Review Essay

Tracing the Triple Helix: The Reformed and Ecumenical Shape of David Kelsey’s Theological Anthropology

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Abstract
David Kelsey develops a theological anthropology in Eccentric Existence whose structure proves distinctly Reformed, though in a methodologically innovative way. Precisely this “Reformed” structure serves to open up ecumenically fruitful dimensions to his constructive proposal. After providing in broad strokes a sketch of the dense yet expansive theological anthropology advanced in Eccentric Existence, this essay homes in on a key image Kelsey implements to represent the shape of his account of human being, namely the image of the triple helix, by introducing its methodological underpinnings and basic structure. It then uses this image as a lens by which to bring into focus the unique location of Eccentric Existence in the larger contexts of Kelsey’s work and the Reformed and ecumenical Christian traditions.

Keywords
theological anthropology, Reformed, ecumenism, imago Dei, David Kelsey

In his highly anticipated Eccentric Existence, a massive work that is the product of a career’s worth of research and teaching on theological anthropology, David Kelsey makes two major contributions to contemporary Christian theology.1 Most obviously, he constructively reconfigures Christian theological anthropology in a work that is breathtaking in both breadth and depth. Furthermore, in an even more fundamental line of argument that weaves its way through

this elaborately developed constructive proposal, Kelsey makes the case for a reconfiguration of traditional approaches to the enterprise of theology as such.

Part I. Created, Consummated, Reconciled: A Theological Anthropology in the Passive Voice

Kant summed up the three basic questions to which he had boldly distilled philosophical inquiry ("What can I know?" “What should I do?” “What may I hope?”) in the single question “What is the human being?” Likewise, Kelsey understands this basic anthropological question to entail a set of three subordinate questions. For Kelsey, a consideration of the human being entails a “what,” a “how” and a “who” question. The first question, “What are we?” is “metaphysical” in that it seeks to identify what makes human persons human in a general, or abstract, sense. The second question, “How ought we to be?” is “existential-historical,” having to do with human ways of being in the world. The third question, “Who am I and who are we?” concerns concrete particular human identities, and is thus a “psychological, sociological and historical as well as religious” question. Kelsey addresses these three fundamental anthropological questions in parts one, two and three of his book, respectively, in which he discusses human persons as created, consummated and reconciled. In choosing these three questions, Kelsey decisively moves away from the modern emphasis on the human person as a center of consciousness. Not Kant’s individual rational subject, not first and foremost the “I” as such, but the person in relationship, the “we” is the focus of Kelsey’s inquiry.

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2 In “The Jäsche Logic,” Kant writes: “philosophy . . . is in fact the science of the relation of all cognition and of all use of reason to the ultimate end of human reason, to which, as the highest, all other ends are subordinated, and in which they must all unite to form a unity. The field of philosophy in this cosmopolitan sense can be brought down to the following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope? 4. What is man? Metaphysics answers the first question, morals the second, religion the third, and anthropology the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one.” See “The Jäsche Logic,” in Lectures on Logic, trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 538. Earlier Kant had stated: “All interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?” See his Critique of Pure Reason, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 677.

Not only Kelsey’s guiding questions but also the answers he provides to these questions represent a telling departure from modern approaches to understanding human being. Kelsey formulates these answers in the passive voice, grammatically signaling a shift of focus from the human person as thinking subject to God as acting subject: human persons are those (1) created, (2) eschatologically consummated and (3) reconciled by God. For Kelsey, these three claims, which together point to the conviction that the “ultimate context in which we must be understood is God relating to us,”4 are “non-negotiable for Christian faith.”5 The material content of the work consists of an elaboration on these three basic theses.

