

Review Essay:

**WHAT'S THE USE OF A *SKELETON KEY*
FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?**
A Report on an Essential Problematic in
Kathryn Tanner's *Christ the Key*

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Christ the Key. By Kathryn Tanner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 309+ pp.

Kathryn Tanner has given what for many is a long-awaited text. Here, in the book version of her 2007 Warfield lectures at Princeton, we have the promised sequel to her concise systematics, the highly praised *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (2001). Here also does appear the book to which Tanner referred in her response to Amy Plantinga Pauw's important critique in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (57.2, 2004). There, in response to Pauw's probing concerns regarding the incipient ecclesiology of *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, Tanner referenced several of the essays that finally became chapters in this book. Those looking, however, for a well-developed, reflective, and patristically-inspired account of the human community in relation to Christ, and hence the Triune God (for such is surely the Church or the Church is nothing), will be sorely disappointed. In fact, a careful reading of the text, such as the one I endeavor to offer, will hardly lend an instance of the word at all. Is this

a problem for her Christology—*especially* if applied to some basic aspects of human life in the world, and thus for the very project that this book undertakes? Perhaps we will find that the lack of a concrete ecclesiology is a symptom of a fundamental problem of her Christology itself, one that militates directly against her primary intuition of the Christological shape of human life and experience.

Yet Tanner's task in this book is clearly not the construction of an ecclesiology. This, of course, could be taken as the very heart of the problem itself. But before an assessment on this score, let us rehearse the progression of the text, testing it from the vantage of inquiry that we have only just adumbrated above. Her task is to show how a rethinking of a number of classical debates in theology from Christological perspective can refresh our thinking. Tanner attempts this laudable intervention by way of an equally laudable *ressourcement* of some patristic intuitions in Christology. In this she is the avid heiress of what is best in 20th century theology. The verdict is certainly out regarding how much this book, with its minimalist approach, and the cursory distance it keeps in relation to complex, multi-faceted, and religiously significant debates, accomplishes such grand intentions. At best, it certainly allows us a fresh look at some fundamental theological problems: human nature as the *Imago Dei* (ch. 1), the relation of nature and grace (chs. 2-3), human relationships in light of the Trinity (ch. 4), and thus politics (ch. 5), atonement (ch. 6), and the work of the Spirit (ch. 7). The real value of Tanner's text lies in the way it helps the reader survey the shape of this vast field. At a second level, and more important to an assessment of Tanner's contribution to theology, the fresh approach to these problems that organizes the book reveals all the more clearly the constructive theological project that underwrites it. When looked at this way, I aver, Tanner's remarkable post-liberal liberalism is clearest. And here we see a thinker who should be understood at the forefront of a loose but growing trend in academic theology that we could call "progressive Barthianism"—not in the sense of some

grand “appeal to Barth as modern Church Father” (Barth is hardly mentioned in the text) but rather in its coupling of a simple, Christologically-shaped account of the relation between God and humans to “liberal” theological conclusions that are, in Tanner’s work, themselves charmingly elusive to get a hold of, often found subtly inscribed within the *indirect* conclusions to which she directs her Christological reflection, as well as in the *implied* targets of each chapter that sometimes remain faceless in her work.

The attempt to reform classical debates, as in Karl Barth or Hans Urs von Balthasar, is likewise here undertaken in a masterfully simple way: namely, by a return to the center, to the living essence that makes Christianity what it is. In this way the obfuscating layers that have exhausted centuries old ‘back and forth,’ spun in our day into a stasis of miscommunication, are neutralized and left to the side. This allows this center, the Christian intuition, to speak anew. Here then is the book’s beautiful articulation of the Christian “thing,” inhabiting the prominent place of its second sentence: “God wants to give us the fullness of God’s own life through the closest possible relationship with us as that comes to completion in Christ” (p. vii). The incarnation, classically understood, reveals and enacts the very meaning of our humanity in God’s desire to give us a share in his eternal life despite our alienation from him, which God overcomes at all cost. And again, on the very last page of the book, Tanner exclaims: “Divinity is indeed what gives this human life the only human character it has, the character that makes it what it is” (p. 301). And a few page earlier, if in a less precise way: “Divinity and humanity in Christ are, indeed, fully themselves in being together” (p. 296). Such an intuition is an echo of the Christological revolution in Catholic thought that occurred in the middle of the last century and found its way to the heart of modern Church teaching in the Christocentric ecclesiological anthropology of Vatican II. I speak of *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22, a refrain in the background of all modern theology since: “Christ...in the very revelation of the

mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling." Tanner owes much, as do we all, to Henri de Lubac, who, in 1938, observed in his first book, *Catholicisme* (to which I will return below), that "by revealing the Father and by being revealed by him, Christ completes the revelation of man to himself" (Ignatius Press edition, p. 339). Here the paradox of the "non-competitive" nature (Tanner's celebrated signature) between Creator and creature emerges; theologically, this means that the either/or between an anthropocentric starting point and a theocentric one is ultimately idolatrous on both sides: theocentrism without anthropocentrism makes for a distant God, whereas the opposite empties humanity of its significance.

THE "ESSENTIAL" PLASTICITY OF THE IMAGE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Appropriately then, Tanner's first chapter articulates the nature of humanity, addressing the question of the *Imago Dei*. Does protology or eschatology give us the key to human being? Is the "first" or "second" Adam the human archetype? The answer is obvious. The Incarnate Christ is the perfect revelation of the divine glory and therefore the true human, in whom is the vision of God and therefore our life, insofar as we identify him with the Father. Considered in themselves (as in psychological analogies popular in the classical tradition of the West), humans only "weakly" image the divine. By contrast, as the Alexandrian Fathers emphasized (upon whom Tanner fundamentally draws for her Christology), Christ *is* the *Imago Dei*, an image that is one in nature (*homoousios*) with its prototype. And the creation of humanity "*according to* the image" (hence at a second remove) is first and foremost a Christological statement. Human nature is therefore not some nebulous "substance" upon which are transposed a self-contained triad of "faculties" (as in reified readings of Augustine and

Aquinas); rather, it is most itself when it is attached to the divine image that is its uncreated prototype, the Word of the Father, revealed in these “last days,” through whom the creation, with humanity as its crown, was made. In Christ, “the first and the last,” the most human man in being fully divine, the two ends of the chain of life—creation and redemption—clasp together to form a perfect ring.

