

Review Essay*

A Sermon to the Choir: Kathryn Tanner's *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*

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When Kathryn Tanner delivered the Gifford Lectures in May 2016, she developed a cold. As one may observe from watching the online lectures, Tanner, armed with lozenges, hoarsely battled through. Watching these lectures in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic thus produced an unsettling feeling of complete dissociation from a past where it was possible to stand at a lectern in an auditorium and cough and wheeze with no one raising an eyebrow. Indeed, from May 2016 when the lectures were given, through 2019 when the book was published, to the first half of 2021 when I am working on this review, events have unfolded that have brought the Western world to its knees, as we are reeling from one self-inflicted disaster to the next. It is, thus, a surreal experience to review this book and attempt to understand Tanner's unquestioning reliance on the grace of God as the only possible counter to the social devastation of finance-based capitalism.

Kathryn Tanner's *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* is based on the six lectures in the 2016 Gifford lecture series at the University of Edinburgh. The book, beautifully produced by Yale University Press, is in six chapters, prefaced by acknowledgements and followed by endnotes and a general index. As the title indicates, the overall argument is presented as a challenge to Max Weber's thesis on

* Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) 256 pp., \$35.00 hb., ISBN 9780300219036. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism.¹ Weber's argument, to recap, was a reaction to a vulgar Marxist claim that Protestantism was a superstructural effect of the economic base of capitalism. Instead, Weber argued that aspects of the Protestant ethos, most fully developed and embodied in Calvinism, had a significant impact in transforming the mindset of believers to meet the demands of capitalism. This is where Tanner steps in, in that she wishes to show how her own Christian commitments are contrary to the demands of capitalism in the present, whatever the situation might have been in the past (7). *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* is, then, less of a direct engagement with Weber, and more of a staged contrast between a number of central components of "finance-dominated capitalism" with the Christian calling of Tanner's own context. This contrast is repeated in each chapter, which all begin with finance-dominated capitalism and end with the Christian challenge. As such, the book is a work of faith, which makes a scholarly response a somewhat awkward affair, especially when one does not subscribe to the ideological framework and theological premise of the book. Seen from a secularised perspective, Tanner's claim, namely that Christianity can alleviate the spiritual maladies of capitalism, is neither unpredictable nor comforting. From a Christian perspective, however, judging by the promotional blurbs, Tanner's Christian vision offers deep solace to the moral traumas of the intelligentsia.

While the aim of the book is contrary to that of Weber, Tanner states that she shares "much of Weber's methodology," namely, "that it is humanistic in its concern for the practical efficacy of religious beliefs" (6).² However, is Weber's methodology really concerned with the efficacy of beliefs? Actually, Weber's methodology concerns the effect of the *worldview* and *theological doctrines* of Protestantism (rather than personal beliefs) on the capitalist drive for profit. In other words, Weber was arguing that a given society's worldview can be (and has been) shaped by theological doctrines without the necessity of religious beliefs among its members. I will return to this in the course of the present article.

Fundamental to the argument is Tanner's distinction between the Protestant work ethic of industrial capitalism and the spirit of contemporary, finance-dominated capitalism. While there is continuation and intensification of the former, the latter is more attuned to flexibility and changing demands and tasks. The new spirit is summed up in five points (27–28):

1. The link between effort and reward is not broken and assumes a highly moralised character: if one is not doing well, it is one's own fault.
2. One bears a completely individualized responsibility for the costs and rewards of one's behavior.

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge Classics; London: Routledge, 2001).

² In the lectures, available online at <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/christianity-and-new-spirit-capitalism>, Tanner is much more circumspect in her description of Weber's methodology.

3. This individualized responsibility sets off a highly competitive relationship between oneself and others.
4. This ethic is intensified by being totalized: there is no “you” apart from it.
5. There is an unbreakable continuity between past, present, and future in ways that make any radical break with the present order seem impossible.

These five points will be developed in the rest of the book. Tanner demonstrates how each point is present in finance-dominated capitalism, and how each point may be countered by the “Protestant anti-work ethic” developed in the book.