Since the God to whom we must be understood as relating is—for Christians—none other than the triune God, Kelsey takes as his guiding aim “to think through the agenda of theological anthropology in a way shaped from beginning to end by the triunity of the God with whom we have to do.”6 The tripartite structure of the work reflects this trinitarian approach. The three aspects of God’s relation to us noted above correspond to God’s threefold identity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.7 Kelsey situates his project in the renaissance of trinitarian theology that began in the 20th century and arguably continues today.8

This project is trinitarian, but it is not properly systematic. Kelsey often insists that this anthropology is to be understood as an exercise in “systematically unsystematic secondary theology” if it is to be faithful to the unsystematic practice of the Christian communities of faith whose belief it aims to describe.9 Yet, for Kelsey, being “unsystematic” has more to do with a certain epistemic humility, a resistance to absolutizing any of his claims or prioritizing their compatibility with one another, than with a resistance to approaching the relevant material in an organized fashion. Indeed Kelsey’s material argument is

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4 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 46.
5 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 8.
6 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 46.
7 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 47.
8 For a brief introduction to this renaissance, including a discussion of some of the key causes and figures responsible for setting it into motion, see Christoph Schwöbel, “Introduction: The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems, Tasks”, Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 1-30.
9 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 45. By “secondary theology,” Kelsey means a practice of theology that critically assesses received formulations of the Christian faith in contrast to “primary theology,” which typically involves “the ad hoc critique of current concrete enactments of communal practices that employs received conceptualizations and formulations (creeds, confessions, and traditional locutions) as criteria.” For his discussion of these terms see page 10.
anything but ad hoc in terms of its basic structure. Formally speaking, it is a model of balance, nuance and unrelenting logical consistency.

Each of the three parts of the work follows the same six-step pattern. First, Kelsey treats the “ultimate context” constituted by the dimension of God’s relation to us under consideration. That is the context that is most basic or fundamental to our human identity. He next turns to the significance of this ultimate context for our “proximate contexts”—our concrete location in space, time and social relationships. These contextual considerations lead, in turn, to a thematization of the mode of human flourishing that corresponds to our identity as persons in these ultimate and proximate contexts. At this point, Kelsey formulates an answer to the basic anthropological question under consideration. Kelsey then proceeds to unpack the implications of this answer for each of the other two basic anthropological questions. Finally, Kelsey turns to the ways this aspect of human identity may be distorted by sin. He approaches this question first in terms of “sins in the plural,” which refer to discrete sinful acts performed by an individual, and then in terms of “sin in the singular,” Kelsey’s version of the classical notion of “original sin,” which applies to a person’s identity as a whole.

In some chapters, Kelsey treats “more technical, in-house-academic-theology discussions.” When he chooses to do so, he situates these discussions in their own small-print “B” chapters after establishing the main line of his argument in an “A” chapter. This organizational scheme has the advantage both of enabling the general reader to follow the main lines of Kelsey’s argument without having to plod through explanations of the methodological underpinnings of his proposals or their relation to debates in academic theology, and also of facilitating easy reference to these discussions in cases where they are of interest, as they most certainly will be, to the specialist. In addition to tailoring the book to meet the needs of a diverse readership, the segregation of these sections attests to the boldly constructive nature of Kelsey’s work. This is not a theological contribution that docilely follows the contours of perspectives already established in the debates of contemporary academic theology. Rather,

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10 Kelsey lists the components of this pattern at the end of the introduction to the work. See Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 10-11.

11 In one of the concluding “codas” of the work, Kelsey also makes a distinction between “sin,” which refers to a dysfunction in creaturely relationship to God, and “evil,” a dysfunction in relationships among creatures. Neither “sin in the singular” nor “sins in the plural” is to be confused with “evil.” See Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1035.

it blazes its own path along or across which these debates will subsequently need to find their way. This is constructive theology writ large.

