

## Faith, Class, and Labor: Intersectional Approaches in a Global Context

**Jin Young Choi and Joerg Rieger, eds.**

Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020 (xx + 270 pages)

The first of the Intersectionality and Theology Series, this edited volume most ably fulfills the goal to provide “a home for theologies that weave in the strands of gender, race, and class.” The series introduction further states that theology is “a weaving or intersection where words, images, schemes, stories, bodies, struggles, cultures, and more, meet and exchange.” The twelve contributors to this volume with roots in eight different countries (and currently residing in five different countries) inhabit different places in their careers and work in various academic, ecclesiastical, and activist networks (xi). A better source for this fabric of ideas is hard to imagine and certainly inspires this reader to explore more deeply the contributors’ other work.

The foundation on which this book rests is unambiguously labor and class. Scholars in the fields of theology and religion have simply not given proper attention to laboring people and issues of class. This book speaks back loudly to this silence. As Rieger notes in the introduction “matters of economics, labor, and class affect virtually everything, both people and the planet: no one and nothing can exist for very long in a vacuum. Many of the other struggles that mark our age (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, colonialism, etc.) are also negotiated here” (xii). Uniting all of the chapters, however, are two focal points. The first is an analysis of how labor as such is constitutive of being human. The second is the question of agency and power, which more than the topic of labor, animates the entire book. “How does the power of working people shape up today, how is it being organized, and how might it be making a difference in the world?” (xiii). To the extent that working people are also religious, their working lives (their daily labors) shape their religious outlook. And one’s religious outlook shapes one’s labor. Once the question of power or agency—even resistance—is built into the investigation of labor and religion, then a deeper inquiry into the structured violence of class relationships in market-based morality is possible. The contributors in this book press this challenging point from their vantage points as theologians, ethicists, biblical scholars, and labor organizers.

The three chapters in section 2, “Reading Bible, Reading Class,” are particularly useful in their collective reminder that matters of class and power predate the various modalities of capitalism. Jin Young Choi in “People’s Money, Women’s Precarious Life, and Empire” describes the political economy of Roman domination in the narrative world of Mark’s gospel. The class relations of imperial rule were also and inextricably about unequal gender relationships. The story of the “poor widow” in Mark 12:38–44 portrays Jesus not only as a critic of Roman exploitation but also as a critic of the temple-state that exerted demands on the most vulnerable and least able to support themselves (97). Gerald O. West’s chapter “A Trans-textual and Trans-sectoral Gender-economic Reading of the Rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13) and the Expropriation of Naboth’s Land (1 Kings 21)” and Chin Ming Stephen Lim’s “Ruth as Esperanza? A Transtextual Reading of Ruth with

Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore” show that the Bible (specifically the Hebrew Scriptures), however ancient these texts may be, is a resource for critically investigating “sites of struggle” (157). For instance, in Lim’s chapter, economic forces compel workers to leave their homes only to find another site of struggle when laboring abroad. West’s argument for trans-textual readings of the Bible emphasizes the power of marginalized readers to transgress and thus “trans-form” biblical study. Contextual Biblical Study offers emancipatory potential such that a class analysis of biblical texts is able to counter “hetero-patriarchal” and “econo-patriarchal” discourses (107, 119).

Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger’s “Deep Solidarity: A Pre-requisite to Resisting Capitalism and Building Economic Democracy” is a key chapter in this volume. Referred to by a number of the contributors, deep solidarity is the moral norm that anchors this book profoundly in labor history and worker activism, inside and outside of union membership. The reference to Ralph Chaplin’s anthem “Solidary Forever” in the introduction also nods, though unmentioned, to the Industrial Workers of the World and the IWW’s promise that one big union, through direct action or a general strike, could bring a new world from the ashes of the old. Rieger’s account of deep solidarity is, perhaps, appropriately more modest than this eschatological vision. Still, the call for deep solidarity updates “an injury to one is an injury to all” through a vigorous intersectional orientation (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality). Human differences, never erased, are inherently honored and a source of the unending creativity required to upend the 1 percent and the “Capitalocene” (100).