In the relation of humanity with its archetype, there are, on Tanner’s presentation, two “levels” of attachment, “weak” and “strong.” The “weak” level of attachment (“simple participation in God as creature,” p. 16) defines the creaturely image in its difference from the uncreated Image, the perfect image of the Father without distinction. The “strong” level of imaging (“participation by having the divine image for one’s own,” p. 16) is a result of the creature’s participation in the uncreated Image by virtue of the hypostatic union. Drawing on the Alexandrian thematic of the malleability of human nature, and boldly—if implicitly—echoing strains of Renaissance neo-Platonism refigured around a deep consideration of human freedom, Tanner grounds the potentiality for humans to receive the elevation into the divine life that defines grace in this radical freedom itself: the unformed and plastic quality of human nature is the essential precondition for its participation in that which it is not, that is, being shaped in the divine image and thereby becoming vessels of the divine Spirit. In fact, *to be human* means having this capacity to be remolded in the divine image through the passage from weak to strong participation in the Incarnation.

For Tanner, the Christological conception of the *imago* eschews any “communio” inspired “personalist” model of the social Trinity as the archetype for humanity, defined thus by the complementary relations of “roles” stamped into its nature (as, for example, male and female). In a concise exposition, she states:

The common theological view that divine persons are constituted by their relations, along with the idea of their indivisibility in being and act, is simply hard to square with the politics that would like to foster the agency of persons traditionally effaced in relations with dominant members of society... Moreover, the various ways of ordering the divine persons, no matter how complex, still distinguish the persons by their unsubstitutable functions or places within such orders. The Holy Spirit, for example, customarily has to go third, as in the liturgically favored, biblically derived formula, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Order among the divine persons is thereby ripe for justification of hierarchy. It easily supports claims of fixed social roles, and the idea that people are equal despite the disparity of their assignment to such roles. And so on (p. 211).

Here Tanner would see the imago in *exclusively* Christological terms. Yet even so, Tanner's social vision is not "binitarian." Tanner holds to the important principle that "the trinity cannot give answers to political questions without socio-historical mediation" (p. 223). Here it is redemption history that must come to the fore. Hers is a "Trinitarian anthropology" at a second remove, insofar as participation in Christ means elevation into the particular *taxis* of his "relations" with the persons of the Trinity that exhaust their personhood: Christ, as begotten in perfect receiving and giving in return, is the Son, the perfect image of the Father, the unbegotten and unoriginated-origin of divine life, united by virtue of the *donum* of the Holy Spirit, which is the collaborator and seal of Triune life, and who is (as in Augustine and Bonaventure) the essence of divinity as love in perfect union. Humans become "sons" of the divine life by entering into the relations that define the Trinity. If, in his relation to the Father, "*obedience* is part of Christ's nature," as Tanner permits (p. 35, quoting Nyssa, *Contra Eun.* II, 11; emphasis mine), then it is also definitive of humanity, all the more strongly as it is elevated to participation in the Trinity in the order of the Son's own filiation. Life-giving love is enacted in perfect complementarity, and

therefore the highest union, by the divine persons in their person-specific ways as they share the divine nature in absolute freedom, and such defines the human inasmuch as it images God in its freedom; and this freedom is why the human is destined from creation toward participation in God. It is hard to see here how a Christological conception of the *Imago* requires the rejection the “communio” model of persons, for which social relations, at least at some fundamental level, are “hierarchically” ordered, if not by power then by love, and therefore do not contradict the absolute equality of persons as bearers of a specific nature, be it divine or creaturely (and creaturely because of the divine). Tanner seems to uphold this distancing distinction between a Christological and Trinitarian conception of the image (and thereby, somehow, reinforcing the most homogenized egalitarianism) by virtue of the amount of *stress* she puts on the “absence of an ontological continuum” between God and creature (cf. pp. 12, 18), which requires that humanity can never even approximate the divine Image, even when the humanity of Jesus is *identified* as the humanity of the second Person of the Trinity (since such human nature is still not God). The gift of participation in the Trinity remains eternally “alien” to humanity in this fundamental way. Hence (implicitly echoing Jean-Luc Marion and referencing de Lubac) humanity images God by virtue of its own intrinsically “apophatic” character, marked by its negative imaging of the divine in the emptiness of its bizarre, creaturely infinitude, the lack that remains at the base of its desire for the absolute, its indefiniteness, its essential openness to the unbounded, etc. (cf. p. 53). This is all profoundly true. But how does it undergird a theological anthropology that denies some kind stable *taxis* of relations basic to human nature (in such controversial *loci*, for example, as the family or marriage)? Here only one side of the Christological paradox is emphasized (alterity), it seems, for the sake of underpinning certain pre-arranged theological-ethical conclusions. Does this emphasis (and most, if not all, of the critical theological work is done by “emphasis” throughout the book) implicitly reduce the paradox from the level

of antinomy to that of contradiction, where two sides are in irreducible opposition instead of reciprocal tension? Yet if the Christological *paradox* can be aptly applied as the metaphysical principle par excellence we must observe that only by simultaneously affirming both poles, such as alterity and proximity here, irreducibly at once, is the paradox rightly raised up. One needs here a Dionysian correction to what seems to remain an *extrinsicist apophaticism* in her (Christological) anthropology: precisely *because* there is no ontological continuum between creatures and God, *because* the gulf is absolute, God is absolutely present in distinct ways at every level of the continuum, and it is precisely the immediacy of the divine presence which distinguishes kinds and even individual 'things' or persons. Hence matter is no more distant from God than the brightest among the seraphim; what distinguishes them is the exclusive way each manifests the absolute proximity of God, which it does in its own unique and irreplaceable way. And therefore a "hierarchy" of relatively stable differences among the plenitude of creatures is necessary in order for the infinitely multifaceted plenitude of God to be truly manifest at all. Apophasis, at its height, is not lack but excess, and difference itself, precisely as difference, is an expression of unity—precisely as Christology teaches us. There is, contra Tanner (at least here), no competition in difference. Regarding the sort of absolute mutability of human nature that Tanner envisions, where, to take a biblical image dear to the Fathers, God is the potter and the creature is the clay (Jer. 18:6): Does such, as an image of the Son's own "absolute" obedience to the Father, and in concert with it, not actually reassert all the more strongly the nature of human passivity and radical abandonment of self-will to the divine that Tanner sees as "politically problematic" (cf. p. 212)? We will have to connect the essential malleability of human nature with the will, and with the *fully human will of Christ* below, especially if we want to understand such malleability in a more than indeterminate way, in the clarion of a Christological key.