The consistent six-step pattern described above gives the work a highly systematic form and feel even while further underscoring the peculiarity of Kelsey’s materially unsystematic approach. The perfectly parallel structure of each of the parts creates an impression of unity. Yet in point of actual fact, Kelsey rarely indulges in integration. Rather, he assiduously avoids interweaving the three parts, using the very parallel structures that would seem to create the perfect opportunity for establishing systematic connections to give each part of the work the measured scope and profundity of a self-standing theological anthropology. The three parts ultimately “constitute an interconnected, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing whole,” but Kelsey’s six-step structure accents a certain integrity that each part possesses in itself.13 The three parts are connected, but each can be “read on its own.”14 This kind of integrity avoids a methodological malady which Kelsey diagnoses as endemic to traditional approaches to systematic theology in one of the most fascinating chapters of the book, 12B.

Part II. Analyzing the Triple Helix Approach

Section A. The Methodological Underpinnings of the Triple Helix Approach: Kelsey’s Critique of Traditional Approaches to Secondary Theology

In this example of one of Kelsey’s more “technical” discussions, Kelsey presents nothing less than a critique of the way the received theological tradition has tended to read scripture, complete with a comprehensive typology for organizing “conventional” approaches to systematic theology.15 Mistakenly

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13 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, xi.
14 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, xi.
15 The key question that determines how various theologies fit into this typology is “what drives the movement of the overall canon-unifying narrative?” In some theologies, according to Kelsey, God’s commitment to creation is seen as the heart of the biblical narrative (though there are various permutations of this perspective ranging all the way from some “broadly Augustinian, especially Anselmian, versions of the narrative” to “broadly Pelagian versions of the narrative”); in others, consummation is the center of the narrative (various representatives of this approach include “broadly Hegelian approaches” on one side and “Orthodox and some broadly Augustinian versions” on the other); incarnation pumps the lifeblood into the canon according to a final type (here Kelsey locates “broadly Irenaean and Schleiermacherian versions of the narrative” at one pole and “broadly Barthian and Rahnerian” versions at the other). For Kelsey’s typology, which
understanding the wholeness of scripture to be susceptible to a more than superficial systematic unity, traditional approaches typically conform the multifaceted stories of God’s relationship found in scripture to a single “canon-unifying narrative,” one traditionally involving four acts: 1) creation, 2) fall, 3) redemption and 4) consummation.16 Though this narrative takes different forms in different theologies, no single conventional systematic theology allows for the multiplicity of scripture’s stories about God’s relation to creatures to come through in its approach. Most theologies do “preserve the distinction between two distinct sets of stories as stories of two different ways in which God relates to all else” yet the inherent imbalance of such binary approaches leads typically to the collapse of one of the stories into a single paradigmatic story, so that the second story becomes a mere subplot of the first.17 Whether this systematization is accomplished by a philosophical or theological governing principle, systematic theology’s natural inclination to conform all of its elements to a single logically consistent system only serves to exacerbate this flattening of the diversity of the biblical narratives. In light of this predicament, Kelsey proposes a new paradigm for how systematic theology should be done.

Systematic theology often tends to drive towards unity, but does not do so necessarily or inherently. Indeed it has the potential, observes Kelsey, to push in precisely the opposite direction by dedicating itself to the task of ensuring that the differences between canonical stories of God’s relating to what is not God be preserved as such. This kind of systematic theology, in other words, insists upon the complex diversity of God’s ways of relating to us. This insistence is not merely accidental to theology, but lies at the heart of its authentic task. Kelsey’s commitment to doing this kind of differentiating systematic theology leads him to resist the binary approach to interpreting the canon-unifying narrative typical of most systematic theologies. “Canonical stories about God relating to all else,” contends Kelsey, “exhibit not two, but three different plots and so fall into three, not two, basic types of stories.”18 Given this exegetical point Kelsey proposes that theological anthropology, and, by implication, any theology accountable to the diversity present in the whole of

fills out in greater detail these types and their distinctions from one another, distinctions that can be fairly dramatic even within the same basic category, see 462-468.

16 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 461.
17 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 468.
18 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 475.
scripture, ought to “be organized in a triplex way rather than in the conventionally binary way.”

