

# Introduction: The Gift of Kathryn Tanner's Theological Imagination

**Rosemary P. Carbine and Hilda P. Koster**

This book acknowledges and celebrates the salient contributions to contemporary constructive Christian theology by Kathryn Tanner, and engages a wide range of topics reflective of the scope of Tanner's theology. Tanner's work is invaluable for theology today due to its unique combination of gifts: logically clear-headed argumentation, commanding grasp of the depth and possibilities of Christian thought and practice, and a transformative incorporation of contemporary interdisciplinary insights springing from ethics, theories of culture, social and political sciences, economics, and gender studies. The aim of the book is to articulate these multiple gifts. To this end, we bring together essays by Tanner's former students and colleagues, who themselves have become leaders in the field of theological and religious studies. Among the many reasons to honor and celebrate Tanner's work, the immediate occasion for our book is that Tanner is named the 2015–2016 Gifford lecturer. The essays in this book, thus, seek to acknowledge this important moment by articulating the

significance of Tanner's theological work for contemporary theology in anticipation of what is yet to come. The book therefore is very much a celebration of Tanner *in medias res*.

Tanner's impressive career has spanned three decades and started at Yale University, led to the University of Chicago Divinity School where she became the Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Theology (2006–2010), and most recently has brought her back to Yale Divinity School where she is the Frederick Marquand Professor of Systematic Theology. Moving back and forth between Yale and Chicago signals more than the twists and turns in Tanner's own professional appointments; it indicates the myriad ways in which her work has bridged these two, in previous eras considered opposite, schools of theology. While initially shaped by the so-called Yale school of postliberal theology and its cultural-linguistic understanding of Christianity—which originated in part with her teachers Hans Frei and George Lindbeck—Tanner exemplified a “next generation” of theologians who are more deeply influenced by postmodernism, feminism, and liberation theologies. Perhaps most characteristic of this generation is that they pressed theology to make “constructive claims of a substantive sort through the critical reworking of Christian ideas and symbols to address the challenges of today's world.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than consider and respond to methodological and epistemological questions about Christianity's legitimacy in modern universities and societies, these now called “constructive theologians” queried “whether theology has anything important to say about the world and our place in it. How might a contemporary Christian theology promote (or not) a more adequate understanding of the world and a more just way of living? ... How would the

1. Kathryn Tanner, “How My Mind Has Changed: Christian Claims,” *Christian Century* 127, no. 4 (2010): 40.

Christian symbol system need to be creatively and critically recast in the process?"<sup>2</sup>

Tanner's first two books illustrate this turn toward constructive theology in her work. Her book *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (1988) brilliantly sets out the fundamental theological principles of God's divine transcendence and non-competitive relation to the world that guide her later work. *God and Creation* then is a "wide-ranging analysis of the patterns of discourse about God and creation in Christian thought," and covers the way such patterns modify "habits of speech in the wider society in order to show (rather than explain) the coherence of various claims about God and the world."<sup>3</sup> Yet, *The Politics of God* (1992) reflects her growing disenchantment with that theological method and pushes toward a new method grounded in sociopolitical theory that "asks about the various ways Christian beliefs and symbols can function in the particulars of people's lives so as to direct and provide support for the shape of social life and the course of social action."<sup>4</sup> Rather than focusing on the coherence of Christian discourse, *The Politics of God* is preoccupied with the *normative* implications of Christian claims about God and world. The question is "how beliefs about God and creation *should* shape Christian lives—in self-conscious opposition to the way those beliefs have commonly functioned to ill effect in the past and present."<sup>5</sup>

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. *Ibid.*, 42.

4. *Ibid.*, 41. At the same time, feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologies analyzed Christian Godtalk and other Christian beliefs, symbols, and practices for their critical and practical effects. See, for example, Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

5. Tanner, "How My Mind Has Changed," 42.

Tanner's method, then, does not insulate a Christian perspective from external criticism or ignore diversity and conflict within Christianity. Her book *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (1997) criticizes a definition of Christian culture as a self-contained social entity that provides norms for sustaining social stability. Tanner argues that such a monolithic notion of culture overlooks the cracks and conflicts within a culture that open up possibilities for resistance and change, hence highlighting human agency. Tanner employs critical theories of culture to further demonstrate the hybridity and internal diversity of Christian discourse. Christianity, like other cultures, has always adopted and reworked elements and ideas, most notably Jewish and Greco-Roman, that are not in and of themselves uniquely Christian. Departing from a postliberal approach that looks for static, stable, or unique rules that constitute and safeguard Christian identity, *Theories of Cultures* proposes that theologians ask themselves what Christians *do* with ideas and beliefs that they adopt from other cultures.<sup>6</sup> As Tanner phrases it, "it is what Christians do with these cultural influences that matters, as they grow into an understanding of their Christian commitments by way of complex processes of revision, appropriation, and resistance to them, taken one by one."<sup>7</sup>

