

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.

—Ken Estey
Brooklyn College

Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism

Kathryn Tanner

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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.

What are the solutions proposed by Tanner? In chapter 2, Christianity is presented as disrupting the capitalist past (based in “past investment decisions” [40] and financial debt) through conversion and rebirth in Christ (54, 59). In chapter 3, Christianity challenges capitalism’s “total commitment” to its goals by exchanging the pursuit of profit with a “commitment to God” that can “help drive a wedge between my desires and the company’s” (86). Chapters 4 and 5 present the need for another world that Christianity seems to address, and the new world is developed in chapter 6. This new world presents an alternative to the “finance-dominated work ethic” (168). Competition with others, a key marker of this ethic, is now replaced by an “anti-work ethic” (202), which is a “religious project” (203) that is cooperative (210), without giving up its clear orientation toward a “head,” which is Christ (214). All of these solutions are based on commonly accepted Christian principles which, in Tanner’s mind are not mere ideas but are somehow “at work in the present” (219). Unfortunately, where and how this is happening is not explained, and no examples are given. This begs the question about the current shape of Christianity, which appears to share the basic theological principles outlined by Tanner but that also appears to be quite supportive of capitalism for the most part.

Reading through this book, one gets the impression that the new spirit of capitalism is getting worse than the old spirit. “Winner takes all” is the accepted motto, competition increases, workers experience growing pressures, and the rich get richer while the poor are left behind. The point of comparison, however, is not clear. Does the old spirit of capitalism refer to capitalism in Weber’s time? Or does it refer to American capitalism in the 1950s? If it is the latter, it might be argued that capitalism at that time was indeed less savage, but why? Was it due to Christian values, as Tanner’s rather conventional theology might argue (although no such argument is made in the book), or was it due to strong labor unions and President Roosevelt’s New Deal?

The latter argument seems more plausible, and it also picks up a subtext of Tanner’s argument that is not pursued. If working people are indeed the biggest losers in financial capitalism, does it not stand to reason that working people organizing and asserting themselves can also make a difference? History, it seems, backs up this argument, and points to an often-forgotten role that Christianity played. Workers organizing against the dismal working conditions in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were indeed supported by Christianity, including many mainline churches. The 1908 Social Creed of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for instance, adopted by the Federal Council of Churches that same year, provides an example.

Here, religion does not come to the rescue from the outside, as it were, but from within the struggle against the capitalist maximization of profit itself. Tanner’s motto that “what Christianity gives it can also take away” (7) might be more properly reformulated as “what working people give, they can also take away.”

—Joerg Rieger

Distinguished Professor of Theology, Vanderbilt University