Section B. The Structure of the Triple Helix: The Peculiar Shape of Kelsey’s New Alternative

Throughout *Eccentric Existence*, Kelsey sustains this commitment to articulating his anthropology in terms of three distinct narratives “that cannot be conflated with either of the other two.” Yet at the same time Kelsey affirms that these narratives are “inseparable.” It is only in the concluding codas of *Eccentric Existence* that he answers the question of how all three “work together as a whole” to comprise one “theocentric picture of human eccentric existence.”

Kelsey finds a model for the “whole-in-complexity” of human existence in the image of a triple helix. He is concerned to note that he has in mind a cylindrical helix, which remains open-ended, rather than a conical helix, which, resolving to a point, “appears to come to closure.” The image of a triple helix is particularly apt in that it naturally suggests some of the asymmetry upon which Kelsey insists in relating the three narratives. Bound together in the person of Jesus Christ, the consummation and reconciliation narratives constitute a double helix, which then spirals around the helix of Part I—God’s creative relation to that which is not God. The double helix presupposes the single helix, and within the double helix there is another layer of asymmetry, as reconciliation presupposes eschatological consummation, but not vice versa.

Whereas the triple helix image serves to characterize the formal relationship of the three parts of Kelsey’s theological anthropology, their material wholeness is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the “concrete content” of the *imago Dei*, and the key to Kelsey’s ability to draw the narrative strands of his anthropology together without confusing them: they constitute a single whole in that they all find a place in Christ’s one unsubstitutable identity. The triple helix as representative of human existence, then, illustrates how human nature mirrors the profile of Christ, and, in so doing, finds its wholeness outside of itself.

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Part III. Mapping Kelsey’s Anthropology of the Triple Helix: 
Three Concentric Circles

The image of the triple helix serves not only as an image for the three dimensions of human existence, but also epitomizes what is most revolutionary in what must on all accounts be recognized as an extraordinarily creative constructive project. Even in the context of Kelsey’s anthropology, this image raises provocative questions, and it aids in locating Kelsey’s theological anthropology in a series of larger contexts.

A natural set of standards by which to evaluate Kelsey is one he himself articulates in the work. Kelsey’s discussion of chapter 12B raises at least two basic clusters of questions regarding his triple helix proposal. Kelsey argues in chapter 12B that “canonical stories about God relating to all else in different ways ought not to be absorbed into one another.”26 He therefore treats three, instead of merely two, ways in which God relates to human persons. The number three doubtless exerts a special attraction on Christian systematic theologians who seek to articulate a theology fundamentally shaped by the doctrine of the trinity. Yet it is not immediately clear why the same charge of reductionism Kelsey levels against binary “canon-unifying narratives” does not apply to Kelsey’s own approach. On what basis does Kelsey determine that the multiplicity of scriptural stories about how God relates to us is adequately conveyed in a clique of three? Would any systematic theology that tries to specify a finite number of God’s ways of relating do justice to the rich variety of such stories in scripture and/or experience? How does Kelsey’s principle of non-absorption avoid a problem of infinite regress whereby theology is prevented from ever recounting any story about God for fear of being reductive?

Another danger to which Kelsey alerts his reader in chapter 12B provokes a second cluster of questions. In addition to the pitfall of collapsing the multiple ways in which God relates to what is not God into a “single, comprehensive, systematic”27 conception, Kelsey points to the temptation, especially in a binary system, of ordering various conceptions of God’s way of relating to what is not God “in a nonreciprocal way that effectively subordinates one way in which God is said to relate to the other way, theologically marginalizing the way of relating that is made subordinate.”28 Kelsey, who advertises in the “Acknowledgments” that “the sense of the proposals made throughout this

