

Kathryn Tanner's anti-work ethic

## **The theologian doesn't want finance capitalism to determine what we're worth.**

by [Keri L. Day](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue

### **In Review**

KATHRYN TANNER

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Christianity

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### **Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism**

By Kathryn Tanner  
Yale University Press

We are conditioned by the capitalist spirit of this age. It forms us in overt and subtle ways. It shapes us according to the religion of the *quid pro quo*. Kathryn Tanner captures the crisis of our capitalist context and offers an alternative vision of human life.

Tanner begins by affirming the insights of sociologist Max Weber about the way religious concepts (such as Calvinistic ideas about predestination and the role of work) shaped early capitalist practices. However, she argues, Weber's proposition doesn't tell the full story, especially in our hyper-capitalist moment. Not every Christian belief provides theological sanction for capitalist behavior and conduct. Our beliefs operate in complex and contradictory ways, sometimes easily aligning with capitalism's demands and sometimes developing significant tension with them. Reversing Weber's analysis, Tanner demonstrates how religious beliefs, specifically Christian beliefs, may "undermine rather than support the new spirit of capitalism."

Before detailing how Christianity can radically critique current economic structures, Tanner offers a precise and compelling picture of the new spirit of capitalism. While she does well in introducing readers to technical aspects of finance-dominated capitalism, her primary goal is to expose the social forms and distorted relations that emerge from this model. For instance, she shows how economic value is derived from creating profit through financial instruments like derivatives—contracts based on the value of an asset—instead of through the production of meaningful goods. The goal is not to produce something tangible but simply to make more money through a financial contract. Money is the means and the end. Consequently, individuals become valued solely for their contributions to this enterprise of making profit for its own sake.

She also tackles how the problem of debt ends up overdetermining and colonizing every aspect of our lives: past, present, and future. In this environment, a new spirit emerges. It is a spirit of unbridled competition in which we participate in the ever-expanding battle with others for position, status, and performance. All productive activity (such as work) is reduced to monetary gain. We become trapped as moral agents, unable to relate rightly to ourselves and others.

Tanner shows how Christian visions of human life challenge the distorted relations produced by finance capitalism. I am most compelled by how she presses us to think about futures beyond the social forms produced by finance-dominated capitalism.

She doesn't acquiesce to debates about whether we can speak of another world. She believes we can and directs our attention to exploring which world we should speak about in imagining a preferable future.

And she doesn't offer easy theological answers. She steers away from accounts of the future that are simply more "progressive" or "enlightened" than the present. She thinks this is a theological mistake. The future for her is an eschatological creation that proceeds out of the very life of God, not a period that unfolds within the linear march of history. The future is never human achievement.

When reading her interpretation of the absolute qualitative difference between the present and future, one might think that Tanner is offering some compensatory perspective that leaves us unable to affect change at all in the present. She is not. She maintains that our imaginings of another world are about "pulling the future into the present." Tanner employs a realized eschatology, encouraging us to realize that God's coming reign can inform our actions here and now, in the present. She turns to what God has done in Jesus Christ, how Jesus' life transforms the character of human life, allowing us to envision new ways of being right now. God empowers our efforts to resist. However, such efforts must never be seen as equivalent to the final future that only God promises, beyond the histories of this world.

To show how Christian resources can help us rethink how we relate to ourselves and others, Tanner attends to *formfulness*—how the Christian vision forms us in distinct ways that oppose the finance-dominated view of human existence. For example, Christian visions of "the self" embrace a radical "dependence on God." This dependence involves recognizing that our entire existence is shaped by what God has done in Jesus, which means turning to the kind of human life Jesus embodied and lived out. But to speak of dependence on God is to also recognize our dependence on others—not a harmful overreliance on others but a healthy sense of the interdependence that marks God's good creation. This allows us to relate differently to ourselves and others, not on the competitive terms that finance capitalism offers, but on terms that are cooperative and mutual.

Tanner also discusses how an anti-work ethic can decenter our relentless self-evaluation through an ethic of productivity, which measures our worth only by the achievements that distinguish us from others. We are more than what we can produce and what we do. Tanner is after a virtue ethics concerned not with "what we should do" to cultivate a different future but rather with "who we aspire to be" in

building a future of cooperation and value divorced from finance-capitalist ways of being.

Tanner's proposals proceed primarily in doctrinal ways: she is a systematic theologian who seeks to bring Christian claims to bear upon economic relations. While her argument is compelling, a turn toward grassroots communities that are resisting the distorted relations of finance capitalism would make it more powerful, particularly in asking what kinds of futures and worlds are possible. Christian claims are not only seen through doctrines; they are also grasped through practices. The fertile world of social practices among subversive Christian communities can unlock profound imaginations on what it means to be bold and dream dangerously in light of Christian witness.

I understand why Tanner might hesitate to foreground practices in this way: it may give too much credence to human efforts in speaking about the future. Admittedly, I make this suggestion as one who does not share her assessment of the absolute qualitative difference between the present and future or her measured perspective on human efforts. But I do think that even a cautious view of human action would value some kind of turn to the social practices of communities that are resisting the pretensions of finance capitalism.

Even so, Tanner's text is insightful and needed in this moment. Her engagement of Christian theology with finance capitalism—a capitalist model that has deeply affected so many people's lives since the 2008 economic recession—is a gift. It will be read for years to come.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Money as both means and end."*