of Kelly in Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (2005). Aiken's overarching argument is that Kelly's theology cannot fully be defined by his immediate historical context, with certain aspects being part of a much older theological tradition. In fairness to Schmidt, he admits that 'there were no doubt ageless qualities to Kelly's *Testament of Devotion*' but that it 'is better read with his immediate world left in rather than left out'.¹ Schmidt goes on to find Kelly's theology shaped by his seeking and eventual renunciation of academic prestige. Schmidt attributes Kelly's emphasis on absolute obedience to God to the inherent tension within liberal theology between the quest for individual freedom and the need for social reform.² Aiken agrees with Schmidt to a degree, writing that Kelly's Christology can be situated comfortably within the theological liberalism of his time. Kelly holds a Logos Christology resembling exemplarism, with the emphasis on Jesus as an exemplary mystic rather than exemplifying God's love through his sacrificial death. For Kelly, this is a participatory Christology, with Christ as a pattern to be replicated.

Aiken's point of departure from Schmidt is in Kelly's theology of God-enthralment. Instead of seeing Kelly's emphasis on complete submission to God as springing from the tensions of liberal theology, Aiken suggest this is part of an older theological tradition rooted in Augustine. Here Aiken has in mind the Augustine of the *Confessions*, a book beloved by Kelly. The similarity with Augustine lies in Kelly's emphasis on God as the primary actor and humanity's inability to live rightly without God. In this, Kelly goes against the liberal grain found in Rufus Jones' optimistic view of human nature and collapsing of the divine into the human. Kelly's un-liberal theology can also be seen in his challenge to the Social Gospel, stressing the importance of rooting action in mystical experience. Kelly suggests a mysticism of self-renunciation as the key to journeying through a life of suffering. Aiken also brings Kelly into dialogue with the work of Tal Brewer and virtue ethics. Kelly proposes an ethic of simplification, both of the outward life and the inward self. A simplified life is an integrated, dedicated life, with ethical action flowing from contemplation. The book concludes with suggestions for further

¹ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2nd edn, 2012, p. 68.

² Schmidt, pp. 168-70.

research, including Kelly's relationship with philosophy, particularly Platonism, and the relationship between Kelly, Rufus Jones, and liberal Quakerism. For Aiken this is a personal as well as scholarly project borne out of a deep appreciation for Kelly's work. As a fellow lover of *A Testament of Devotion*, I warmly welcome this critical celebration of one of the landmark Quaker texts of the twentieth century.

There are a few friendly challenges I would like to make to Aiken. Is Kelly's connection with Augustine enough to warrant labelling him as 'Augustinian'? Augustine is more than his *Confessions*, and there are certainly many differences between the two men. If Kelly's Christology is cut from a liberal cloth, then this must also impact his theology of God. With Christ primarily an exemplary mystic, Kelly's God is essentially a unitarian deity. Here we are once more on liberal ground, firmly in the tradition of Schleiermacher and Harnack who stressed the Fatherhood of God and Christ as the one who achieves God-consciousness. A break from trinitarianism is also a break from a pillar of Augustine's theology. It strikes me that Kelly could more easily be labelled a Barclay—an Quaker, after early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay, who shares Kelly's emphasis on human passivity in the face of God's absolute demands. Aiken writes that Kelly 'would have no truck with the "constructivist" position, that no experience ever entirely bursts the bonds of culture or history' (pp. 74–75). I must admit my own constructivist orientation here, which makes me ask not whether Kelly's work is timeless or not, but whether it still works for us today. Does Kelly's use of enslavement as a metaphor hold up under the gaze of liberation theology? A student of Kelly's commented at the time that such language was dangerously totalitarian in an era of rising fascism.³ It seems to me that post-James Cone such a metaphor has had its day. Kelly's work still has relevance but cannot be adopted wholesale. These concerns aside, I still find Kelly's *A Testament of Devotion* to be a challenge, comfort and guide, and I'm grateful to Aiken for adding to the scholarship this important text deserves.

³ Schmidt, p. 166.

Competing Interests

[[COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT TO BE PROVIDED]]



Typesetting queries

1. The journal has a policy to include a competing interest statement in all published articles, to ensure transparency. Please could you provide a competing interest statement, or confirm that all authors of this article have no competing interests. Further information is available here: <https://www.openlibhums.org/site/competing-interests/>