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26 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 475.
27 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, xi.
28 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 473.
project, and the force of the arguments supporting them, rest equally on the three parts" supplies no overt signal of subordinating one part of the work to another until the conclusion—indeed the very structure of the three central parts of the work suggests a punctilious attention to parity.29 In the final coda, however, Kelsey makes the surprising pronouncement that “being structurally reconciled to God in Christ as estranged human creatures is the aspect of [personal living human bodies] imaging the image of God in which they most closely image the image of God. For it is as they are in Christ by virtue of God relating in incarnate agape to reconcile them to Christ that they are themselves structurally ‘within,’ participating in, the one who properly images God.”30 Does this privileging of the story of God’s reconciliation of humanity as the pinnacle of intimacy in the human relationship to God imply a subordination of the other two stories Kelsey treats? If so, why is this privileging appropriate? One finishes Eccentric Existence with the sense that Kelsey has an answer to these questions, but no certainty as to what it is, or how it fits with the challenges to traditional theological approaches Kelsey articulates in chapter 12B.

A similar question presents itself regarding Kelsey’s account of God relating creatively. In an essay from 1982 on “Human Being,” Kelsey called for the recovery of “a full-blown doctrine of creation as a mode of relation to God other than relationships in consciousness” as a means of countering the modern tendency to obscure and underplay the “material dimensions of human life.”31 This is a promissory note on which Kelsey makes good in Eccentric Existence. Both his decision to prioritize Wisdom literature in his account of human persons as created as well as the asymmetry of the triple helix structure enable him to achieve precisely the kind of accentuation of the doctrine of creation he found lacking in contemporary theological anthropologies in 1982.32 But is the kind of asymmetry in creation’s favor for which Kelsey allows in his tripartite model of human existence compatible with the kind of reciprocity he seems to regard as necessary in chapter 12B? If anything, the anthropological vista Kelsey opens up for his readers raises the question of whether he overcorrects for this problem: the theme of eschatological fulfillment seems to hide in the

29 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, xi.
30 Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 1049.
shadows of the two towering peaks of Kelsey’s threefold account, creation and reconciliation.

In addition to helping to locate Eccentric Existence in the larger context of Kelsey’s theological work, an analysis of the triple helix approach also aids in locating Kelsey’s work in his Reformed tradition. The Reformed sensibility for clear and watertight distinctions, characteristically expressed in Reformed Christology and the Reformed emphasis on the ontological difference between God and the world, permeates Kelsey’s constructive proposal in Eccentric Existence on a variety of levels. The classic manifestations of this sensibility are unmistakably echoed in the work’s continued insistence on the creator/creature distinction and God’s utter independence from creation. One might even contend that Kelsey’s claim that Jesus Christ gives material unity to the formal triple helix structure of his theological anthropology, a claim which seems to require that the three aspects of the triple helix refer, however indirectly, to three aspects of Christology, arguably represents a contemporary variation on (though by no means a replacement of!) the traditional Reformed theme of emphasizing the distinctions between different aspects of the one person, Jesus Christ. Certainly Kelsey’s move to maintain a strict separation between love to neighbor and love to God, which stands in such stark contrast to Rahner’s famous identification of the former as a mode of the latter,33 and the segregation of the methodological and material sections of the book, might be attributed to this Reformed sensibility. Most of all, one cannot help but wonder if the very heart of Kelsey’s proposal, his triple helix model of human existence and the methodological critique of chapter 12B that underlies it, is not at bottom a radicalization, beginning in the realm of scriptural hermeneutics, of a quintessentially Reformed modus operandi. How this kind of radicalization of one tendency of the Reformed tradition proves ultimately compatible with the cherished Reformed doctrine of providence is a question that deserves further consideration. Does God’s providence, and the unity of God’s action and purpose in relation to human persons that it affirms, offer a properly theological justification for canon-unifying narratives? Does it require that attempts be made to articulate them? What are the implications of Kelsey’s eschewal of canon-unifying-narratives for the doctrine of divine providence? Does this eschewal find its basis in an ontic or merely noetic necessity?