NATURE AND GRACE

Chapters two and three are a long engagement with the nature/grace debates that, according to Tanner, have reached a sort of stalemate, mainly between Protestant and Catholic sides (if also, in a lesser mode, between competing Catholic accounts). The first Catholic view conceives of a “natural desire for the supernatural” as paradoxically definitive of the natural itself, thus raising the question of the gratuity of grace. Though let me break in from the outset: the idea of a *desiderium naturale* surely considers itself as a product of the kind of *Christological thinking* that Tanner herself espouses, all the more if the *post-Chalcedonian* contribution to Conciliar Christology—as Aaron Riches has demonstrated so well in his “Christic humanism”—has any credence (one wishes Tanner would have acknowledged this). On the other hand, there is the Catholic view that conceives of creation as a natural realm integral in itself, and thereby worthy of the ascription “good,” apart from the consideration of grace. The question fundamentally posed to the second Catholic position, as Tanner poses it, is whether a creation considered substantially complete on its own in this way makes grace itself fundamentally irrelevant to the meaning of the creature. The question posed to the first Catholic position, one that Tanner considers to be substantial, is whether God is required to save his creation since nature already calls for, and even protologically participates in, its supernatural end by virtue of its created “nature” as in itself supernaturally oriented. Interestingly, such was already more or less Athanasius’ position in *On the Incarnation*, one which echoes God’s reasoning in delivering Israel: the fall into self-erasure of creation by virtue of its rejection of its divine support calls God’s divinity into question, since the salvation of a good creation is requisite for a good God. Thus, for Athanasius, God is in some sense compelled to save creation by virtue of his own nature. I will return to this in a moment.

If chapter two, then, unfolds the general account of grace implied by the conception of human nature as image of God by virtue of imitative union with Christ, then chapter three is taken up with “resolving” the problem of grace’s gratuity without recourse to the conception of a “pure nature.” It is interesting that Tanner finds much to critique in the first Catholic account of paradoxically graced nature; much of the second chapter on grace is concerned with carefully distinguishing her position from the *nouvelle théologie* and demonstrating that she is after all Protestant, despite her “Catholic” ontologization of grace and (arguably) sin that forms her basic theological orientation (as she recognizes: cf. p. 58-9). This is a tall order. Tanner’s position is, of course, “Catholic” inasmuch as it couples grace with nature (as opposed to sin, conceived “forensically,” as for traditional Protestants), yet it claims “Protestant” status by means of placing the “emphasis” (yet again) on the “discontinuity” in the passage of nature to grace. It is certainly hard to see where an emphasis on discontinuity in particular differs from the positions of Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, or Erich Przywara on anthropology, with their radical commitment to the Jesuit-inspired *semper maior* of the divine nature in relation to that which is created, which arguably in all three cases has a Christology and a radical theology of the Cross(-Eucharist) concentrically dancing at their center. Tanner’s greatest claim is that her account pulls the rug out from under the feet of any “natural desire” for the vision of God as defining human nature, which, she says in fundamental agreement with the neo-Thomists, dangerously threatens the gratuity of grace. By contrast, “our nature,” she says, “is perfected and completed, ironically, by making us act unnaturally, in a divine rather than human way.” Replace Tanner’s “ironically” with “paradoxically” and you have something that is surely at home in the pages of de Lubac’s *Surnaturel*.

The most sympathetic reading would suggest that like Athanasius, the focus of Tanner’s account is on the divine will to save—it is of the divine nature to do

so—rather than on the question of the creation’s “nature” as such, which is a derivative of the latter. On this reading, Tanner’s approach would seem to echo the Athanasian perspective, and thereby attempts to escape the aporias that she thinks arise in de Lubac, particularly the “Aristotelian” focus on “natural desire” as somehow “self-generated” (cf. pp. 123-7), suggesting continuity between nature and grace and threatening to collapse them into one another. Tanner considers de Lubac’s position, and indeed the fundamental problematic of both sides of the (Catholic) debate, to be a “distortion,” inasmuch as it “starts from the character of the creature” apart from “any question of grace” and only at a second remove comes to “ask about the character of the grace to come” (116-7). Such is a “bottom-up view” that must be replaced by the “grace-centered account” (116) that she offers. Here grace can only take the parameters laid out for it beforehand by the account of the creature (as natural desire). For Tanner, by contrast, eschewing the natural desire problematic altogether alone will refuse the creature any ability to “merit” grace. In other words, Tanner stresses the “weakness” of natural participation in the divine life by virtue of one’s creatureliness, in order to emphasize, then, a discontinuity between the “strong” mode of participation that is granted in the absence of a “natural desire” for God defining the creature.

Now, besides questioning whether Aristotelian and Thomist “desire” is in any way initiated merely from within the creature as such (surely an offensively reductive view), we ought to observe that for de Lubac (and Thomas), such desire is itself as elicited by and manifests the divine presence, and is all the more ours by being not ours; there is the presence of Another at the heart of our creaturehood that makes us creature, “more inward than our innermost” by virtue of being “higher than our highest,” as goes the great Augustinian refrain. De Lubac does not deny the cosmic Athanasian vantage, but rather, like the documents of Vatican II, addresses a particularly modern problematic, with its

anthropocentric concentration, by recalling a fundamental dimension of traditional Christian thinking long veiled over. Someone as historically sensitive as de Lubac would have hardly considered his theology a definitive or even static description of the relation of nature and grace, but rather as an interpolation of the tradition into present debates. Such a view, at any rate, is virtually a refrain in Balthasar's own descriptions of de Lubac's significance scattered throughout his own works.

Yet in many respects it can be difficult to find the substantial differences between her fundamental position (admittedly setting aside the essential question of desire) and de Lubac's own that Tanner works so hard to make evident—particularly if a charitable and more thorough reading of the “Aristotelian” character of the “natural desire” can be re-extended on her behalf. From this vantage point, however, it is finally hard to see the value of Tanner's “intervention” into the nature-grace debates at all. First, she unfortunately does not interact with any of the current literature, which is by all accounts essential to understanding the state of the problematic today. Because of this, and along with a shallow and misinformed reading of the philosophical dimensions of the debate, it is hard to see how Tanner unlocks anything whatsoever in the “current impasse” of what is perhaps the most essential theological problem of our time.