What distinguishes Tanner's method is her emphasis on the need for historical analysis of Christian ideas and symbols. Indeed, Tanner's systematic theology sifts through historical debates to offer new and often unexpected perspectives on these at times worn-out dilemmas,

6. Kathryn Tanner, "Is God in Charge?," in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 118.

7. Tanner, "How My Mind Has Changed," 45. The emphasis on the possibility of critical resistance to as well as critical appropriation and revision of theological ideas moved Tanner's work closer to the revised method of critical correlation forwarded by David Tracy, which also recognizes the fluidity between Christian claims and non-Christian resources and the importance of reworking Christian doctrine in light of today's challenges. See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 43–71.

such as sin and grace, creation *ex nihilo*, or the *imago Dei*. Tanner's insistence on the need for historical study is motivated also by her commitment to the *apophatic* nature of theology. Because theology's ultimate reference, God, can never be fully encapsulated or captured, and, thus always escapes the usual canons of our meaning-making, theological discourse must seek "what lies beyond a contemporary outlook and beyond the immediate context of one's own work."<sup>8</sup> Highlighting historical study does not imply that theologians need to imitate past solutions, or emphasize the correspondence between *the* biblical tradition and *the* Christian tradition as the litmus test for theological work. On the contrary, like Karl Rahner, who has also influenced her work, Tanner "pursues a joint venture of *ressourcement*, a critical retrieval of Christianity's historical traditions, and of *aggiornamento*, an opening up of the theological discipline to the pressing challenges of the day."<sup>9</sup>

In her *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (2001) and her more recent *Christ the Key* (2010), Tanner spells out her constructive systematic agenda for theology rooted in the idea of God as the giver of all good gifts. *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* offers an overarching theological vision that affirms the world as the product of God's gratuitous gift-giving and articulates the social principles of unconditional, mutual, and universally inclusive benefit that in turn shape and sustain Christian responsibility in the world. *Christ the Key* shares this same theological vision, yet takes up an incarnational Christology to "throw fresh light on otherwise tired theological topics, opening up new avenues for approaching them by breaking through current impasses in theological literature."<sup>10</sup> God's gift-giving in Christ in

8. Tanner, "How My Mind Has Changed," 43.

9. Joy Ann McDougall, "Introduction," *Theology Today* 68, no. 3 (2011): 318.

10. Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vii.

the incarnation is here the key to unlock closed doors in classical doctrinal debates, and thus imagines new possibilities for contemporary theological and ethical debates.

Throughout her work, Tanner maintains that the aim of theology is to imagine ways of being in the world that serve the flourishing of all of God's creation, especially the poor and disenfranchised. This purpose has led her into a reimagining of our economic practices. Her book *Economy of Grace* (2005), written between the publications of her two systematic theologies, addresses the inequities of global capitalism and explores the implications of God's gracious gift-giving in contrast to a debt-ridden economy. Through this book, as through the gift of all her theological works, Tanner repeatedly reminds us that Christianity ultimately is an ongoing debate about how to best live the Christian life in today's world riddled with all of its inequities and injustices. Or, in her own succinct yet eloquent words: "What Christianity has going for it is its substantive proposal of a way of life—a way of life over which Christians argue in an effort to witness to and be disciples of Christ, and with which they enter into argument with others."<sup>11</sup>

As a testament to Tanner's method as constructive and public theologian, in what follows the contributors to this book also combine the historical analysis of Christian beliefs, symbols, and practices with specific socio-cultural perspectives in order to expand the possibilities of the Christian imaginary and lifeworld in ways that critically and constructively address our society's harmful and unjust practices. In the 1980s and 1990s, Tanner was startled and disappointed by theologians who interpreted the popularity and power of the Christian Right in the U.S. as a sign of Christianity's legitimacy in the U.S. public square, but paid little attention to

11. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 149.

the Christian Right's theological agenda which "targeted gays and lesbians at the height of the AIDS crisis ... and maligned [to further its own political interests] welfare mothers, sexual minorities, and the urban poor."<sup>12</sup> So, too, these contributors—whether addressing selected theological dimensions of Tanner's work or creatively engaging with that work for the betterment of current U.S. social life and action, which is plagued most recently by religious liberty laws that disguise discriminatory practices—seek to enter into and embody a new theological imagination: "a theology that starts from, and uses as its toolbox for creative ends, materials gathered from the widest possible purview is, in my opinion, a theology with that imaginative expansiveness ... it moves beyond the narrow denominational confines to the broadest possible ecumenical vision and sees beyond elite forms of theological expression, in written texts primarily, to the popular theologies of everyday life."<sup>13</sup> In good Christian eschatological fashion, we live in hope that this book enacts and extends Tanner's generous gift of this method to us.