The final chapter, Karl James E. Villarnea’s “Transcendence in the Time of Neoliberalism: A Theological Reflection on the Employer-Employee Relationship and the Theological Struggle for Everyday Life” offers the reader much to ponder. Villarnea provides yet another reason to keep returning to the book. As a professor of religion, theologian, and member of the Silliman University [The Philippines] Faculty Association (SUFA) negotiating panel, Villarnea is informed by his firsthand experiencing negotiating a supplemental Collective Bargaining Agreement for his union. Negotiating on behalf of his colleagues is a sacred task, he emphasizes, and particularly so because of the way he flips the notion of transcendence to apply to the “political-judicial” order of the Employer-Employee Relationship (234). This sovereign power over workers, a primary feature of neoliberalism, conditions the survival and flourishing of laborers. Typically, transcendence is reserved for notions of God but, in this chapter, theologians must attend to and counter the transcendence of the seeming divine right of the neoliberal order. For Villarnea, in his union context, constant negotiation to secure rights or even membership in a labor union (to be sure—never assured) is theologically, a “prayer-in-praxis.” It is not a prayer for what must come, but it is the doing of what *must* (emphasis added) come through disruptions to traditional power relationship of employers and employees in favor of the workers (253).

Villarnea’s goal is to develop a “more expansive view of theological work that commits to a particular purpose of improving the working conditions of workers” (257). To the extent he had to take “time away” from his theological studies or teaching to negotiate a union contract, he actually more fully realized the essential theological task of liberation.

Readers of *Faith, Class, and Labor* would do well to start with Villarnea's essay as it amply realizes this book's goal to exhibit the interwoven and intersectional natures of theology in its multifaceted treatment of labor and religion. The reading journey from there will be well worth the effort.

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## Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism

**Kathryn Tanner**

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019 (241 pages)

Capitalism is about the maximization of profit. This is the new spirit of capitalism, according to Kathryn Tanner. Arguably, however, this is also the old spirit of capitalism, as Karl Marx, whose work is conspicuously absent in this book, has copiously demonstrated. What is new, therefore, may be more a matter of degree and perhaps intensity rather than a change to the fundamental structure of this economic system.

Tanner defines the new spirit of capitalism as being more focused on the financial sector than on production and labor, as this is where the bulk of the profits is being made (11). As the old formula of M-M' vs. M-C-M' (not M-M vs. M-C-M, as Tanner has it, p. 18) notes, under the conditions of so-called financial capitalism money [M] almost miraculously begets more money [M'], often without the need for the sale of commodities [C]. Tanner's reference to these formulas neglects to reference Marx' *Das Kapital* as the place where they were prominently developed and discussed.

At the same time, Tanner acknowledges that production and labor have not disappeared from the equation and have not become irrelevant. Since corporations are tasked with increasing the profits of their stockholders, workers are forced to bear the burdens of an increasingly lean and mean production process that neglects their welfare—just like the environment is neglected, as we might add. Again, it should be noted that none of this is entirely new to the spirit of capitalism, as the Ford Motor Company was famously sued in 1919 by the Dodge brothers for not following this iron rule. The ongoing significance of production and labor for the new spirit of capitalism can also be observed in persistent efforts to reduce the power of organized labor, not mentioned in the book.

What about the relationship between the new spirit of capitalism and Christianity? Tanner agrees with Max Weber's sense of the central role of religion in shaping the world (4), not primarily via ideas and morals but via the shaping of people's subjectivity at deep psychological levels (6). She turns against Weber, however, by stating her lack of concern for the question whether Christianity contributed to the rise of capitalism in the past (4) and proceeds to investigate whether Christianity might provide alternatives to capitalism today (7). Moreover, since Tanner assumes that capitalism does not need religion anymore (169), she offers no investigation into whether or how contemporary Christianity might continue to be supportive of capitalism. Basic Christian theological commitments are introduced exclusively as the solution to the problems created by capitalism.