SKETCHING THE LIMITS OF AN ABSTRACT KEY

Chapters four and five concern the Christological reassessment of God as Trinity, most fundamentally in its practical consequences for human life. In chapter four Tanner proffers the principle according to which the concrete shape of Jesus' human life is the paradigm for any human life—and therefore what the life of the human community, as a “Trinitarian way of life” (140) is intended to look like. “In being one with the Word,” Tanner says, “Jesus achieves this new

way of life before us; and we gain it through close connection with him” (141). In order to fill out this sketch, Tanner, following the method the Fathers utilized in the Christological debates, appeals to the biblical passages that directly illustrate the Trinitarian order of relations, abstracting them from the narrative(s) of the Gospels in order to construct a general pattern of Christ’s relation to the Father and Spirit. Such a method of proceeding is perfectly adequate, of course, when the question concerns an initial account meant to justify basic theological tenets at the most general level, such as the question of Christ’s natures, the deity of the Spirit, or the relation of Christ’s divinity to his humanity. The account of Christ’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, crucial indeed for the full development of orthodox Christology, as the triumph of Maximus the Confessor at Constantinople III attests, is virtually absent (as are the parables and Christ’s prophetic actions), outside of a general statement that Christ “seems to do the Father’s will with some reluctance since it involves his own suffering” (181), meant only to highlight the differences between the Trinitarian relations *ad intra* and their unfolding in a fallen world in redemption history. Yet it is precisely in the theology of Maximus the Confessor’s meditations on the mystery of Christ’s “agony” in the Garden that the concrete meaning of human life implied by abstract sketches of previous classical Christology is unfolded: here we see the essential, where the gift of one’s freedom is revealed as the height of freedom, thus remaking human being an image of God, and becomes definitive of the Christian conception of *love* in the synergy of humanity with God that the ineffable union of human and divine nature in Christ signifies (Tanner’s reflections on the essential plasticity of human nature in chapter one should have found their concrete terminus, as classical orthodoxy does, precisely here in Maximus’ conception of Christ as the “living icon of love.”). The description of classical conciliar Christology as a “sketch” is important, for it shows the unfinished nature of, for example, Chalcedon’s definition of the hypostatic union; the participatory and paradoxical conception of the meaning of Christ for

human being contained in Chalcedon is materialized—that is, takes on flesh—in the dyothelite reflections of St. Maximus. Now, all of the events of Christ's life that Tanner looks at (for example, the Virgin birth, his temptation in the wilderness, etc.) are mentioned for the sake of quickly extracting the Trinitarian pattern implied within it, a circuit of descent and ascent that forms the general pattern of the Christian understanding of human life (cf. pp. 160-1). We ought to ask here whether Tanner's "primary intent" to "interpret the New Testament *story* of Jesus' life and death in Trinitarian terms," and thereby provide an "account of the basic shape" of the inter-Trinitarian relationship(s) and, finally, its "consequences" for human life (147, emphasis added), is completed almost without getting off the ground. I will return to the significance of this abstract and incomplete picture of the humanity of Christ, theoretically extracted from its narrative context below—a context that is essential if we desire to apply Jesus' own life, in flesh and bone, to crucial questions related to the appropriate shape of human life "in the flesh" and all of its perplexing specificities.

The fifth chapter is especially concerned with revising the typical Trinitarian accounts of human social relations, which tend to err in painting the Trinity in the image of some human utopian vision. The point is that without a Christological mediation of the Trinitarian relations, human relationships themselves can never reach such a level of relation; the *diastema* of Gregory of Nyssa or, as Balthasar calls it, the absolute "spacing" between Creator and creation (or the Kierkegaardian-Barthian "infinite qualitative distinction," if you like), is only Christologically and therefore paradoxically navigated, and as such is the only intelligible way the Trinity can be a model for the structure of human relations that is the political. One wishes, incidentally, that Tanner's (implicit) recognition of the fundamental pertinence of the Nyssan *diastema* for a Trinitarian politics would have been supplemented with the Nyssan account of the *epectastic* stretching of creaturely being in the infinite desire to overcome the

diastema here: the infinite becoming of the creature in the eternal unrest of the ecstasy of divinization would seem to balance the emphasis on absolute distance with that of an absolute proximity (as expression of true distance), the play between them being definitive of human being in Christ. Seen in its light, the *humanity* of her account of the political seems rather chilled and bloodless; the description lacks the dramatic quality of human malleability tied, in real human experience on the ground, to decisions and radical consequences that surely define our human relations in their very humanity—*most especially* in Christological key.

The sixth chapter is the shortest investigation in the book (being just a few pages longer than the second half of the study on grace in chapter 2). Yet here Tanner is at her best. Developing the brief sketches of her thoughts on the atonement in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (to which the present volume is to be thought the sequel), Tanner assumes and pushes forward womanist and feminist critiques of traditional atonement theories, especially the much-maligned models of “vicarious satisfaction” and “penal substitution.” If womanist and feminist theologians are right to protest the ways in which certain atonement theories have been used to justify the oppression of people on the margins (even if simply by having nothing to say to their situation), Tanner seeks to place the atonement square in the middle of the Incarnation: Christ effects the restoration of fallen humanity by means of his transforming assumption of our human nature *tout court*. It is to her merit that Tanner does not wholly reject the notion of sacrifice, but rather takes seriously its centrality in the history of religions as much as in Christianity. Her brisk passage through much theological and ethnological reflection on sacrifice takes only a few pages, but nevertheless offers more or less the germ of a coherent perspective on the phenomenon. According to Tanner, sacrifice concerns only the establishment of social parameters, such as inclusion/exclusion and the organization of community (cf.

p. 265). The goal and purpose of sacrifice is not at all to “propitiate” or pacify the anger of the Deity; rather, more fundamentally, sacrifice is the act on God’s behalf who desires fellowship with his estranged creature. For Christianity, God sacrifices himself, that is, gives himself to us for our good, in order that we may make use of his gifts for “life-enhancing use,” especially the “satisfaction of human needs” and “the reversal of the effects of sin on human life.” This means that for Tanner, “humans are not to offer sacrifices to God” (272). Here, service to others takes the place of blood sacrifice, though this service is not “sorrowful renunciation” but rather “joyous communion” between God and humanity—which is precisely what it has in common with the ancient cultic sacrifices of Israel and Greece (cf. p. 266, developing Robert Daley). Thus sacrifice becomes the gift of life in the celebration of life, as opposed to the gift of death.