## Overview of the Book

The essays in Part I, *Doing Theology: Gift and Task*, situate Tanner's theological contribution on the contemporary theological scene and recognize the many ways her theology has shaped this scene by (re)defining the place and task of theology in the academy and today's world, more broadly. In chapter 1, Charles Mathewes paints a rich picture of the geniality of her theological work, then examines Tanner's contribution to the task of doing theology and to the vocation of the theologian, comparing her theology with contemporaries such as Rowan Williams, Sarah Coakley, and Jean-Yves Lacoste. More specifically, Mathewes demonstrates the

12. Tanner, "How My Mind Has Changed," 44, 45.

13. *Ibid.*, 43.

relation between Tanner's first-order claims about God's sovereignty and the way she conceives of the theological task as pointing "beyond" itself, which is shown for example in Tanner's affirmation of multiple legitimate theological approaches. For Mathewes, Tanner's theology is theology-logy, focusing on the different logics of theology and their ultimate strengths and weaknesses.

In chapter 2, Paul DeHart reflects on the implications of Tanner's understanding of the God-world relationship for her theology of the Trinity. Engaging her systematic theology outlined in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* and *Christ the Key*, DeHart explores a fundamental Trinitarian pattern in Tanner's work, and demonstrates how Tanner's concept of the Trinity closely coordinates with key soteriological and christological themes (with accompanying anthropological assumptions). Utilizing a Catholic Thomistic view, DeHart questions the implications of the way Tanner's account of the God-world relationship ignores the "the internal topography of the subject," which seemingly leads to a strangely hollowed-out account of the human person.

Part II, *The Fullness of God's Gift-Giving*, showcases essays that reflect on the overarching vision of Tanner's systematic theology: God's everlasting and boundless gift-giving nature amid the suffering, strife, and fragility of creation. As Tanner states, "in all God's dealing with the world, God is trying to give creatures the good of God's own life by increasingly intimate relationships with them that culminate in Christ."<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on this central theme of Tanner's theology, in chapter 3 Ian McFarland maps the universal reach of God's gift-giving in the incarnation. Whereas many contemporary theologies downplay the uniqueness of God's gift-giving in Christ in order to maximize God's salvific presence in the

14. Kathryn Tanner, "Author Response," *Theology Today* 68, no. 3 (2011): 342.



world, McFarland agrees with Tanner that God's saving presence to the whole of creation is secured only by highlighting the unique character of Jesus' assumption by the Word. To this end, he reads Tanner's Christology within the context of her early work on creation in *God and Creation in Christian Theology* and *The Politics of God*. While at face value these early and later works seem only loosely connected, McFarland argues that they can be drawn together by deploying Tanner's theme of a non-competitive relationship between God and creatures with her reworking of Chalcedonian Christology, using seventh-century theologian Maximus the Confessor to build that bridge.

In chapter 4, Amy Pauw articulates the ways Christ, as the incarnated Word, is not only the giver of gifts, but also the *receiver* of gifts. She skillfully and persuasively utilizes biblical Wisdom traditions in relation to the gospel stories to affirm Jesus' dependence on the life-giving and life-orienting relations with the physical world and various human communities. The result is an evocative creation-centered account of the incarnation which traces Christ's divinity in and through his human interdependence: "Jesus is *for* others as Savior only as he is *with* others, and dependent on them." Taking her cue from the feeding stories in the Gospels, Pauw spells out a task-oriented Christology and an ecclesial practice emulating both Jesus' own dependency on others throughout his creaturely life, as well as his care for and commitment to fragile, hungry bodies in need.

George Hunsinger, in chapter 5, proposes that the saving significance of Christ's cross is not fully developed in Tanner's theology; although she engages with the early Greek Fathers in depth, Hunsinger aims to more fully flesh out a central point in Tanner's Christology about the relationship between the incarnation and the cross. Indeed, Hunsinger identifies and takes on a recurring christological dilemma of whether to affirm a disjunctive or an

integrative relationship between the incarnation and the cross, utilizing selected Greek fathers from the early Christian tradition as conversation partners to sort through the attending soteriological issues of this dilemma. Elaborating on key works from Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Cyril of Alexandria, Hunsinger shows that the cross is central not only to Christ's accomplishment of salvation but also to the form taken by the Christian life. For these Greek patristic theologians, there is no cross without the incarnation, and no incarnation without the cross. The cross is the divinely ordained fulfillment of the incarnation while the incarnation is the necessary premise of the cross. And vice versa—the incarnation has no saving significance that can be separated from what took place in Christ's death, while the cross plays a fundamental role in the achievement of salvation.

