

The Trinity and Flourishing

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1. Introduction

Christian theology is under increasing pressure to deal with issues surrounding human dignity and ecological sustainability. In the face of widespread malpractices in which the dignity and rights of human beings (especially women) are violated, and in the light of the ecological crisis in which the earth and her ecology is endangered, much is asked, and much is required, of theology. Churches, congregations, synods, seminaries, faculties of theology, small groups and individual believers the world over are concerned with the well-being of human and nonhuman beings. The first challenge to Christian theology lies here, within the widespread violence (often in the very name of the Christian faith) against nature and neighbours.

The theological conversation that deals with the dignity and well-being of human beings and the ecology traditionally lies within the fields of inquiry of theological anthropology and ecological theology. Moreover, the vision of the ‘flourishing’ of the earth and human beings expresses theology’s concern for ‘the good life’, ‘well-being’ and ‘healing’. Perhaps it is therefore wholly unsurprising that ecological theologians and feminist theologians would have a particular affinity for the theological concept of ‘flourishing’. The theological vision and language of ‘flourishing’ could therefore be a meeting point between the concern for human dignity and the concern for the earth and her ecology.

In my own research, I have found the work of the Reformed theologian, David Kelsey,¹ thoroughly interesting and fruitful in engaging with ecological theology and theological anthropology. Christian

1 David H. Kelsey, Luther Weigle Professor Emeritus of Theology at the Yale Divinity School in New Haven, CT, has written extensively on theological education (*cf* 1992; 1993), biblical hermeneutics (*cf* 1975; 1999) and theological anthropology (*cf* 2005; 2009). Since the publication of his magnum opus, entitled *Eccentric existence* (2009), Professor Kelsey has become a well-known and an even more widely respected theologian, to the extent that he was invited to deliver the famous Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2011 and

theology's affirmation that human beings and the earth flourish in their relationship with God provides promising common ground between ecological theology's concerns for ecological sustainability and theological anthropology's concern for the dignity of human beings.

Yet such a focus on flourishing is not as elegant and unproblematic as it may seem. Kelsey adds a second layer of challenge to the task of Christian theology in this regard. He writes that 'Christian theology has a large stake in making it clear that its affirmations about God and God's ways of relating to human beings underwrite human beings' flourishing' (2008:1). He argues that '[i]t has been especially important to emphasize this claim in the context of "late modernity"' (2009:1) (or what may be called 'postmodernity'), where the suspicion that Christians magnify God's power at the expense of the freedom and flourishing of human beings is rampant (2008:1). The second challenge to Christian theology lies here, within the assumption that the Christian faith makes human beings out to be small, weak, servile, and docile.

The theological vision and language of 'flourishing' responds to the two challenges to Christian theology outlined above. This chapter proposes to conduct a critical analysis of Kelsey's theocentric perspective on human flourishing in the light of these two challenges. David Kelsey has written extensively on human flourishing, as part of his thinking through various issues within theological anthropology, and for him the vision and language of flourishing is deeply embedded within theological anthropology. His attention to human flourishing culminates in his arguments within his latest book, *Eccentric existence* (2009), and in an article that he wrote as part of a Yale consultation on God and human flourishing, entitled 'On human flourishing' (2008). This paper will therefore limit its focus to these two pieces of writing, and in the process ask the following questions of Kelsey's work: (1) What is the context for the theological conversation on human flourishing? (2) What is human flourishing? (3) What are the implications of this theological vision and language of human flourishing?

2. Expressing the glory of God

What is the context for the theological conversation on human flourishing? This first question is a particularly important question to ask, for it deals with the context in which David Kelsey embeds his understanding of human flourishing. 'Flourishing' is grounded in two claims in Kelsey's work, namely that the triune God relates to all that is not God in three interrelated ways and that human beings derivatively express God's glory.

that he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Tübingen in 2012.

