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# God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?, by Kathryn Tanner

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## Peer Reviewed

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**GOD AND CREATION IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: TYRANNY OR EMPOWERMENT?** By Kathryn Tanner. New York: Blackwell, 1988. Pp. 196. \$39.95.

Like all generalizations, speaking of a "Yale school" of theological interpretation may conceal more than it reveals. But Tanner's interesting methodological proposals share at least a family resemblance to a "Yale" approach in their insistence on the priority of scriptural meaning and their suspicion of resolving the modern crisis of theology by appeal to an experiential grounding of the theological task. T.'s book is a theoretical extension and particular application of the culture-linguistic rule theory detailed in G. Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984).

T. responds to the fragmented state of Christian identity in the post-Enlightenment period by sketching a variation on Lindbeck's methodological theme. She is confident that a close analysis of the workings of Christian discourse through the ages will exhibit the acceptable parameters within which authentic Christian identity flourishes. T. proposes a method which functions as a "qualified transcendental argument"—an approach which intends to establish the possibility of the meaningfulness of Christian discourse but whose principles are neither necessary nor unique. In this respect T. eschews the a priori character of transcendental deduction in the Kantian tradition and embraces the more modest approach of empirical examination and description, which, she believes, will allow the regulative assumptions of Christian discourse to show through. The test case that T. employs is the God-world relationship, and, more specifically, the relationship between God and creatures.

The early Christian appropriation of the Greek philosophical tradition provides T. with evidence sufficient for the articulation of two rules which serve as the doctrinal grammar of the God-world relationship: (1) "avoid both a simple univocal attribution of predicates to God and world and a simple contrast to divine and non-divine predicates"; (2) "avoid in talk of God's creative agency all suggestions of limitation in scope or manner" (47). The principal contribution of T.'s book is to show how these rules function in a variety of theologico-cultural circumstances. T. illustrates cogently how theologians as different as Irenaeus, Aquinas, Schleiermacher, Rahner, and Barth are faithful to the rules of divine transcendence and immanence while yet articulating remarkably different theological stances, a demonstration that brings life to Lindbeck's theoretical claim that the objectivity of the rule is not impervious to change. Indeed, T. contends that it is from the consistent stability of the tradition's grammar that doctrinal diversity unfolds (32).

Further evidence of the wide latitude of theological discourse permissible in the cultural-linguistic approach is provided in T.'s extended

discussion of God and the efficacy of creatures. T. draws on the work of Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth to exemplify the inevitable mutuality of the rules at work in particular theological applications, as well as the consequences for particular theologies of applying the rules negatively or positively, i.e. stressing God's transcendence and majesty while diminishing claims on behalf of human dignity *coram Deo* or vice versa. Here Roman Catholic and Reformation Protestant positions on justification serve as the backdrop for T.'s analysis, the conclusions of which reflect the ecumenical consensus of the 1983 statement *Justification by Faith* by the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue group.

T.'s concluding chapters argue that the modern period has witnessed a departure from the grammar of meaningful theological discourse about God's relationship to the creaturely world, and that the skewed environment of Pelagianism resulting from this departure must be consciously addressed as theologians apply the traditional rules in a contemporary setting. This "rhetorical stance" (161) is necessary in T.'s view to parry the untraditional assumptions of unnamed "revisionist theologians" who, in emphasizing the dignity of the creature, forsake traditional claims for a transcendent God (164).

In spite of its unnuanced judgments about the liberal trajectory of modern theology, T.'s work is a valuable resource for current discussions of theological method. She has elucidated well the range of the cultural-linguistic approach, and her understanding of theologies as strategic applications of the regulative tradition does much to illustrate the limitations of naively foundational theologies. As much as I appreciate her work, however, the persuasiveness of her methodological proposal might be attributed to the relatively uncontroversial nature of the doctrine that serves as her test case. One could argue against T. that there are doctrines utterly central to the tradition of the faithful (the doctrine of Christ could serve as an example) which exhibit not only an applicative but also a regulative diversity. T. would be suspicious of any modern theological example invoked as an illustration of the regulative diversity of the tradition. But perhaps the various Christologies preserved in the canon provide examples of normative diversity that is regulative and not simply applicative in nature. For any such case to be made consistently according to T.'s empirical method, one would need to cite evidence from the entire tradition and not assume too quickly, as T., despite her disclaimer, does, that a completely unified doctrinal grammar abides in some dimension of premodern theology.