Before we turn to the development of the argument, however, there are three items I want to flag, and to which I will return later. The first is the connection between these points and the political ideology of liberalism. As has been demonstrated often, but perhaps most succinctly by C. B. Macpherson, the first three of Tanner’s five points are hallmarks of the individual of liberal ideology.³ This raises the question of the relation between the Protestant work ethic, the spirit of capitalism, liberalism, and the material effects of capitalism. Weber is, as noted above, not completely clear on this point, nor, for that matter, is Tanner. This is important in terms of the cure that Tanner advocates, and, more importantly, what ills it is purposed to cure. The second item is that of an ideal type. Tanner is quite clear that her construction of finance-dominated capitalism and its spirit are ideal types (10–11), and should, as such, not be confused with reality, but rather understood in their heuristic functions. However, Tanner’s construct of Christianity is also an ideal type, although not addressed or presented as such. This is, actually, not an insignificant problem, in that there are, as Tanner also remarks in the lectures, Christian, or rather, Protestant denominations which undergird finance-dominated capitalism very well. If a specific brand of Christianity is to be offered as an antidote to the new spirit of capitalism, generic Christian tropes simply won’t do. The final item is the identity of the “one.” This impersonal marker is used throughout the book. This “one” is also the individual of liberalism, but, as we know, there is a difference between the individual who is CEO of a billion-dollar corporation, one who is a middle manager, and the individual who cleans hospitals as one out of three jobs. It is by no means clear to which of these “ones” Tanner is appealing. We return to these three points after a presentation of the argument in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*.

In chapter one we are introduced to Tanner’s take on Weber, the nature of finance-dominated capitalism and the differences between it and industrial capitalism. This is summarized in the five points mentioned above. The following five chapters deal with the subjectification strategies of finance-dominated capitalism over against subjection to God. The subjectification strategies of finance-dominated capitalism function mainly through its temporal structures that fix its subjects within a web that is, at one and the same time, timeless and thus seemingly eternal, and yet

³ C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

determined by debt accumulation and its significance for present and future action. It is no coincidence that time looms so large in the argument, in that, for Tanner, it is precisely Christianity's future promise of salvation that will transform the current (finance-dominated) timelessness into a mere period within a larger plan. Indeed, as a parallel to Foucault's work, Tanner argues for looking outside the present for alternatives to the present model, not only to highlight its contingency, but also, in order to seek a model of subjectivity that may offer means of resistance here and now. Tanner qualifies this latter option as offering resistance insofar as this model of subjectivity is "supported by forms of community life" extending (from the future?) into the present (50). I will return to this below, for the communal aspect of Tanner's theological vision is hardly visible, except in the odd phrase, such as here. By turning to "certain Christian ways," Tanner finds "the starkest possible contrast" to the temporal structures of finance-based capitalism (50). Tanner's model for the past—and the argument is particularly difficult to follow in this section—is neither a complete embrace of one's past (in fellowship with God) or a complete repudiation of the past, but, rather, sees the past from the perspective of the future: "Now that one knows how one has ended up—saved from sin—one can see how, unbeknownst to one and often contrary to one's own intentions, God was working on one's behalf to bring one where one otherwise could not have brought oneself" (56). In such a reading, which, as Tanner notes, has similarities with typological readings of the "Old Testament," it is important not to empty the past into its significance for the future, which would be supersessionist, but rather to regard these pasts and futures as both "radically disjunctive" and woven into a coherent narrative (59). One is, in other words, not held captive by one's past, which is the important difference from the temporal organization of capitalism.

In the third chapter, "Total Commitment," Tanner focuses on the self and how it is encouraged to self-evacuate in finance-dominated capitalism. The aim of capitalism, both industrial and finance-dominated, is to squeeze as much work from the workers as possible. The ways in which this is done has changed. Under industrial capitalism, says Tanner, reward, such as secure employment, good pay, and benefits, secured the workers' engagement with the fate of the firm. In finance-dominated capitalism, the keys to exploitation are fear, surveillance, reward, and self-evacuation. The major way is, however, to induce the workers into thinking themselves as a company or a business: maximizing assets and efficiencies, expanding capabilities through training, and so forth. In essence, one considers oneself "to be an economic resource upon which to capitalize" (74). In this way, one's self-understanding is aligned with the business model of finance-dominated capitalism. Government offices and educational institutions are also run in this way, thus producing a common understanding of the way the market works, and all, individual worker and company alike, mirror themselves in the market (82–84).

Because the commitment to God is a totalizing force, it can effectively disrupt the equally totalizing claims of the company. In fact, one's life project should not

be about making oneself as a business, but, rather, making oneself as a Christian, maximizing one's religiousness and allowing it to govern all other aims, roles, and tasks. This identity is shared, and as such is common with others, but nevertheless the individual is "leading such a life project of God orientation" (92).