In *Eccentric existence* (2009), David Kelsey makes the fundamental theological claim that the triune God relates to all that is not God in three interrelated ways: (1) God creates all that is not God;² (2) God draws all that is not God into eschatological consummation;³ (3) God reconciles all that is not God to God.⁴ Yet creation, eschatological consummation and reconciliation are not only three ways of the triune God's relating, but describe three *narratives* of how God relates to human beings and the earth and her ecology. For Kelsey, this is the core theological idea from which his thinking and writing on theological anthropology springs: namely, that the story of God's relationship to all that exists, including human beings, can be told in three interrelated ways. Moreover, human flourishing is inseparable from God's relating to human beings because the flourishing of human beings is always dependent upon God (2008:1). For Kelsey, flourishing makes no sense, has no meaning or coherence or content or power, apart from the confession that God stands in a relationship with human beings and that it is God that initiates this relationship. The first claim in which human flourishing is grounded is therefore the confession that the triune God relates to human beings.

'Human flourishing' is systematically connected to 'the glory of God', argues Kelsey (2009:310), in that 'the glory of God defines human creaturely flourishing' (2009:314) just as 'flourishing defines human creaturely glory' (2009:310). Kelsey understands 'God's glory' relationally, as 'the full richness of God's reality' which comes to expression in 'God's self-expressive self-giving' and 'God's attractive beauty' (2009:310).

2 By creation, Kelsey means that human beings are living on borrowed breath, by the gift of having and being a living body. We are alive because God graciously willed and made it so. The appropriate response to God creating human beings and all that we see around us is 'faith' or flourishing on borrowed breath. It is 'in faith' that human beings flourish (2009:310).

3 By eschatological consummation, Kelsey means that human beings are living on borrowed time, by participating in God's own life (2009:510). We can hope in being transformed and liberated into those that reflect God's glory, because God gives us the gift of hope itself (2009:512). The appropriate response to God that draws human beings into eschatological consummation is 'hope' or flourishing on borrowed time. It is 'by hope' that human beings flourish.

4 By reconciliation, Kelsey means that human beings are living by another's death. Jesus' death manifests 'the terrible beauty of the story of God's entering into solidarity with estranged humankind' (2009:722), wherein lies the gift of reconciliation. The appropriate response to God that reconciles estranged human beings to Godself is 'love' or flourishing by another's death. It is 'through love' that human beings flourish.

Human beings are derivatively glorious, in that God's intrinsic glory is expressed in them. God relating to create, to draw into eschatological consummation and to reconcile is a confession of God's relational glory, which leaves its mark upon all that God relates to – including human beings *and* the earth and her ecology. God's relating to all that is not God forms the broader context for understanding how God's glory is expressed in the flourishing of human beings and the earth and her ecology. Moreover, the expression of God's glory is the index of human flourishing. This means that human flourishing cannot, in principle, be measured or counted, but is grounded in the confession that 'the glory of God is human beings made fully alive' (Ireanaues of Lyons) (Kelsey 2008:2). The second claim in which human flourishing is grounded, therefore is the confession that human beings express God's glory.

Together, these two confessions – of God relating to human beings, and of God's glory in human beings – describe David Kelsey's context for understanding human flourishing. Herein we find that human flourishing ought to be understood as an expression of the triune God's relationship to human beings and as an expression of God's glory in human beings.

3. Manifesting beauty

What is human flourishing? This second question is an exceptionally fruitful question to ask of Kelsey's work, in that it reveals the rigorous systematic and analytical thinking that Kelsey employs in his writing. David Kelsey defines 'to flourish' in a twofold sense, namely as both 'to blossom' and 'to thrive'.

First, 'to blossom' is 'to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God's relating to it' (2008:2; 2009:315). Kelsey extends the metaphor of flourishing as a blossom by claiming that this may also provide 'fruit' (that may nurture and support the flourishing of others) and 'seed' (that may determine the lives of subsequent generations).⁵ Blossoming and blooming therefore have implications for both present neighbours (fruit) and future neighbours (seed) (2008:2; 2009:315).

