

Article

Negotiating Purity and Impurity of Religion and Economy: An Empirical Contribution to Kathryn Tanner's *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*

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Abstract: Kathryn Tanner's book *Christianity and the new Spirit of Capitalism* generated an interesting debate about the relationship between Christianity and capitalism, as exemplified by the four review essays—by David Cloutier, Nicole M. Flores, Philip Goodchild, and John E. Thiel, respectively—published in *Modern Theology* in 2019. While the responses contain many interesting critical points, this article focuses on two particular trajectories in the debate that indirectly demand an empirical engagement with Tanner's work. One strand of criticism charges that Tanner offers too generic examples of the economic reality that she examines, while her description of Christianity is too specific without being contextualized. The second strand argues that Tanner makes a dichotomy between a religious project and an economic project, which leads to the construction of a "pure" Christian conduct. This article continues this debate by fleshing out the issues of purity and impurity through an empirical study of two Christian networks, the Economy of Communion and Business as Mission. Using Bruno Latour's account of modernization, the main finding is that the two logics, purity and impurity, continually configure the relationship between religion and economy. We further discuss these findings in relation to Tanner and her critics, and argue that theological ethical studies of the relationship between Christianity and economy would benefit from starting with empirical studies of the actual intertwining of religion and economy. Tanner convincingly argues that in order to challenge capitalism one has to work for structural, political changes and not only improve conditions within the economic system. However, this does not necessarily imply the use of pure and abstract normative principles. Normative ethical insights that are developed through analyses of everyday religious–economic practices may turn out to be as convincing.

Keywords: Kathryn Tanner; Bruno Latour; empirical theology; business as mission; economy of communion

1. Introduction

Kathryn Tanner's book *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (Tanner 2019), which is based on her Gifford lectures, has been widely praised. It has been described as hugely important due to its particular way of critiquing capitalism and because it offers, as Rowan Williams puts it, an "alternative way of imagining human well-being, grounded in a sophisticated and provocative theological vision".¹ As well as being an important theological contribution in itself, Tanner's book has generated an

¹ See Rowan Williams, (Tanner 2019, cover page).

interesting debate about the relationship between Christianity, or religion in general, and economy, as exemplified by the four review essays—by David Cloutier, Nicole M. Flores, Philip Goodchild, and John E. Thiel, respectively—published in *Modern Theology* in 2019.²

In this article, we will continue this debate by providing an empirical contribution, which has thus far been missing. Although there are many interesting critical points and valuable trajectories in the four responses published to date, these very responses implicitly demand an empirical engagement and critique of Tanner's work. One strand of critique charges that Tanner, in her way of creating "ideal types", risks treating too generic examples of the economic reality that she is criticizing. Meanwhile, her description of Christianity is too specific, without being contextualized. The second strand points out that in her analysis Tanner risks constructing a "pure" Christian conduct, as she presents a strong dichotomy between a religious project and an economic project.

Here, we flesh out the issues of the purity and impurity of Christian practices in relation to economic practice. This calls for an empirical consideration, which we will provide by looking at specific cases where these issues arise. This means that we will not discuss Tanner's work in detail; that has already been done admirably. Instead, based on the empirical findings of a qualitative study of two Christian networks, the Economy of Communion (EoC) and Business as Mission (BAM) (in which we unearthed how the two logics of *purity* and *impurity* continually configure the relationship between religion and economy), we want to discuss the implications of these findings in dialogue with Tanner and her critics. The purpose of this article, therefore, is twofold: to elaborate on the relationship between religion and economy in two specific social practices and to theorize about the implications of the empirical findings for theological ethics.

For the empirical study, we have focused on two cases in which the relevant practices are at once economic and religious. More specifically, we analyze how the Roman Catholic movement the EoC and the Evangelical Protestant movement BAM construe the relationship between religion and economy in work through their official documents. This means that our analysis takes place at a policy level. The policy discourses are, of course, not a mirror of actual interactions, but they are understood here as parts of the larger practices of the EoC and BAM.

It is important to note that we will not discuss or make claims about the relationship between religion and economy generally or conceptually but in specific Christian social practices. In that way, we will not study theological beliefs or how religion should be understood but how religion is enacted and construed in practices. Furthermore, we will use both "Christianity" and "religion" when writing about the enacted Christianity in the empirical material. This means we will not discuss how theological arguments are framed in economic terms. When we use the word "economy", we refer to economic activities and how economic resources and affairs are conducted and described in practice. Nonetheless, as we shall see, our empirical considerations are relevant for Tanner's argument and demonstrate the importance of contextual and empirical specificity for theological reflections on the relationship between Christian practices and economic activities.

In analyzing the intertwining of religion and economy, and the relationship between them, our theoretical interest lies in the processes often referred to as differentiation and dedifferentiation. Searching for dynamic concepts that allow for empirical complexity, we turned to Bruno Latour (Latour 1993) and his concepts of purity, impurity, and hybridity.

