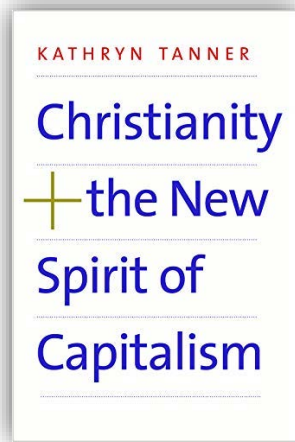


BOOK REVIEW

CHRISTIANITY AND THE NEW SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

By Kathryn Tanner

Reviewed by Christine Albertini



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The global Covid-19 pandemic and its concurrent economic destruction have again revealed the shortcomings of capitalism and private employer-based compensation and benefits. Around the globe, governments have had to step in with a safety net, reminding us of the unequal balance of power between the private enterprise and its employees. Capitalism as we know it is like a roulette table, with a winner-take-all make-up, leaving only a few still standing in its boom and bust wake.

Prominent theologian and Yale Divinity School Professor Kathryn Tanner's book *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* was published in 2019, before the current crisis. But she had keen hind-sight-perspective on the *last* global economic crisis: the economic meltdown of 2008 and its root cause in contemporary capitalism, which she characterizes as "finance-dominated" capitalism. Tanner describes this system as so corrupted by debt, short term perspective, byzantine and hollow financial instruments that it bears little resemblance to a system that once might have built productive economies. This capitalism is a rapacious creditor, powered by greed, dominating the life of workers in a demand for all-consuming attention to its present moment demands. It is characterized by futility,

uncertainty, and fear. Among its faults outlined by Tanner are its privatizing tendencies in the provision of public goods and the shifting of risks onto vulnerable individuals. "When things turn ugly one is on one's own" (2413).

Tanner's title harkens back to the primary insights of Max Weber's classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* published over a century ago. In this treatise Weber attributed the Protestant work ethic to the particularly punishing theology of Dutch Calvinism and its doctrine of double predestination. You were either damned or saved and there was nothing that could be done to alter God's predetermination. What was left to an individual was to work without pleasure, follow a strict, joyless, ascetic life and take this as sinful humanity's lot. Later evolutions of capitalism were disassociated from the Calvinist ethic, but the artifacts such as humorless work being deserved drudgery, and power in the hands of a few based on financial assets remained, finally morphing into the immoral and debased "finance-dominated" capitalism Tanner eviscerates.

Her perspective on a typical working day as a harsh slog recall Marx's "The Working Day". But Tanner is no Marxist. Finance-dominated capitalism has a destructive "person-shaping capacity" that she proposes can be countered by Christian beliefs and practices with a comparable "person-shaping capacity". Tanner looks at contemporary capitalism and holds that as a Christian she has no choice but to critique it. In fact, it is so deplete of any moral, let alone Christian, ethic that it must be resisted and replaced with a Christian vision of redemption and salvation.

Tanner's book contributes significantly to a Christian perspective on modern economic life. Her deep dives into various aspects of finance-dominated capitalism (e.g. derivatives, consumer debt) are abundantly detailed and dense. But one must wade through these descriptions to understand her view of just how amoral and vacuous is the essence of contemporary capitalism. Her elaborate citations provide a path through the extensive post-modern re-examination of the concept of work and economic injustice among theologians, sociologists, philosophers and cultural critics of the past decades.

Tanner's conclusion is clear: "The work ethic of finance-dominated capitalism is incompatible with fundamental Christian commitments" (2735). She argues that "there is surprisingly little reason to think Christianity has a direct interest in developing a work ethic at all, whatever form that ethic takes" (2739). To support this she cites pre-Reformation theology which prioritized religious pursuits and suggests that economic pursuits were viewed with suspicion in a church-dominated world. Then, the highest concern was placed on a life dedicated to God. Nevertheless, Tanner's Christian worldview allows for non-religious aspects of life, but all these must be in support of a total commitment to fulfillment of one's primary calling: a God-centered life.

I could not help but reflect on a growing, global, Christian, *Business as Mission* movement as I read Tanner's book. In this movement, work and worship are the same concept as the Hebrew word *avodah* commends. Within this frame, the idea of business and the productive work it offers fits into Tanner's view of a Christian commitment to God expressed in all of one's life. This covenant brings meaning to even the most mundane aspects of the human condition. No more the competitive and individualistic drive to profit for profit's sake. "Salvation is not a scarce good to be fought over" (2819). In this scenario, ethical, God-centered business is a vital component of a free, fair, and joyful society. We can only hope (and pray) that Kathryn Tanner's vision of "new hope" will dominate and lead as we emerge from the current economic crisis with all the inequities in employment and social safety net that it has exposed.



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