5 Kelsey consistently excludes the metaphorical connotation with 'maximal good health' because 'health is problematic as an index of human flourishing' (2009:317) in that by 'health' and 'unhealthy' is understood functionally and self-referentially. This runs against the grain of the logic of his larger anthropological argument, namely that human beings are not finally to be understood in relation to ourselves, but excentrically in relation to God and therefore 'outside' of ourselves (2009:317).

Secondly, 'to thrive' is 'to have oneself in hand' (2008:3; 2009:315). Kelsey does not have much regard for the metaphoric extensions that include the meanings of 'to grow luxuriantly' (because 'it unqualifiedly reintroduces health as a metaphor') or 'to prosper' (because 'it introduces wealth and achievements as metaphors definitive of human flourishing') (2008:3; 2009:315). Rather, he emphasises the sociality (in that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of all creatures') (2009:315) and responsibility (in the sense that human beings 'take charge of themselves wisely for their own well-being' 'and of their contexts') (2009:319) of human flourishing. Thriving therefore has implications for human persons themselves, for non-human neighbours, and for the broader context in which human beings live.

Accordingly, flourishing is the expression of the glory and the beauty of God's relating to human beings. This has social and relational, present and future implications that stretch wider and deeper than the life of an individual, single human being. Yet Kelsey further qualifies his interpretation of human flourishing by way of a number of characteristics of human flourishing that reflect and shape his theological vision and language. Aside from the twofold definition that Kelsey works out, at least five characteristics of 'human flourishing' can be identified from Kelsey's work, namely that: (1) flourishing is contextual and concrete; (2) flourishing is not functional or self-referencing; (3) flourishing is a gift; (4) flourishing is relational and responsive; (5) flourishing is eccentric.

A first characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is that 'what counts as 'flourishing' is relative to what flourishes' (2009:314). There is no abstract, ideal, vague, generalised, absolute, or standard way of understanding flourishing against which the flourishing of each and every human person can or should be measured. No such standard exists, argues Kelsey, in that 'flourishing' as a theological concept is, at its heart, 'a highly relative concept' (2009:316). Instead, the flourishing of a human life must be understood contextually (in terms of the networks of relationships in which a human life is embedded) and concretely (in terms of the individual powers and capacities of each human being) (2009:316).

A second characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is what it is not or must not be equated with – namely 'human well-being' and 'good health' (2009:511). Kelsey is highly critical of modern academic theology that construes human flourishing as well-being, because it is 'framed in terms of a human subject's relating to itself by an interior subjective act' (2008:9). Where 'flourishing' denotes 'happiness', 'health', 'self-fulfilment', 'self-realisation', 'full actualisation' or 'well-being', it is defined in terms of human beings' internal functioning and

our ability to adapt to larger contexts (2008:9). Wellbeing and health are, however, inadequate and problematic synonyms for ‘flourishing’, in that these are ‘functional and self-referencing terms’ (2009:511).⁶ For Kelsey, ‘flourishing’ is not functional (that reduces human beings to that which they are able to think or to do) or self-referencing (in that it is concerned only with itself).

At this point, after the first two characteristics of human flourishing, the basis of flourishing becomes particularly complex. David Kelsey deals exclusively, from here on, with what he simply describes as ‘God relation’. This covers two kinds of relations: (a) ‘God’s relations to human beings’ and (b) ‘human beings’ relations to God’ (2008:20). He distinguishes, at this point, between two broad kinds of human flourishing understood theocentrically, namely ‘type A flourishing’ (which deals with God’s relating to human beings) and ‘type B flourishing’ (which deals with human beings, relating, or appropriate responses, to God) (2008:21). The third characteristic deals with Kelsey’s ‘type A flourishing’ the fourth characteristic deals with Kelsey’s ‘type B flourishing’ and the fifth characteristic treats ‘type A flourishing’ and ‘type B flourishing’ together.