Tanner recognises the formal likeness between finance-dominated capitalism and Christianity here, in its demand for the fullness of the person, the malleability required to let oneself become the instrument of a larger purpose (be it for good, i.e. God, or for bad, i.e. finance-dominated capitalism), and the similarity between an orientation to God and orientation to money (later, in an incomprehensible example,⁴ it is God who becomes like money), in that Tanner sees money as that value which underlies every other commodity. In the same way that money "motivates all other motives," God can convert pursuits into "occasions for God-directedness" (94). Tanner distinguishes the Christian project of "self-fashioning" from Platonic and Stoic influences, which advocated a contextualization of the self in the whole, because the whole of Platonism and Stoicism is the fallen world (of capitalism) in need of recreation by God "who is not the world" (100). This means then, when one conforms to God, conformity with the world is impossible. Tanner explicitly names this "counter-conduct" with a nod to Foucault and claims that Foucault makes the point that there were forms of Christianity that arose after the Reformation and challenged the forms of Christian subject formation which fed into capitalism. However, Foucault's point was precisely the opposite: the forms of Christianity resistant to specific forms of discipline, the splinter groups that arose from the Reformation, were precisely those that fed into the new form of modern government.⁵ This is not unrelated to Weber's point. The inner-worldly character of the Protestant sects to which Weber pointed is confirmed in their beliefs that their work and progress was God's work in the world.⁶ In contrast,

⁴ "Although everyone wants what everyone else wants here—to live a life transparent to the life of Christ within one—members do not compete with one another for those same goods because of a certain detachment from those goods that the relationship to that third thing, God, enables. God functions here something like the way money functions: to allow one to give up one's attachments to the achievements that others would also like for themselves" (Tanner, 215).

⁵ I have discussed this at length in Christina Petterson, *The Missionary, the Catechist and the Hunter: Foucault, Protestantism and Colonialism* (ed. Warren Goldstein; Studies in Critical Research on Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 55–72. Drawing on Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (ed. James Schmidt; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 [1978]); idem, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977–1978* (ed. Arnold I. Davidson; trans. Graham Burchell; Michel Foucault, Lectures at the Collège De France; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Matthew Chrulew, "Pastoral Counter-Conducts: Religious Resistance in Foucault's Genealogy of Christianity," *Critical Research on Religion* 2 (2014) 55–65; idem, "Genealogies of the Secular," in *Religion after Secularization in Australia* (ed. Timothy Stanley; New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015) 139–57.

⁶ Christina Petterson, *The Moravian Brethren in a Time of Transition: A Socio-Economic Analysis of a Religious Community in Eighteenth Century Saxony* (Historical Materialism 231; Leiden: Brill, 2021). See also Esther Sahlé, *Quakers in the British Atlantic World, C.1660–1800, People, Markets,*

Tanner is re-transcendentalizing God, and re-establishing the Wholly Other, as Jonathan Z. Smith quipped in a different, though not unrelated, context.⁷ Having thus separated God from any worldly action, Tanner does not give any indication of how the connection is then to be thought, apart from the individual–divine relation and the notion of doing God’s work, and furthering God’s project. With one’s full commitment thus placed in relation to God, what are the implications for our interaction with this world?

The fourth chapter, “Nothing but the Present,” describes how the present in finance-dominated capitalism is a vortex that sucks everything into it, preventing one from thinking differently, more creatively, as a way of reassessing one’s current task or predicament. At work, everything has to be done correctly the first time, and this demands one’s complete focus on the task at hand, while, at home, the rent is due tomorrow, so scraping it together becomes one’s overriding purpose. The effect of these demands is that one does not have “any unused cognitive capacity to give to such thoughts about the future; one’s cognitive bandwidth is completely absorbed in the present task, with no unused capacities left over for deployment elsewhere” (105). The future and its consequences are pushed ahead, and one moves from one present to the next. This is not only the case for people trying to meet rent by taking small loans with extortionist conditions, but also for the short-term decision making on the stock market, where profits are made based on market volatility (114).

The Christian attention to the present is also characterised by urgency, which, says Tanner, can challenge the relation to the present as urged by finance-dominated capitalism precisely because of its significance for the future (i.e., salvation) and its openness towards the present. Because one’s sins are forgiven, “one can let go of the past without consequence” (126). Furthermore, because one has to orient one’s life to God in every moment, a focus is created in what might otherwise be a string of disconnected presents (130). Whereas Stoicism throws one upon one’s own resources, reliance on God can dispel any anxiety caused by the dispersal and turbulence which a world without God offers (133–34).