The main question explored in this article concerns how BAM and the EoC discursively construct and negotiate religion and economy in work and how religion and economy relate to each other. When and how are religion and economy separated, and when and how are they part of the same process?³ In the first part of the article, we will map the significant moments of the "Tanner debate" and

² In 2019, *Modern Theology* published four review essays discussing Tanner's *Christianity and New Spirit of Capitalism*. See (Cloutier 2019; Flores 2019; Goodchild 2019; Thiel 2019). Even though the review essays discuss Tanner's work together with Devin Singh's *Divine Currency* (Singh 2018), this article will focus on Tanner's work.

³ (Latour 1993).

elaborate on our theoretical perspectives. We will then present some methodological considerations and analyze the policy texts in question. Having presented the results of these findings, we will discuss possible implications for theological ethics in general and for the Tanner debate in particular.

2. Kathryn Tanner and the New Spirit of Capitalism

In *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (Tanner 2019), Tanner uses a kind of Weberian method to reverse Weber's famous argument. Instead of showing how Christianity helped to shape capitalism at its conception—by offering religious motives for capitalist demands—Tanner argues that religion, and particularly Christianity, can counteract the otherwise totalizing forces of capitalism. Christian beliefs and practices, Tanner explains, have the potential to form people “differently”, enabling them to resist the demands placed on them by capitalism. Beginning with the idea that religion can offer powerful psychological sanctions for economic behavior, Tanner articulates a Protestant “anti-work ethic” that she argues resists the link between human worth and profitability.⁴

How, then, is Christianity supposed to challenge capitalism? Tanner's alternative aims to address the inequalities in today's economy and to draw on theological resources that have the capability to shape individuals differently and thereby enable them to resist capitalism. The role of religion, then, is to challenge capitalism through its ideas and not through its practices. Even though Tanner argues against utopianism, we contend that her contribution is undoubtedly an alternative that proposes something completely different.

As mentioned, however much Tanner acknowledges and questions the complex relationship between religion and economy, she sharply distinguishes between them in her theological critique of capitalism. We will address the concerns that have been raised regarding Tanner's tendency to create “ideal types” and “dichotomous alternatives” in constructing this sharp divide.

The first strand of critique suggests that Tanner's description of the economic system is too generic and does not hold for everyday life, be it that of the poor or of regular workers. Flores argues that Tanner's project does not provide possible and realistic alternatives for those who are most oppressed. For example, Flores discusses how Tanner's anti-work ethic illustrates how finance-dominated capitalism leads people to develop a commodified relationship with their labor. However, “for those living on the brink of economic demise, this vision of the completely commodified self provides perhaps the only hope for making ends meet” (Flores 2019, p. 5). Similarly, David Cloutier criticizes her generic descriptions of economic life under finance capitalism; however, he does so from the perspective of “regular workers”. Cloutier argues that very few workers would match Tanner's description of finance capitalism because her examples are often “put in the most extreme terms” (Cloutier 2019, p. 3f). Even though Cloutier thinks Tanner is pointing at something distinctively problematic in the current economic system, he argues that as a Christian theologian working on economic critique she would benefit from examining “more precise dynamics”.⁵ Cloutier further argues that Tanner is “passing generic examples in large quantity without an attempt to drill down on them or sort them in some more nuanced way”.

Another aspect of Tanner's uncontextualized theology becomes apparent in how she talks about Christian faith and practices. John E. Thiel discusses how Tanner has left her fluid form of Christian identity—as is presented in *Theories of Cultures* (Tanner 1997)—and is now presenting a very confident portrayal of “Christian belief and practices” (Thiel 2019). Thiel is not worried about Tanner's change of position per se, but he is concerned that her presentation has a specific “evangelical accent” and that she is exaggerating a “very specific and minority style of Christian faith as typically Christian”.⁶

⁴ (Tanner 2019, pp. 4, 30).

⁵ (Cloutier 2019).

⁶ (Thiel 2019, p. 8f).

Entering the debate from a somewhat different angle, Philip Goodchild argues that Tanner, having sharply distinguished between an economic project and a religious project, is creating a “pure Christian conduct”. Goodchild criticizes Tanner for refusing to discuss how Christians are supposed to live out their calling in material practices and argues that she thereby is creating pure religion (Goodchild 2019, p. 4).

By refusing to discuss any material mediation of Christian life, Tanner’s project to articulate a pure Christian conduct, based around a grace which is entirely unlike the ways of this world, is premised upon, and helps to maintain, that sharp separation between economics and religion which is so characteristic of the Protestant world. ‘Grace remains untouched’, (133) safe and sound, immune to the struggles of the world, and in imitation of God, Christians are to become more and more unlike anything within the world—perhaps progressing towards being untouched in their souls. Both grace and the Christ who is to be imitated appear in Tanner’s account as transcendent signifiers, above and beyond any worldly or cultural meaning.⁷

Goodchild’s suggestion for how theology and economy should be studied can be seen as opposite to Tanner’s. Instead of studying the relationship between religion and economy as two a priori analytically isolated phenomena, Goodchild wants to understand the dynamics in hybrids.

