

# Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity, by Kathryn Tanner

reviewed by [William C. Placher](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

Kathryn Tanner's first book, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (1988), was technical, austere and tremendously important. Tanner argued that most modern theology gets the relation of God and world wrong. It thinks of God as one being among the other beings in the world, and that sets up a number of misguided zero-sum games: the more God is transcendent, the less God is involved in the world; the more power God has, the less freedom creatures have.

Tanner recovered from premodern theology a more radically transcendent God, a God who is on an entirely different plane from the beings in the world. Such a God isn't in some place, and therefore can't be either farther away or closer. Such a God directs all things, and thus isn't in competition with creatures over relative amounts of power. (We can argue about who's funnier in *The Odd Couple*, Oscar or Felix, but it makes no sense to debate whether either of them is funnier than Neil Simon: Simon wrote all the lines.)

In this book, her fourth, Tanner, now professor of theology at the University of Chicago, sketches the outline of a full systematic theology--something she promises to write at much greater length in the future. She adds to her earlier emphasis on God's transcendence a second central theme: God as "the giver of all good gifts, their fount, luminous source, fecund treasury, and store-house."

As Tanner tells the story, God's gracious love leads to creation, "continues in historical fellowship with a particular people, Israel," and culminates in Jesus, in whom is achieved "the closest approximation to the triune life that is possible for a creature." In Tanner's theology, everything that anyone does flows from God, but in the special case of Jesus God's agency has become fully one with Jesus' humanity. God is acting in Jesus for the salvation of humanity by making humanity one with God.

Tanner thinks such theology has clear ethical implications. She urges that we should live our lives on the pattern of God's love in Jesus. It's not that we can save others; God has already done that. But we can glorify God by adopting patterns of action that reach out in "purifying, healing, and elevating" love to others as God does. Tanner insists, however, that God doesn't need our help and that, by living such lives, we do not pay a debt or fulfill an obligation; we simply live "the only way of life appropriate to the way things are."

In her last and perhaps most interesting chapter Tanner turns to the end of the story. What does it mean for this picture of God's love at work in the world that the best science of our day tells us the earth and the solar system eventually will come to an end? She proposes what she calls an eschatology that does not privilege the future. Aquinas and Barth provide her with a model of how past, present and future might all be preserved in God's eternity. Even if the solar system ends, nothing will get lost, for everything will be in God.

Aquinas, however, combined his account of eternity with a belief in a future bodily resurrection, and Barth at least took Jesus' bodily resurrection quite seriously. Since it's not clear that Tanner does so, her eschatology is more radical in almost completely replacing hope for the future with confidence in eternity.

On this point and others, Tanner's conclusions will be controversial. For instance:

- In a time when many theologians are reemphasizing the threeness of the Trinity, her focus is strongly on God's oneness-the three Persons, she says, are only three modes or forms of presentation, three appearances of the same thing as if seen from different angles, "though here the appearances are objective and lasting."
- She holds that in the incarnation the Word assumed a humanity suffering the effects of sin and only gradually perfected it. "Deification does not happen all at once, but over the course of Jesus' life and death."
- She thinks that the cross has nothing to do with expiation or blood sacrifice. Jesus' mission of love naturally put him at odds with the powerful of his society, so his death on a cross is no surprise. And in dying he defeats death. But his death has nothing to do with paying our debts or cleansing us from guilt.
- As already implied, I'm not sure how Tanner understands Jesus' resurrection. As in the Gospel of John, Jesus here already defeats death on the cross. What more needs to happen? Would it suffice for the disciples to realize the meaning of

Jesus' life and death? Tanner leaves the answers unclear.

But such questions indicate that a creative, original theological mind is at work here. Tanner's arguments are rigorous; her footnotes indicate vast reading, especially in the early church fathers as well as Aquinas and Barth. This book is not an easy introduction to Tanner's views for theological beginners. Its brevity sometimes requires exceedingly compressed argument on complex issues. The good news hinted at in all the detail is how much of the larger book or books she means to write must already be in Tanner's head. That larger work seems likely to be one of the major theological statements of Tanner's generation; my appetite is certainly whetted.