In chapter five, “Another World?,” Tanner focuses on the importance of the future in finance-dominated capitalism and Christianity. Tanner argues that finance-dominated capitalism fixes the future by urging planning for it, creating an already imagined future. A notable feature of modernity is that humans are regarded as having an impact on the outcomes of the future through a variety of actions and choices. This has the effect of weighing advantages and disadvantages from an imagined future position, collapsing the present and the future, and only imagining the future from the parameters of the present and vice versa. In the section on

Goods: Economies and Societies in History (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021).

⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 38.

Christianity, Tanner addresses the criticism of Christianity's emphasis on future salvation as a way of preempting a criticism or rethinking of the present. Tanner argues that Christian existence is precisely a rethinking of the present, in that "the grace that is necessary to change things radically exists and is at work in the world now, providing human beings with everything they need to live life differently" (164), life in Christ being the motor of change. Tanner regards this as revolutionary. However, this addresses only the spiritual concerns of humans, whereas for a large part of the world's population it still is a struggle to feed children three times daily. The material concerns are not alleviated by life in Christ, as we see in John 6 where the request for bread to eat meets a counter-offer with the bread of life.⁸

The final chapter, "Which World?," draws together the consequences of this new work ethic of finance-based capitalism and presents us with its extreme individualization, its holding the individual accountable, and its moral judgment of success or failure, creating, as it were, a competitive environment between individuals. This competition is made more direct, Tanner believes, because of the lack of external mediation. In contrast to old-school capitalism, where the market takes the role of external mediator of relations with others, financial-based capitalism and its secondary markets do not rely on objective value, but rather on the opinion about the value. The question remains, though, whether the secondary markets and the value of value are not a further abstraction of a capitalist market economy, which means that it is not the market that mediates and creates competition, but rather value. Value, i.e. exchange value, is a level of abstraction enabling two otherwise incommensurable objects ("labor expended" and "end product") to be compared. As such, it is a constitutive feature of capitalism, and relies on individualism and labor as alienable private property in order to function. Tanner knows all of this. But she still insists that there is a qualitative difference between finance-dominated capitalism and its predecessor, whereas I would see the difference more as one of degree. The point of this is that Tanner wants to see our current state as one made up of competitive, brutish individuals with not even a market to help us engage with one another for whatever utilitarian or self-sustaining reason. This, we might add, was something Hobbes had seen centuries earlier, which formed his infamous state of nature, where civil society without common power would turn into a brutish condition of dog-eat-dog and zero-sum mentality.⁹ In this depraved state, Tanner wants to insert God as the external mediator of selves in a time where there is nothing else. The solution offered in the final chapter is based on the assumption that "salvation includes the material well-being of bodies, and that the Christ who brings about that salvation is at work now to transform lives"—which is done by serving God in employments that are aligned with "God's

⁸ Christina Petterson, *From Tomb to Text: The Body of Jesus in the Book of John* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016) 60–69.

⁹ This is Macpherson's argument of Hobbes' state of nature, i.e. that it actually reflects what the emerging liberal society would look like without a common power. Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 19–29.

own efforts to bring about the well-being of all.” Thus, it is through belief and the radical self-reformation, enabled by Christ, that we (“presumably”) are given power to change our economic lives (201). This brings us back to the efficacy of belief mentioned above. For Tanner, the agent of change can only be God, coming from outside the system itself. For Weber, however, the changes take place within a base/superstructure model, where ideology and culture effect change.

What Tanner prescribes to overthrow the work ethic of contemporary capitalism (not capitalism as such, mind you), is not that we make work enjoyable, cut back on work, or relish in anti-capitalist behavior such as lack of productivity, strike action, or outright destructive behavior: “What is to replace such acts of resistance, along the Christian lines developed here, is a community forged according to very different assumptions about how relations to oneself bear on relations with others. This anti-work ethic has its own social presuppositions and implications, with the capacity to form a whole alternative world” (210). As mentioned above, I am not certain that Tanner has fully demonstrated how this community is forged, or how this, practically and on the ground, can offer any alternative to finance-dominated capitalism. While the evangelizing orientation of the book is clear, its message still seems to be articulated within liberalism and the individual, as well as being based on a premise of stable income, medical insurance, and pension scheme. It is not capitalism per se that is the problem, merely its current incarnation.