For Tanner, the sacrifice of the Cross is “a rite performed by God and not human beings” (268). Tanner draws this conclusion from the self-evident observation that Cross is an act of redemption that follows upon God’s decision to incarnate. Hence it follows that the Eucharist is not to be considered a sacrifice, but rather a simple meal, the “provision” of which is the “point of his death” (267; referring to Calvin). What is at the forefront here is not the incarnation; it is rather the divine will to save that matters. “The whole act is God’s”—there is no room for humanity in it. Sacrifice is reduced to sanctification (cf. p. 269-70). Hence Tanner offers the strange conclusion that “despite the fact that it takes place on the cross, this sanctification is not being identified with death but with life” (p. 269). All this is a matter of *emphasis* and, I would think, of *overemphasis*. One wonders why here, again, in this radically monergistic account, it becomes an either/or between God and humanity. The purpose for Tanner seems to be that, in order to safeguard against a positive conception of suffering as redemptive, sacrifice cannot be a “work” of humanity at all, even Jesus’ suffering on the Cross: and here it seems that the opposite extreme from Docetic

and Gnostic conceptions that sought to protect the divine nature from abasing itself in the mire of historical experience has remarkably occurred. Thus it is inconceivable and unfitting for the human to undergo the Passion. Rather such tainted and unpleasant messiness is only for the divine—for humans “do not have to sacrifice anything ourselves, anything whose use might otherwise have contributed to our well-being” (268-9). The implications for Christology of this view are of course deleterious; thought through, it is evident that they would end in a new Nestorianism: Nestorian results for precisely inverse reasons—safeguarding “humanity” from contamination. Such a view of the Cross/Eucharist cuts directly against Tanner’s primary Christological intuition.

One wishes she would have been able to negotiate more directly with the biblical material itself on sacrifice, especially, for example, in the Letter to the Hebrews and in St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (which revolutionized the notion of sacrifice altogether, not simply “spiritualizing” it, but actually *incarnating* it all the more in the concrete activity of human life *coram Deo*), if not also in the Apocalypse of St. John (for which the sacrifice of Christ, and the Church’s *participation* in it through her travails on earth, is the cosmic-liturgical center of creation and history). A return to Scripture would protect Tanner against “dividing the Christ” of the Cross/Eucharist and her *de facto* apotheosized humanity, which, at worst, would seem to “lord it over” God. This observation points out yet again the abstract character of Tanner’s Christology in its application, and especially what we could call the still “extrinsicist” relation of Christ to the life of believers in the Church (which again only works against her otherwise superior Patristic retrieval of participatory Christology), for it minimizes at least one half of its participation in the full Christ—that is, in his death. A straightforwardly Pauline theology of baptism and its underlying ecclesiology, highlighting their radical realism, ought to be enough to point out Tanner’s limitations here: surely if we *participate* in the Christ, as his Body, then

our participation in his Cross (death) is as much required, and indeed, according to Paul, is a prerequisite, for our *participation* in his resurrection (cf. Tanner's undeveloped remarks on baptism, pp. 198-9). Such *concrete and fully human participation* is a passage from the regime of death to the kingdom of life and it is the Christologically shaped key to history. There is no resurrection without the requisite passage of death. We do not escape the trial of death, and the historical passage *through* the reign of death because of Jesus; rather, we are given the strength and power to persevere and overcome where Adam failed (for Christ succeeded in his garden and thereby renewed human nature for its *essential* task of synergistic, *free* collaboration with the Triune God, which in Adam was reduced to "opposition" or even "competition"). For if life-giving love in freedom is what the divine Persons share in their "absolute" sharing of the divine nature, and if it is the likeness to this freedom that is corrupted in humanity as a result of sin (since sin is this very corruption that reduces human freedom to the parody of competition with God), then the passage from opposition to synergy requires the sacrifice of absolute obedience, the gift of self, even through suffering and to its death (like Abraham's gift of Isaac, internalized and suffered through completely in Christ). Only in this way, at least for classical Christological reflection, is human freedom and dignity not supplanted, but transformed and elevated, precisely as freedom, to its destiny as absolute (human) freedom in God. Suffering and sacrifice even unto death are, on this view, paradoxically marks of a truly non-competitive account of the Creator-creature relations (and surely it accords more fully with both the "humanity" of the biblical material and human experience!), whereas the denial of the redemptive aspect of suffering harbors a secret "competition" at the very heart of the question, namely freedom. These are, of course, not easy lines to write. Yet what is true and good in a fallen world is often hidden, and agonizingly so. Even theological reflection itself, perhaps above all, must fully "enter into" this mystery. The "sacrifice of obedience" which imprints humanity anew with the mode of the Eternal Son's

existence from within the very “heart of darkness” at the base of human experience in opposition to God *freely* elevates human freedom to the full freedom of love.

My remarks here suggest that Tanner ought to take history (where the meaning of creation unfolds and where the incarnation happened, where she writes and where her audience lives) and especially the mystery of iniquity itself (where humanity suffers, creation groans and God’s love and justice seem far away) more seriously as fundamental elements to her Christology. In light of the travails of history, and the entrance of God into it, Tanner’s “Christ the key” seems too intellectually detached, too flat and mechanistic. The concept of sacrifice and atonement, at least biblically speaking, ought to be the place where the grit, humanity, and full historicity of the Incarnation as atonement ought to come out with full force. And an ecclesiology as radical as the incarnation will emerge here as well. There is nothing, of course, in her participatory Christology that directly cuts against this kind of development; rather it seems to be, at least here a result of her concern to use it as a means to overcome the social repercussions of traditional atonement theories, as developed in the theologies of womanists and feminists, which of course ought to be negotiated with full care, yet *never* at the expense of the Scriptural witness and of the full “historicity” of the Incarnation and atonement. Tanner’s appeal to “historical complexity” and the “historical humanity” of the incarnate Word (cf. pp. 261, 263, etc.) is not yet enough, because it separates Christ’s sufferings from our own simply by refusing to allow our own suffering a (participatory) soteriological place and thus undoing, as I already mentioned, the very theology of baptism and even the anthropology/ecclesiology of St. Paul. Could it really be that the patristic “metaphysics” of incarnation is more directly tied to a theology of baptism and of an ecclesiology that is just as universal? What I offer here of course is an interpretive judgment of Tanner’s position—one that she would strongly disagree

with—but the importance of raising the question ought not be underestimated, since here it may very well be the case after all that we risk a sort of backdoor docetism that even womanism and feminism are at least designed to avoid, and that is the very opposite of what a participatory Christology requires.