William Wright's carefully wrought essay, in chapter 6, ponders the absence of dialectics in Tanner's theology, more specifically in her Christology. Wright argues that retrieving a dialectical approach may lead Tanner to a different view of the theological task, namely not as primarily concerned with establishing theological principles that can somehow solve the classical *aporia* of theology, but more as collecting and ordering "the pluralism that results as Christian language through the ages falls out into conceptual conflicts." Wright's essay then puts this dialectical approach to work by demonstrating how Tanner's Christology solves the longstanding Antiochene-Alexandrian conflict, but fails to accommodate the suffering of the divine Son in Christ. Pondering this oddity while fully affirming its soteriological motive, Wright's essay raises poignant questions about the coherence of Tanner's fundamental theological principles of divine transcendence and non-competiveness.

From a rather different vantage point, namely ritual theory and evolutionary science of religion, Eugene F. Rogers, in chapter 7,

constructively utilizes Tanner's non-competitive Christology to illuminate how the blood of Christ is the blood of God. Observing that "blood" is succeeding "the body" as a central theme of the humanities, Rogers's essay investigates ways in which "Christian blood-signaling," most notably in the Eucharist, can be put towards subversive social ends, to cease oppression and violence. Having established that the blood of Christ in Eucharistic ritual emulates "costly signaling" and thus allows Christians to foster virtue, cooperation, and gratitude, Rogers then emphasizes the untapped theological potential of Tanner's non-competitive account for Eucharistic theology, using Aquinas to articulate the efficacy of the Eucharistic elements.

Part III, *Christianity as Culture: A Gift to Theology*, gathers essays that reflect on Tanner's pathbreaking work in *Theories of Culture*. In chapter 8, Mary McClintock Fulkerson creatively relates Tanner's theology of God's abundant gift-giving to ministering to and with people with disabilities. Whereas DeHart in Part I challenges Tanner's lack of attention to the interiority of the subject from a Catholic perspective, Fulkerson utilizes a more radical Protestant perspective and praises Tanner's refusal to highlight cognitive abilities as a prerequisite of faith, which opens up theological pathways to honor the living faith of an interracial community that includes people with disabilities. The grace of a God who is beyond kinds does not depend on any condition in the finite world, and, hence, is radically inclusive, thereby offering rich resources for different ecclesiological, especially worship, practices.

In chapter 9, Jan Pranger explores the potential of Tanner's theology of culture for missiological discussions about inculturation—that is, for the articulation of Christian theology in intercultural situations or amidst social and cultural change—along the twin lines of theology as cultural construction and non-

essentialist negotiation of Christian identity in relation to culture. Understanding inculturation via Tanner's proposal for constructing Christian identity through the creative use of existing cultural forms, Pranger discusses how missiological models of inculturation and contextualization, and ecumenical discussions about syncretism, diversity, and identity, may be advanced. He contends that postcolonial inculturation seeks to overcome the cultural trauma that was inflicted by the arbitrary creation of cultural and religious boundaries in the elite theological production by Eurocentric Christian missions while also acknowledging the simultaneous popular production of local forms of Christian theology. Thus, Pranger argues that Tanner's postmodern understanding of culture bridges the divide between inculturation and contextualization, between theological concerns with cultural identity and with issues of social justice. Exploring the ecumenical significance of Tanner's proposals for Christian identity as an open, inclusive commitment to figure out the meaning of discipleship, he suggests that such a commitment begins with practices of resistance and solidarity as a first step in learning about Christian discipleship as part of God's healing of the world.

Finally, in chapter 10 Hugh Nicholson explores Tanner's understanding of Christian identity for relations with other religions. Nicholson recaps Tanner's move away from a postliberal stance, which regards the engagement with culture as a risk to a self-contained, self-generated Christian identity, toward a postmodern understanding of Christian identity as generated relationally in the interaction with cultures, fueled by subaltern uses of elite cultural productions. Nicholson concludes that engagement with other religions, or comparative theology, is integral to the theological task, but at the same time observes a tension between Christian identity formation through creative use of other religions *pace* Tanner's

theology of culture and respect for the alterity of other religions *pace* Tanner's social ethics in the *Politics of God*. This tension, Nicholson maintains, also leads Tanner to occasional lapses into notions of intrinsic identity, for instance by distinguishing between matters of internal importance to Christians and situational needs to mark Christian distinctiveness. While recognizing that Tanner's consistent insistence on openness to the freedom of the Word in theological articulations sets her apart from a postliberal approach to culture, he suspects that her appeal to style as a situationally enacted practical sense preserves a trace of intrinsic identity not entirely unlike postliberalism.