Having summarized Tanner’s argument, and raised a couple of points of criticism, I return now to the three issues I flagged earlier, beginning with the identity of “one.” While we hear often of workers, and resource-strapped people, there are also people who can buy shares, who can contemplate extra training, who can identify fully with the workplace or corporation. The “one,” who is endangered by the subjectification practices of capitalism, moves from baker to college-students to CEOs, which means that Tanner has a purely individual subjectification in view, following Foucault. While there is some attention granted to the differing impact of the volatile market on people without resources and those with them (119–24), Tanner does not articulate or perhaps even consider the collective subjectification strategies of capitalism, namely its class structure and the differences between the owners of the means of production and the workers. The focus is solely on the individual, a focus which, not incidentally, dovetails nicely with the call to the individual believer throughout the book. What struck me in reading the book was the neglect of community—with very few exceptions. This was especially noteworthy in the sections on Christianity. My own main area of research is the community of the Moravian Church in the eighteenth century, and this particular brand of Protestant Christianity, which also has a presence in Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) today, maintains a strong and cohesive global community. Furthermore, coming from Denmark—where the state church (in place since the implementation of the Danish liberal constitution in 1848) functions as a church community, but also ensures various rituals of importance within a surprisingly large part of the

otherwise secular society—I was surprised by this purely individualistic focus. Or, more accurately, it made me realize how much I take community for granted in any discussion of Christianity.

This brings me to the second point, namely the relation between the Protestant work ethic, the spirit of capitalism, liberalism, and the material effects of capitalism. As mentioned earlier, Weber connects the spirit of capitalism (i.e., its drive for profit) with Protestant calling, rational organization, and the sanctification of an inner worldly life. What Tanner is providing in her analysis is a much fuller picture of capitalism, namely its ideological underpinnings and its devastating effects on individuals. In the process, however, Tanner merges liberalism (the ideological underpinning) with capitalism (the economic system). Tanner notes that

It has not been unusual since the early days of capitalism to think of having property in one's person. The labor power one owns in virtue of that fact can be exchanged for wages in an employment contract. Property in one's person amounts to a kind of private property. One can do what one likes with private property, loaning it out for a time, as one does with one's labour power, and assuming the proceeds received in exchange. (74)

This is what C. B. Macpherson, mentioned earlier, described as possessive individualism, a constituent but overlooked feature of liberal ideology. Here, as well as in the five points that set the agenda for the book, Tanner conflates central liberal dogmas with the spirit of finance-dominated capitalism and problematizes these unpalatable features as Stoic-inflected finance-driven capitalist features. This means that liberalism is never questioned, but fully assumed—as we see in the overriding focus on the individual consumer and the individual believer.

Tanner does suggest that being thrown into reliance on one's own resources makes life under capitalism a terrifying prospect (133), but instead of recognizing this as a constitutive feature of liberalism, Tanner connects it with Stoicism. In her first chapter, Tanner concludes:

Conformity to God therefore does not lead to conformity to the way things are. It does not mean, for example (as it did for ancient Stoicism), aligning one's individual aims with, submerging them into, harmonizing them with a universal given order of things, in much the same way the new spirit of capitalism counsels a perfect convergence between one's own desires and that of the broader firm or of the market generally, as that establishes the cosmological givens of present-day global capitalism. (33)

This is a very liberal reading of ancient Stoicism (inspired by Foucault), in that the individual is regarded as being aligned with the cosmos. For ancient Stoics, however, the individual could not be thought apart from the cosmos,¹⁰ and thus cannot be moved into alignment, in that “alignment” presupposes a previous

¹⁰ Tilde Bak Halvgaard, *Linguistic Manifestations in the Trimorphic Protennoia and the Thunder: Perfect Mind: Analysed against the Background of Platonic and Stoic Dialectics, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 11–40.

separation. What is really going on here is that Stoicism is made to stand in for the role of liberalism within capitalism. This is also clear in chapter four, where the financial players are depicted as possessing a Stoic-inflected temporal sensibility, which only has eyes for the present (126).

This focus on the present, where the individual jumps from present moment to present moment without an eye to the future or the past, is not to be misunderstood as a yearning for historical context on Tanner's part (not the usual hunting ground for systematic theologians), but rather as a concern for the dispersion of self, a fragmented self which in this state cannot be directed towards a future in the presence of God. But are these consecutive never-ending presents the result of a Stoic echo in finance-dominated capitalism or of liberal ideology? Here I am thinking of the view of history presented in Francis Fukuyama's 1989 piece, "The End of History," where he proclaims that the end of history has arrived, that we, in 1989, have now reached the pleromatic ahistorical whole of Western liberal democracy and the transcendent status of the individual, setting the stage for a re-envisioning of the battle between good and evil.