Such an observation raises the specter of what may turn out to be a deeper problematic in Tanner's thought. Following my practice in this review I will only introduce it here. Tanner's treatment of the various atonement theologies of tradition considers each one as an "image" (cf. p. 247). The "classical images of the cross" are mere images, that is, are *extrinsically* connected to something ineffable of which they signify, it seems, in a non-participatory way. This is fine if we want to talk about mere "theories" of the atonement, but if we are to talk about such theologically significant "images" as sacrifice, obedience of the Son, economic exchange, etc., then a more profound account is needed—that is, unless biblical images are things we can replace at our own convenience or even *as a result* of our own requirements placed upon the meaning of love, of justice, of the divine and of grace. However, it is surely the very meaning of these concepts fundamental to the meaning of our humanity that the images of Scripture, even and most especially its difficult ones, are given to address. A non-participatory conception of biblical imagery and signification contradicts patristic views of theological signification as well as those, it is needless to say, implied by the liturgy. With the biblical material on sacrifice and on the Cross especially (and on liturgy and the Eucharist as well), such a non-participatory theory of the image falls far short. In fact, we ought to observe, such an extrinsicist conception of biblical image contradicts the robust theology of the image developed in the first chapter of the book. Yet for patristic thought, there is a profound and living link between the incarnation of the Word in the flesh and the inspiration of the Word in the biblical text. In short, Tanner's theology of language, her theology of theo-*logy* first of all, ought to be developed in order to catch up with her

Christology—this ought to be undertaken, I would suggest, by a return to Cyril of Alexandria, particularly as explored by Marie-Odile Boulnois in her remarkable monograph, *Le paradoxe trinitaire chez Cyrille d’Alexandrie. Herméneutique, analyses philosophiques et argumentation théologique* (1994). As implied throughout this review, something similar applies here: the judgment of a theology ought to be upon its ability for revision based on an ever-greater commitment to revelation’s priority in judgment over our own theological judgments. Such revision is of course always rooted in a dialogue, of course (that is, between divine revelation and human reflection), one that is already intrinsic to revelation itself, and thus ongoing. As Tanner seems to recognize, to preclude the critique of one’s present theological judgments by an always-deepening recognition of the priority of revelation, precisely by recognizing its essential dialogical form (whether or not my critique raised here has any merits or not), is no longer theology but something else that we might as well call mere politics.

The last chapter is probably the weakest of the book. Here Tanner is concerned with re-navigating the question of the normative means of the Spirit’s work in the lives of believers. Does the Spirit work primarily in the mode of immediate, exceptional events, and by interior illumination beyond critique, or in the midst of and within normal human activity, the “often messy and conflict-ridden public processes of give and take in ordinary life” (p. 274)? It is interesting, and beneficial, that Tanner classifies conceptions of the Spirit’s activity according to whether there is a “competitiveness” (explicit or merely implied) between divine and human action. It is the second view, she says, that bears the conception that “the Spirit does not begin to work where the ordinary sorts of human operation come to an end” (p. 274). As one would have guessed, Tanner sides with the second position, assembling an impressive amount (at least for one whose theological expertise is in Patristics) of mainly Puritan critiques of “establishment religion” coupled with classical Anglican articulations of its

“middle way” between a institutionalism and radical subjectivism to underpin the view that the Spirit’s action and human fallibility are not at odds. Here Tanner rightly notes that the bifurcation of subjective and objective conceptions of the Spirit “has everything to do” with some fundamental elements of modern religious thought that can be described in various ways, such as the split between interior and exterior, the personal realm of the essentially religious, fundamentally irrational and the public realm of scientific reason, and most especially then, with “the bifurcation between faith and reason that breaks out in modern times” (p. 276). The upshot of Tanner’s commitment to the metaphysics of non-competition in the work of the Spirit, inasmuch as it implies a God who “gets his hands dirty” in the mess of human action and does not contradict or supersede such fallibility, is that there is a concomitant lack of resolution regarding theological beliefs and their practical implication. Hence any religious principle considered objectively absolute or unmediated is all the less valuable (even if necessary at some level) as concerns practical and political decisions. The point is to neutralize the political significance of any attempt to transcend human fallibility by equating the Spirit’s authority with specific, historically localized judgments, whether, for example, in “unbending scriptural witness” or “unwavering church tradition” (p. 289). Here “reform” or self-revision in the light of experience is the key to progress in the knowledge of the Spirit’s work. Because the Spirit is “at work everywhere” in the church, in its practical life, it is “opened up to greater flexibility and greater appreciation for the surprise of the new” (292). Such reform is fundamentally a “public” and democratic process, as truth is a process of complex mediation, unfolding through time along the path carved out through the history of the community’s life. The question raised, of course, by this view, is whether this “modest” (295) and “invisible” (299) account of the Spirit is itself open to a “metacritique.” The implied reference to Hamann is of course critical (and here lies, indeed, our “key to the abyss”). For here the “prophetic” would seem inevitably to be equated with the community’s present

self-conception, *inasmuch* as it sees itself “opening up” traditional authorities, which are measured by the standard of whatever is considered to be the common voice. And do we not encounter here a near perfect justification of the ecclesiological convictions of progressive American Episcopalianism? This observation is not a critique, necessarily, for what else are we to expect from a thoughtful Episcopalian theologian? However, speaking wholly outside of her tradition, I would simply like to raise in all modesty and good will the following question: Are we not here again in the realm of an “extrincisist” Christology, and indeed, a “competitive” account of the Spirit’s work where human fallibility totally swallows up the freedom of the divine and calls it “non-competitive”? What separates us here from a *de facto* Nestorianism recapitulated on the level of pneumatology?

Whatever the answer to this question, this chapter would have been much more interesting if more difficult questions were addressed head on, questions that directly pertain to the heart of a Christology that rightly elevates the human to an overwhelming, theological dignity: if God’s grace, in the mode of the Spirit’s presence in human affairs, does not depend on, respond to, or in any way “compete” with human action for the accomplishment of its purposes, then, as we all believe, *how* does human action matter? Why is human freedom (implicitly made fundamental to an account of human nature essentially malleable) then not an epiphenomenon or at least reduced in stature? How can there be any standard for human thought and action, outside of itself, and by which it can be measured, on this account? Is there possible here any final weight to human decisions, to human life in the historical process that depends on them? Are not love and justice thereby evacuated of any final meaningfulness since we are here left with no capacity to allow the continual reformation of our preconceptions of what love and justice are and therefore what the human is, particularly the significance of its existential depth (surely a modern insight)?