Part IV, titled *The Gift of Theology to Praxis*, elaborates on the socio-political and economic implications of Tanner's theology, especial for pressing contemporary issues such as feminist theologies of sin, ecofeminist theological concerns about global ecological crises, economic theologies of alternatives to capitalist, consumerist cultures, and feminist public theologies of antiracist activism. In chapter 11, Joy McDougall plumbs the depths of Tanner's theological insights for clues into how elements of the Christian tradition can move feminist agendas forward. In particular, McDougall highlights the potential of Tanner's notion of sin as either closing our eyes to or blocking our vision of God's gracious and abundant gift-giving for a Reformed feminist theology of sin and grace. While McDougall shows that Tanner's concept of sin overcomes unhelpful binaries in sin-talk (personal and structural sin, sinner and sinned-against), she argues that Tanner's theology of sin requires further en-gendering in order to address particular facets of gender oppression that afflict women and men's lives. She proposes re-visioning the Reformed notion of "the bondage of the will" as "the bondage of the Eye/I," in which blindness or "blocked vision" to God's gracious gifts ensnares persons in oppressive gender roles, cultural scripts, and systemic structures

not always of their choosing. This feminist conceptualization of sin ultimately seeks to re-imagine the workings of grace that free men and women from this gendered “bondage of the Eye/I.”

In her essay in chapter 12, Hilda P. Koster demonstrates how key themes in Tanner’s theology offer an attractive model for ecological theology, in part because they help solve some recurrent problems in eco-theological pantheisms. Specifically, Koster points out the promise of Tanner’s account of divine transcendence for a non-anthropocentric, non-hierarchical, non-dualistic theology of creation and salvation that envisions God as the fecund provider and redeemer of all that is. In spite of the rich promise of Tanner’s model for a green theology, its soteriology, which is characterized by the cosmic-theological scheme of God’s ongoing gift-giving, tends to cast finitude *itself* as the problem addressed by the incarnation. From an evolutionary, ecological perspective, however, death and disease—while tragic—guarantee the vitality and resilience of healthy biotic communities. Koster, thus, envisions a soteriology that overcomes the suffering and death that result from human sin, while fully embracing the finite conditions of our lives as members of the earth-community. To this end, Koster utilizes the perspectives of Catholic eco-theologian Denis Edwards and eco-feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, especially their retrieval of “the wisdom of the cross” via the idea of “deep incarnation.”

Courtney Wilder’s essay in chapter 13 creatively engages Tanner’s *Economy of Grace* in relation to contemporary subversive economic practices, such as Zero Waste Living, that disrupt hegemonic consumerist values. Capitalizing on Tanner’s claims that a theology of God’s gift-giving may open up our economic imagination in a time of economic dead ends, Wilder identifies these popular practices as allowing for an alternate economic system that reflects both a primary allegiance to God and an abiding reliance upon God’s grace.

Wilder thus broadens the scope of non-capitalist economic possibilities in relation to Tanner's analysis, and asks whether distinctive popular phenomena, which she sees reflected in the blog "Zero Waste Home" and the song "Thrift Shop" by the rapper Macklemore, may offer fresh resources for Christian theological reflection on economics.

Finally, in chapter 14 Rosemary P. Carbine seeks to illuminate the conversations and protests sparked by police killings of black men in America since 2014 in the light of feminist public theology, with particular reference to Tanner's reflections on Christian tradition and public theology. Stepping away from some social Trinitarian theologies which take immanent Trinitarian relations as a direct religio-political model for human social relations, Tanner instead proposes public theology as a communicative process of religio-political discourse, which parallels her understanding of the Christian tradition as a task of continued conversation. Carbine addresses and presses beyond discursive public theology in Tanner by exploring rhetorical, symbolic, and prophetic practices of public engagement by nonreligious and interreligious groups in the aftermath of Ferguson, practices which denounce racism and proclaim black religio-political subjectivity and community on theological grounds.

The book concludes with an *Afterword* by Serene Jones, in which she eloquently and personally reflects on the multiple ways in which Tanner—through the gift of her theological imagination as well as her mentoring, collegiality, and friendship—enriches the lives of all of us who enjoy the great fortune to learn from her, work with her, and collaborate with her.