What Fukuyama means by the end of history is no less than "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."¹¹ The logic underlying this view of history is a Hegelian view of history as a series of contradictions, which ultimately have been resolved in this professed victory of liberalism, hence we have reached "the end." Drawing on Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel, Fukuyama refers to Hegel's claim of having seen the world spirit in the figure of Napoleon after the battle of Jena in 1806. Kojève believed that Hegel was right, that in the battle of Jena, "the vanguard of humanity virtually attained the limit and the aim, that is, the end, of Man's historical evolution."¹² This would be manifested fully in the liberal, democratic state, the principles of which appeared that day, 13 October 1806, in Jena. The embodiment of this liberal democratic state, for Kojève, appeared in the countries of Western Europe after the Second World War, or in the "American way of life" where all contradictions had come to an end in this universal homogeneous state. This materialisation of idealist principles is Kojève's attempt to rescue Hegel from Marx, who famously set Hegel on his feet, to emphasise the primacy of the material over the ideal. For Marx and Engels, the history of contradictions is the history of class struggles, which will be resolved in communism, while for Kojève's Hegel, the contradictions are in the realms of ideas, which come to an end once consciousness has fully materialised itself. In Fukuyama's words, "Consciousness is cause and not effect, and can develop autonomously from the material world: hence the real subtext underlying the apparent jumble of current events is the history

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989) 3.

¹² Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) 160n.

of ideology.”¹³ Indeed, Fukuyama uses Weber to reinforce this point. Returning yet again to Tanner’s point about the efficacy of religious belief, I would suggest that this is how Tanner indeed imagines the end of finance-dominated capitalism.

The final item is that of the ideal type in respect to “Christianity,” which is offered to us as the ultimate solution to a rapacious economic system and its subjectification. In order to present Christianity as an alternative to finance-dominated capitalism, Tanner presents Christianity in the language and logic of this very system. Two examples will suffice:

The first example is from the second chapter, “Chained to the Past,” and is in the context of post-baptismal sin:

The salvation that Christ brings would become in this way [post-baptismal sin bringing one into debt of God] a kind of advance on what one is eventually to pay for oneself through holy living. God would become one’s creditor again in Christ, loaning salvation on the expectation of being paid back by the good works that Christ makes possible. (61)

The second example is from the chapter entitled “Total Commitment,” which deals with the totalizing subjectification features of finance-based capitalism, insofar as it treats each self as a business enterprise:

Christianity is to promote, in short, a form of work on oneself in which one problematizes one’s own piety with a maximizing intent: one is to make an issue of one’s own religiousness in ways that turn that religiousness itself into a maximizing project. One should be as religious as possible in the sense of directing oneself to God in thanks and praise and into alignment with God’s will at every moment and in everything one does. (86)

What the transfer of language demonstrates as well as the content is that finance-dominated capitalism is not a structure which can be changed or contested; rather, the problem is what it demands and effectuates on the self—and only the self. This sounds like Luther’s discussion of the human will being placed between Satan and God as a beast of burden, where the beast is under the control of its rider.¹⁴ The aim is, in other words, to change the individual’s rider/master, not the corroding social fabric.

Setting aside the extent to which such an idealist solution is indeed satisfactory to solve social and material problems, it must be said that for a trained theologian, the theological vision presented in this book is astonishingly meagre when compared to the extensive expositions of finance-dominated capitalism—indeed, Foucault is referred to more often than Augustine. The theological vision is not based on detailed and systematic analysis, but is presented as the most self-evident solution to the ills of our present time. What I would like to be shown, on the other hand, is what this particular theological position can offer that others, say, liberation theology,

¹³ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 6.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 107. See also James 3:2–3.

ontotheology, process theology, or natural theology for that matter, cannot. It is not enough for me to be told that this ideal type, i.e. “Christianity,” is the superior theological vision; I would like to be shown how and why. Instead, I am told that in the face of financial-based capitalism, God has it under control. I am encouraged to take comfort in my salvation, and use Christianity to help me make better choices. At the end of the day (excuse the pun), such a theological vision is most seriously wanting. Judging by some of the questions raised in the lecture series themselves, I am not alone in this opinion. When even an Englishman in clipped Oxbridge tones can ask whether there is room for revolution in this theological vision, one should know that something is missing.