Does the Pauline warning to avoid “quenching” or “grieving” the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19 and Eph. 4:30, respectively) make sense on this scheme? What does such a scheme imply about the Cross, and therefore about the weight of human responsibility and of sin in a world where humanity is the image of God (to gloss Augustine in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*) by virtue of its “prerogative” of authority over all other creatures (L, III, XX, 30)? It is here that the “subjective” account of the Spirit swallows the “objective” completely, and paints the picture of a Spirit who is intrinsic to and unable to transcend the religious experiences of this or that community. What if these religious experiences and the convictions of a community are dangerously self-identified with the “prophetic” (for the sake of political ends)? How do we avoid a *radical* democratization and thus relativization of religious truth, where the measure of truth itself is ever only intrinsic to our individual and corporate religious experiences, however “publicly” tested? Yet the non-contradiction of human and divine action, where (metaphorically or literally) eternity is at stake (as in Aquinas, for example) does not reduce the irreducible significance of human action, nor does a non-competitive account of the Spirit’s work in the world require a Protestant odium to an ecclesiastical *magisterium* (whether or not such is considered valuable). In fact, the argument could be made in just the opposite direction: just such an objective “guarantee” of the Spirit’s activity alone can overcome the limitations of the subjectivization of the Spirit and underwrite a truly non-competitive account of divine and human action based on the Incarnation, where the radical fallibilist position falls short in refusing the Spirit of God the power and authority to contradict or work over and against human failures. Would such a view take into account in a deeper way the real significance of human action, the priority of grace (God’s *incarnational* commitment to the creation that presses through history by virtue of the concrete participation of the Body in the Head) and thereby not run roughshod over the irreducible “infinity” of the human will simply by virtue of a vague commitment to the ultimately non-competitive

nature of divine and human operation? One wonders, on this view, whether Tanner has taken into account the necessarily *eschatological* quality that surely colors the metaphysics of divine and human relations on the plane of human history, precisely by virtue of an *incarnate* Christological concentration, in a way that Balthasar, for example, acknowledges and faces head on in his *Theo-Drama*. As much of the Pauline and Johannine material is concerned to tell us, and which can be seen when its proper debt to apocalyptic traditions is acknowledged, it is in the end that the *mysterion* or key to the meaning of human life and history is divulged (which we know because the end has been *introduced* into history in Christ by his Cross and Resurrection); yet we have only been given enough to trust in such a *final* non-competition between the violent oscillations and convulsions of human history and the divine purposes, and we cannot presume to know how it works—for such would require a God’s-eye-view that is not ours within history, and we would only reduce it to the horizon of our own intellectual powers (even if we identify them with Christ). Even the Apocalypse of St. John veils the vision of the end in the thick smoke of images and symbols proper to the cosmic temple that is heaven and earth and the wild drama of human history that unfolds upon it as a stage, manifesting the hidden war between the legions of the abyss and the “Lamb, looking as though he was slain.” Perhaps it is Chesterton’s “wild truth, reeling but erect” after all—and nothing less—that serves as a key that fits the lock of the arcane and fabulous mystery of human existence in Christ, before the majesty of the Triune God.

DRY BONES DRY. BUT WHERE IS CHRIST IN FLESH AND BONE?

Let us, for a moment, cease trembling and return to the beginning and ask again: who or what is Christ, according to Tanner? What is the shape of this “skeleton key” that unlocks the mystery of God and humanity, and in doing so

purports to vivify the otherwise dry and scattered bones of inter-confessional debates? In keeping with her style, Tanner's use of this metaphor is probably the most straightforward and perhaps gains its force by virtue of its (here at least) appropriate vagueness. Her "Christ" is simply a "theological vision" (p. vii): standing for God's universal and unconditional desire to communicate his life to humanity, thereby giving humanity to itself in the fullness of the divine life. Christ is the way to cut through the Gordian knot of debates in theology that have become hopelessly tangled. One of the basic problems with this work is, as we have repeatedly seen, the fact that Tanner's Christ remains wholly in the realm of the abstract (despite her assertions to the contrary). Yet such a blunt blade would hardly cut through anything. Given, in the chapter on politics, to take an example, Christ is only *the Key* to the "translation" of the perfect community of Trinitarian life to relationships in human community (and keys must remain generalized and consistent in their contours, especially if they are to unlock multiple doors, as Christ is asserted as doing throughout the chapters of this book), and as such must remain without much of the flesh that the Gospels give us in Christ's symbolic actions and teachings. Her Christ, as "theological vision," tends to remain only a skeleton as opposed to a living person, *Christos Pantokrator*, the Lord of history, who, "conquering every enemy," sits enthroned in glory "at the right hand of the Father," the slain Lamb and High Priest of the cosmos who "holds in his hand the keys to Hades and death." Instead, she presupposes a Christ that every modern reader presumably more or less already agrees with. She makes a fundamental appeal to this basic picture: "Jesus' own healing, reconciling, and life-giving relations with others" (p. 240)—though she nowhere gets more concrete than that. Is this the Christ of the Gospels? Well, yes, of course, but is that what "Christ" *fully* is for us—the pathway to human flourishing and fulfillment: a means to our end? Well, yes, he is *that*, thank God, but *how* he is such is what really matters. To reach a real picture of *that*, and I dare say to encounter the living Jesus, theology must itself dare to become

cruciform. What of that “grace” that “costs” (to invoke Bonhoeffer)? What we paint with our theologies may very well always be a distorted image, though distortions, exaggerations, heavy shading, are not without much theological value, and probably necessary in order to capture at least an authentic glimpse of the Christ who always exceeds our grasp. But what of the Christ, the Son of David who burns with fiery justice, the prophet of Jerusalem’s destruction, the cleanser of the Temple, who “comes not to bring peace but the sword,” and “to divide fathers from their children and children from their fathers,” the “sign of contradiction” who embodies in his person the Great Day of the Lord anticipated by the prophets? Do we want this Lord who gives his blood for us *to swallow* and his flesh for us *to choke down* in real space and time? Any Christology must wrestle with the whole portraiture of Christ that the Gospels gives; it must wrestle and it must persevere through the night that collapses our preconceptions and wounds us; it must not let go until the blessing of understanding comes. Tanner would certainly agree that the Christ of the Gospels must perennially be allowed to smash through our tenuous and paltry constructions, for he passes through them to reach us. As Barth reminded us, so he reminds theologians first of all: Christ is Lord, we are not. The first task of the theologian, it would seem to me—but I confess, I am young, and hardly a theologian—is to digest this one great, all-encompassing fact, and to give oneself without reserve and without fear to this very Jesus who is, through the lineaments of the whole of Scripture, the true “face of God” *pro nobis*.

