Dayne Edward Nix, *Moral Injury and a First World War Chaplain: The Life of G. A. Studdert Kennedy*
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Reverend Chaplain Geoffrey Anketell (G.A.) Studdert Kennedy is described as the most famous and popular chaplain among 5000 British chaplains of the First World War. He gained this reputation through his positive morale-building presence in recruit-training units, at aid stations and in the trenches, and through his support of soldiers’ families. This volume is an overview of his life and ministry through the lens of contemporary understanding of moral injury and post-traumatic growth.

Kennedy’s biographer Dayne Nix served in the military for 29 years, 24 of them as a U.S. Navy chaplain. Also teaching at the Naval War College since 2001, his research interests focus on the role and experience of chaplains and religion and its relationship to national security affairs. His chaplaincy included debriefing many military members after trauma and hosting 40 ‘returning warrior retreats’. He brings that experience, and conversation with the seminal literature on moral injury (Shay, Litz, Brock et. al.), to explain how Kennedy epitomised chaplaincy in fostering faith and hope and building morale through pastoral presence and cheerfulness but also how he struggled with his own memories.

Among Kennedy’s heroic acts, he left an aid station and dodged heavy artillery to get a soldier more morphine and retrieved other wounded soldiers while exposed to enemy (and friendly) fire – actions for which he was awarded the Military Cross. Among acts of empathy, he offered a cigarette to Peter who was fervently praying during an artillery barrage, and when later shot Kennedy buried him and promised to write to his wife: “That's all I am, Peter, an informal and incompetent undertaker, with tears in my eyes and sorrow in my heart” (cited p.71).

Kennedy carried war wounds home himself – physical (damaged lungs) but also moral and spiritual. Seeing the suffering but also futility of trench warfare led him to question his political leaders but also his traditional view of God. He adopted a combat inspired theology of the Suffering God:

> "God suffers in every man [sic.] that suffers. God, the God we love and worship, is no far off God of Power, but the comrade God of love: He is on no heavenly throne, He is up in the trenches, under the guns: for every wound a man receives there is pain in the heart of God, and every cry of agony finds echo in God’s soul” (cited p.161).

Seeing himself as a co-worker with a suffering God is part of what energized him to be with soldiers to the front line, but also what called him to engage in ministry in postwar slums and industrial struggles.

Post-war, alongside busy pastoral duties, Kennedy became chaplain to the King and spokesperson for Industrial Christian Fellowship. He advocated for abolishing poverty, mediated in strikes, opposed unemployment and class
warfare, and became an ardent Pacifist. Controversially, on Armistice Day 1921, he spoke of how much of the war was lies and confessed his own guilt. He questioned the waste of war overall (writing one of his poems on that), but also regretted his encouragement to parishioners to enlist and instructions to his military assistant and a chaplain colleague that led to their deaths. He appealed for the right for conscientious objection of serving soldiers and sailors if they believed a war was immoral and challenged the Church to support them. Nix sees in Kennedy’s post-war idealism evidence of post-traumatic growth of a war veteran with lessons for resilience, yet also perhaps signs of feeling culpable, betrayed and unable to turn off the adrenaline. His driven overwork was probably part of the reason for his early death at 45.

Nix’s contribution is one of historiography with explicit implications for contemporary military members struggling with trauma or moral injury. Kennedy’s experience resonates with serving chaplains who listen to and carry the moral and other burdens of the people they serve. It is also suggestive of the potency of spiritual practices including confession, reconciliation and community service in soul repair and post-traumatic growth. Moreover, Kennedy’s theology of a suffering God and “God in a work[er]’s jacket” appropriately spoke to soldiers in WWI and workers in post-war Britain. It also has potential, as Nix underlines, to speak to a world which has experienced 9/11 and COVID-19. What Kennedy did not seem to explore for himself, nor Nix develop, is that a suffering God is good news for those suffering moral injury, including caregivers who act in the name of a suffering God.

*Moral Injury and a First World War Chaplain* is delightful and informative reading of interest to war historians, chaplains and others supporting those with unseen wounds. Its most important implication is the need for caregivers to practice self-awareness and receive care themselves.

Notes:
The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Australian Army, the Department of Defence or the Australian Government. This review was originally published in *Journal of the Royal Army Chaplains' Department* (Feb 2022).