A third characteristic of Kelsey’s understanding of flourishing is its gift-like character. This characteristic deals with Kelsey’s ‘type A flourishing’: in that it affirms the graciousness and givenness of God’s initial threefold relating to human beings. There are, in this regard, three distinct varieties of ‘type A flourishing’: flourishing in God’s relating to create, flourishing in God’s relating to draw to eschatological consummation, and relating to reconciliation (2008:21). This leads him to focus on what it means for human beings to flourish as those who are created (*cf.* 2009:314–332), eschatologically consummated (*cf.* 2009:510–524) and reconciled (*cf.* 2009:703–726). Yet, human beings flourish ‘simply

6 Although Kelsey has no problem with defining ‘well-being’ in terms of ‘health’ and even in affirming that ‘well-being as health is surely part of the content of a theological account of human flourishing’ (2008:14), he notes that ‘it is a good deal more problematic theologically to define human flourishing as human well-being understood as ‘health’’ (2008:15; original emphasis). The criteria or significance for a *theocentric* account of human flourishing, however, ‘lie in the dynamics of human beings’ relations to God and God’s relations to them’ (2008:15). For Kelsey, the fundamental difference is this: human well-being (‘understood as various kinds of health’) is not necessarily defined (only?) in relation to God (although it is defined in relation to everything else: ‘themselves, to fellow creatures, *and* to their shared social and natural contexts’), whereas human flourishing is defined only in relation to God (which includes both ‘God’s relations to human beings’ and ‘human beings’ relation to God’) (2008:19–20).

in virtue of God's relating to them in three different ways' (2009:46) and must therefore be understood theocentrically, from the perspective of God relating to human beings. Flourishing, in this view, is the sheer graciousness and givenness of God's threefold relating (2009:51 1).

A fourth characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is that it is responsive, and therein a responsibility, in enacting appropriate responses to God and neighbour (2009:510). This characteristic deals with Kelsey's 'type B flourishing' in that it affirms the flourishing of human beings in our enactment of what Kelsey calls 'appropriate responses'. Human beings flourish when we respond faithfully – in trust and with loyalty – to our living on borrowed breath (2009:510), when we respond with joyous hopefulness – including thanksgiving – to our living on borrowed time (2009:510), and when we respond with love – a passionate desire for communion with God and neighbour – to our living by another's death (2009:1031). Human beings flourish 'as they act intentionally' (2009:319) and therefore, in short, when we respond in faith, hope and love to God and neighbour. The practices of faith, hope and love are, however, shaped by the first characteristic of flourishing, namely the 'concrete particularities' of the context in which we live and the human (and non-human) beings that we are in a relationship with. The flourishing of a human life is, in this view, relational (in terms of God's relating to human beings and our relating back to God and to one another) and responsive (in terms of our appropriate responses to God and neighbour).

A fifth characteristic of Kelsey's understanding of flourishing is that human beings flourish 'eccentrically'. This characteristic is expressive of both 'type A flourishing' and 'type B flourishing', in that it affirms the eccentricity (which includes God's relation to us and our relation to God) of human existence. The triune God's three ways of relating to human beings together constitute a theocentric picture of the eccentricity of our existence. The central claim of Kelsey in his book, *Eccentric existence* (2009), is that all that is not God is to be understood excentrically, outside of itself, within God's ways of relating to all that is not God. For Kelsey, 'the result of that is that the basis for human reality and the basis for human value both lie, so to speak, outside of human beings – because it finally lies outside in God. So "eccentric" means having your centre outside yourself. And "existence" simply means living as a human being' (Westminster John Knox Press Radio interview with David Kelsey 2009). The appropriate responses to God and neighbour are therefore not merely faith, hope and love, but *eccentric* faith, *eccentric* hope, and *eccentric* love.

Human beings who are 'fully alive' blossom and thrive. Human flourishing expresses God's glory and manifests the beauty of God's

relation not in its functionality or self-referentiality, but in its contextuality and concreteness, gracious givenness, relationality and responsiveness, and eccentricity. It is this glory and this beauty that is the ground of the intrinsic dignity and value of human beings (2009:570).