I suggest therefore that the problems associated with Tanner’s work outlined above may best be reached by way of her abstract notion of grace, which, in order to be adequate, must, precisely as a *work* of theology, sub-mit (L. *submittere*) itself to the data of revelation and take the shape of the Christ of the Gospels. Second, following this problematic and indeed intrinsic to it, is the concomitant question of ecclesiology. As we have seen above, many readers of

Tanner's works have asked, and continue to ask: where is the Church? Even here, throughout the text, the Church remains as abstract as the Christ does, if not more so. Aside from some generalized images such as "life-brimming, Spirit-filled community" and the like, there is, as I said, hardly a word on the *ecclesia* in the book. In fact Tanner mostly replaces the role of ecclesiology with repetitions of 19th century moralizing accounts of the "kingdom" as "a community of mutual fulfillment in which the good of one becomes the good of all" (p. 241). Again, such is indeed laudatory, but hardly the full story. There is likely a connection here between Christology and ecclesiology that should be *fleshed out*. For such an endeavor, for my part, I would recommend the following Augustinian rule: any ecclesiology is only as good as the concreteness of one's Christology, *and vice versa*, since Christ is the Head of the Body, itself united to its Head, bearing the material grittiness of the eternal Incarnation through history in a sacramental and thereby realist manner.

Next to the dancing candle of this work, one ought to hold the flaming torch that is Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism*, where "the Catholic, the all-embracing" of the Church becomes (according to Joseph Ratzinger's preface) "the key" to unlocking the integral unity of the relation between the Trinitarian God and humanity in the one Christ and only thus to human life in its social, moral, economic, political and all other practical particularities: the incarnate catholicity of the Church manifests and is united with the very incarnate catholicity of Christ. This book shows precisely what is still missing in Tanner's avowed "internalizing" and "redeployment" (p. ix) of patristic Christology, namely the fundamental patristic intuition of the ecclesiological concreteness of the Christological "common destiny of humanity" (to quote the subtitle of the English translation of de Lubac's work). In other words and in sum: to separate Christ from the Church only leads to an abstract Christ. Therefore, precisely

what is missing in Tanner's Christology, considered as the key to understanding divine and human relations, marks the scope of its failure.

Second, a "personal" engagement with the man who is the Creator-come-to-save in his incarnate historicity—had by way of a thinking reception of *the faith that is Scripture's own*, that is, by an "incarnate" immersion of thought in the words, parables, symbols, events, and narratives of the Gospels themselves and hence a recapitulation of this living Word by a life become transparent to this Word, overflowing in words that give witness to it—is surely the fundamental work of theology, as the Fathers attest. Let us hope that in future work Tanner will undergo the risk and challenge of exposing her theology in the fullest way to Jesus of Nazareth in the Christological fullness of the rich diversity of Scripture's "symphonic" witness. In this way, surely, she will only come to understand more deeply the thought of the Early Church "from within." Only then can an ecclesiology—inseparable from a Christological account of the human, and surely no less scandalous—be adequately and faithfully developed. The Christ of this book, and of Tanner's work to date, can only be a placeholder for what, seen in this light, becomes a necessary labor that would become the true test and measure of her thought.

The brilliance and significance of Tanner's *oeuvre* will probably finally be found in the way it ties together a classical and vibrant Christocentrism, surely at the heart of Christianity, with a progressivist social program. Christ is the Key, to understanding God, humanity and therefore *what it means to live in this world*: surely Christ means nothing if he does not teach us this. Tanner's work springs from this sound intuition. The key question is whether Tanner is right in the practical results of her Christology, that is, in her hermeneutic of the Christ. Does Christ the Key (A) entail a post-liberal liberation theology (C)? Such is the wholly un-argued *argument* that defines, I would suggest, her entire theological project, manifest through the studies of this book. What matters here, of course,

is (B), the implicit passage from (A) to (C). It is the identification of (A) and (C) that her entire project is one consistent, and often beautiful and striking elaboration. I believe, for what it is worth, that anyone committed to the Christ of the Gospels ought to have serious reservations concerning Tanner's theological conclusions, mainly for the reasons made evident through this report. Perhaps the end is the place to offer a summary of a tentative assessment raised by the critical dimensions elaborated above: the limitations and blind spots of Tanner's no less important and profound contribution to 21st century theology are probably best seen in her construction of a post-liberal liberation theology on a traditional Christological infrastructure: her flesh to his "skeleton." Here grace is defined primarily in patristic neo-Platonic terms (though tipping the hat to Protestant wariness of "divinizing language"—thus somehow appeasing it?) as "strong" participation in "what we are not," that is, the divine life, by way of "attachment" of our human nature to it in Christ. Yet this is underpinned by a generalized affirmation of God's "unconditional love," which is arguably separated from an adequate account of justice and truth—*that is*, one that would transcend its simple identification with the political aims of postmodern liberalism. Harsh words again, perhaps too much so: let the reader (and author) forgive me. My judgment on the matter is only secondary to be sure. What matters is the question raised by the "problematic" identified here.

Yet surely the debate lies here and nowhere else. It is to Tanner's credit that she has not only identified what is at stake, but also continues to propose a hermeneutic of the Christ that we must agree to be a compelling theological vision. It certainly fits very well with our late modern, liberal understanding of the meaning of human persons and of life together in the world; in fact, we could say that her Christ powerfully *incarnates* the liberal values that we cannot help but presuppose, and in shadowy ways shape who we are today and certainly what we think and do. There is nothing in Tanner's Christ, as abstract

as it is, that calls them into question; rather, they are only justified by means of their identification with Jesus of Nazareth himself. This is the original liberal move. Is such inevitable for theologians? Perhaps to some degree. But let us console ourselves, as we contemplate Jesus from within the confines of our linguistic and hermeneutic cells, with the rapturous memory of Albert Schweitzer. The fact that her work raises such a question and demands an answer from us all makes Kathy Tanner a noteworthy theologian; it makes *Christ the Key* a “must-read” book—but if there exists some holy sage in our day who has glimpsed the *light of the world* as it burns, lifted up and resplendent, outside of the dark confines of our stuffy abstractions and feeble constructs, let them speak! And may we be given the grace to hear them—no matter what we take the ephemeral shadows dancing on the wall to imply.