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Though from one perspective Kelsey’s tripartite approach may be viewed as a distinctively Reformed constructive development, it also forges links between Kelsey’s project and the broader ecumenical tradition. The triple helix image achieves this negatively, in that it provides a structural guard against what is typically regarded as a peculiarly Protestant pitfall, the tendency to overplay sin. In opting for a more stable tripartite structure for his theological anthropology, rather than the four-part structure he attributes to such giants of the tradition as Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Schleiermacher, Barth, and Rahner, which he sees as tending to reduce to a binary schema, Kelsey makes a notable omission. The story of humankind’s relationship to sin, or “fall,” is not one of the three “non-negotiable” narratives according to which he chooses to frame his account of human existence. Though sin receives treatment in each of the three major parts of Eccentric Existence, it does not, for Kelsey, have the same status in determining the fundamental structure of human nature as do the three major pillars of his anthropology. Thus Kelsey acknowledges the reality of sin and its devastating effects on human life, but structurally underlines sin’s accidental rather than constitutive relationship to human being: sin is egocentric and as such alien to authentically eccentric human existence. By restricting the role of sin in his anthropology, Kelsey actually demotes sin from the more central position he perceives it to occupy in classical theologies of both east and west.

The image of the triple helix also works positively to establish fruitful points of contact between Kelsey’s anthropological proposal and key figures in the Church’s broader ecumenical traditions. Kelsey’s insistence on the idea that only Christ, strictly speaking, is the image of God, while human existence is an image of the image, for example, goes back to Origen. Yet the hospitality of his anthropology to eastern traditions runs deeper than individual material debts to Greek early Christian theologians; it grows from roots in the very structure of his anthropological approach. The conjunction of the asymmetrical relation between the three strands of the triple helix and Kelsey’s trinitarian thematization of these three strands makes an ecumenically pregnant point. Insofar as, 1) consummation presupposes only creation and not reconciliation and, 2) Kelsey associates consummation with the Spirit, creation with God the Father, and reconciliation with the Son (47), it is the case that, 3) the very structure of the triple helix entails an asymmetry that stands in tension with the

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filioque. The consummation of human existence can only proceed given its prior creation, but this procession towards the eschaton in no way proceeds from reconciliation as a logically necessary premise. Kelsey's triple helix approach thus renders his anthropology formally hospitable to an analogous trinitarian dynamic.

Insofar as Kelsey associates the three strands of the triple helix with the three theological virtues, faith, hope and love, this project also possesses a distinctively Augustinian flavor, and is reminiscent of the kind of project that Thomas Aquinas began in his unfinished *Compendium Theologiae.*35 Indeed, *Eccentric Existence,* for all Kelsey's insistence on being unsystematically systematic, is, like Thomas's ambitious work, a systematic theology *in nuce* that aims to equip human persons to live virtuously. Kelsey's triple helix mirrors the Pauline taxis Thomas emphasizes in his introduction to the *Compendium.* For Thomas, as for Kelsey, this taxis is not insignificant: love presupposes hope, which presupposes faith. And perhaps most significantly, for Kelsey, as for the Augustinian tradition as a whole, the greatest of these is love.

The image of the triple helix lends Kelsey's account a distinctively Reformed sensibility, but because of the way Kelsey concretizes precisely this Reformed emphasis on distinction and asymmetry, it opens up new possibilities for rapprochement between his own Reformed tradition and both the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic branches of the Church. In this sense, Kelsey's creative development of the image of the triple helix serves not only as a sign of the wholeness-in-distinction of the human person, but also of the wholeness-in-distinction of the ecumenical Christian faith.36

35 In the opening paragraph of the work, Thomas describes the structure of the "summary instruction on the Christian religion" he is setting out to provide, appealing to both scriptural and logical precedent for the organization he has chosen: "we shall first treat of faith, second of hope, and third of charity, since this both retains the order of Paul and is required by right reason. For there cannot be right love unless the proper end of hope should be established, and we cannot establish the proper end of hope if one should lack knowledge of the truth. First, therefore, faith, by which you may know the truth, is necessary. Second, hope, by which your intention may be focused on the proper end, is necessary. Third, charity, by which your affection may be completely ordered, is necessary," Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology,* trans. Richard J. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18.

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