4. Eccentric flourishing

What are the implications of this theological vision and language of human flourishing? This third question is a fair question to ask next, but a particularly difficult question to answer, in that there may be an indefinite number of changing implications of David Kelsey's understanding of human and ecological flourishing within a given situation, relationship or context. I will, however, trace three possible implications of affirming the flourishing of human beings and the earth and her ecology in light of the two challenges – first, the violation of the dignity of human beings and the ecology; second the assumption that God's power negates the freedom and the flourishing of human beings – outlined above, namely: (1) human and ecological flourishing as a blessing given; (2) human and ecological flourishing amidst suffering, weakness, poverty and ill health; (3) human flourishing as responsibility for human and non-human neighbours.

First, human and ecological flourishing is a gracious gift of God, and therefore a blessing freely given. This means that it is not, in the first instance, a state or condition achieved through self-discipline. As a gift of God, it marks the eccentricity of human beings and the earth and her ecology: the dignity and worth and value of human beings and the earth and her ecology do not, finally, lie within themselves, but outside of themselves, in God's dynamic act of relating to all that is not God. This frees us from the anxiety of ensuring our own flourishing or that of others (including the earth) and liberates us from the relentless 'pursuit of happiness' that marks our world today. Human and ecological flourishing is a gift of God, a blessing given, which cannot be earned or deserved, and which is safeguarded outside of our own selves and our efforts either to protect or to destroy it.

Secondly, human and ecological flourishing is possible amidst the most intense experiences of suffering, weakness, poverty or ill health because it does not mean the achievement or enjoyment of well-being (2008:46). Human beings do not flourish because they are healthy or wealthy, and not only healthy or wealthy human beings reflect the glory of God (2009:317). Likewise, the earth and her ecology do not flourish only when it is well and healthy. Many interesting studies, including the

work of Princeton economist Angus Deaton,⁷ make the point that there are important correlations between health, wealth and well-being. Yet David Kelsey makes the point that human beings express God's glory and manifest the beauty of God's relation regardless of their states of health, wealth or well-being. For Kelsey, the point here is pastoral. Human beings and the ecology flourish amidst suffering, weakness, poverty and ill health, because God relates to them regardless of what they are or who they are or how they are.

Thirdly, human flourishing calls for responsiveness and responsibility for human and non-human neighbours. This last point affirms that human beings flourish in a third sense: 'as they act intentionally' 'in their human acting', by enacting appropriate responses to God, each other and the earth and her ecology (2009:319). However, even in taking responsibility for our human and non-human neighbours, we risk violating their integrity or created wholeness (2009:321). Therefore, human beings are called upon to take responsibility for the well-being of others (whether other human beings or the earth and her ecology) *for its own sake* (2009:320) and *not for some goal beyond it* (2009:324). What exactly this responsibility for fellow human beings and the earth and her ecology may mean concretely, will differ. Yet the point remains: human flourishing also means acting responsibly toward others, human and non-human neighbours. This responsibility is not any responsibility, but the specific responsibility to act appropriately towards other human beings and the earth, for their well-being, for their own sake, and not in terms of any goal or purpose that transcends them.

5. Conclusion

David Kelsey's theological vision and language arguably provides us with fresh images, new metaphors, and innovative arguments to reimagine human and ecological flourishing. Perhaps this is what Christian theology needs, at this time and in this context, to respond to both the first challenge (of dealing with the violation of the dignity and integrity of human beings and the earth and her ecology) and the second challenge (of dealing with the accusation that God's power implies the lack of human power and flourishing), as outlined above. The confession that God is deeply invested in God's relationship to all that is not God (including human beings *and* the earth and her ecology) and the confession that God is committed to the flourishing of both human beings *and* the earth and her ecology together

7 Cf Angus Deaton's recently published book, entitled *The great escape* (with the subtitle *Health, wealth and the origins of inequality*) 2013.

guide and shape us toward a present reality where all human beings and the whole earth's ecology may be 'fully alive'.