

The true eccentric

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue



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Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump know exactly how to capitalize on voter restlessness in this year of populist fever (see [Robert Westbrook's article "Populist fever"](#)). Sanders, with his modest lifestyle and self-described “unexciting tax returns,” appears to many young, middle-class people as one of their own. Trump, the billionaire who flies around in his own fleet of jets, hardly resembles the working-class constituents he courts.

Eccentric is among the kinder names Trump’s detractors have assigned to him. He’s a populist who deviates from established norms by violating conventional boundaries, regularly commanding attention through threat and insult adorned with shock value. People who are eccentric, we say, tend to act in strange or unusual ways when it comes to behavioral norms.

Our theological identity can be eccentric too, but in a different way. Borrowing from David Kelsey’s magisterial work *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, we can imagine what a theological character to our lives looks like by understanding eccentric as something other than behavior.

The word *eccentric* comes from the combination of the Greek *ek* (out of) and *kentron* (center), with *ekkentros* meaning “out of center.” It became an astronomical term in the Middle Ages, when Copernicus discovered the elliptical orbits of planets revolving around the sun instead of the earth.

The town where I live was named for William and Joseph Bettendorf, two inventive brothers who founded the Bettendorf Axle Company along the banks of the Mississippi River. Among their early 20th-century innovations was a crank pin design for locomotive wheels. A steel pin, mounted at an out-of-center point between the axle and the circumference of the locomotive wheel, anchored the coupling rod that connected multiple wheels. Essentially transforming rotary motion into linear motion, this eccentric pin-and-rod assembly creates propulsion by working much like the rod, piston, and camshaft design in a combustion engine.

An eccentric existence is one in which God forms the center of life, becoming the axle of our self-understanding, as it were. We go places in life when we treat God as our center and view ourselves as out-of-center and away from the place in which only God rightfully belongs. There is movement and meaning in a life of faith lived eccentrically. But if we place ourselves at the center of importance—our ego, pride, or achievements—we go nowhere significant, spiritually speaking at least. The world spins mindlessly around our self-interests.

In the introduction to his translation of the book of Genesis, Eugene Peterson identifies the centrality of God: “If we don’t have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right, get life right, get our lives right. Not God on the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at center and circumference.”

Eccentric people of faith are those who plot the geometry of their lives not with their egos but with God centering their identity.