Surveying these various strands of criticism, we find a concern about Tanner’s tendency to dichotomize and, concomitantly, to construct ideal types. Tanner risks construing Christian practices as more coherent or unified than they really are and presenting the economic and the religious as separate circulatory systems. However, Tanner’s critics do not concretely flesh out how an empirical consideration may modify or challenge parts of her substantive critiques of finance capitalism. We will return to Tanner and her critics towards the end of the article. In the next part, however, we will present an empirical study that provides just this sort of empirical contribution to the debate.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on Religion and Economy

In analyzing the intertwining of religion and economy and the relationship between them, our theoretical interest lies in the processes often referred to as differentiation and dedifferentiation. Searching for dynamic concepts that allow for empirical complexity, we turn to Bruno Latour (Latour 1993) and his concepts of purity, impurity, and hybridity. Simply put, Latour argues that modernization as a narrative of differentiation, dichotomies, and purity does not account for the hybridization processes and the hybrid, material-semiotic objects (quasi-objects) in empirical, everyday practices. In this, Latour is arguing against differentiation as an a priori analytical given. He also argues against de-differentiation as an a priori given. The modern account has had and still has a performative effect. When analyzing the relationship between religion and economy, one cannot merely understand religion and economy as dichotomous, pure, and separate entities or as isolated subjects. Neither can one understand them as aspects of the same processes. In many cases, religion is something other than economy, and economy often has nothing to do with religion. The question of impurity and purity is an empirical one. In some cases, religion and economy are interwoven, constituting hybrid objects and hybridizing processes; in other cases, they are quite separate.

Latour’s understanding of religion is useful in analyzing how religion is expressed in policy texts.⁸ Latour contrasts religion with beliefs about a transcendent reality (Latour 2001). Religion is localized neither in a distant transcendence nor in the individual cognition or mind. Religion is radically

⁷ (Goodchild 2019, p. 5).

⁸ It is important to note, however, that Latour has written extensively on religion and that our aim with this article is not to write theoretically about Latour’s scholarship on religion, nor are we building on *all* of his work on religion for our theoretical framework. While some of Latour’s texts on religion are quite open theoretically—see e.g., (Latour 2001, 2005) and the two first chapters in (Latour 2010)—other texts make a great effort to explain religion to other spheres—see e.g., (Latour 2013b, 2013a). Since this is an empirical study, we will primarily be in dialogue with texts on religion that are more

performative, something that is done and that has to be understood as actions in the sense of collective practice. Everyday empirical and objective religious practice is not a representation of something else, of a religious essence or core (Latour 2005). Furthermore, there is no separation between the spiritual and the material; religion involves interaction with quasi-objects, such as angels, books, and buildings. In addition, the agency is distributed; angels may make people act as well as the opposite (Latour 2010). Religion is impure in the sense that economic objects and practices may be part of religious practice. At the same time, religion is pure in the sense that religion cannot domesticate economy—or politics, for that matter.

In relation to economics, Latour argues that it now holds the role that religion once had in the Western world and that it is domesticating other regimes, such as politics and science. He argues that economics is the new transcendent religion, establishing the final and absolute laws. The laws of economics and capitalism, furthermore, are met either with a sense of fatalism or hubris (Latour 2014a). There is a sense of helplessness that there is no alternative for politics or everyday life other than abiding by the laws of economics. The enthusiasts, argues Latour, are blinded by the apparent possibilities of capitalism and are indifferent to its consequences. The worst consequence that Latour sees is how capitalism and economic laws legitimize the destruction of nature and climate (Latour 2014b), a topic that he writes about at length in his book *Down to Earth* (Latour 2018). Discussing globalization and capitalism, Latour argues that three phenomena in our time are closely connected: massive deregulation, growing economic injustice, and a systematic effort to deny climate change. These phenomena are further held together, argues Latour, by the conviction shared by some of the elite that the ecological threat is real and that the earth no longer will hold room for them and everyone else. This explains their sheltering from the world and their massive investment in climate denial.⁹ In light of this, Latour argues for a politics that does not lead towards either the global or the local, but towards the earth. What is needed is a balancing act between attaching oneself to a particular patch of soil on the one hand and having access to the global world on the other. “Attachment allows us to get away from the illusion of a Great Outside; detachment allows us to escape the illusion of borders.”¹⁰

Latour further questions how we could deem the project of modernization as “rational” or “materialist” when for two centuries it has “forgotten” that we are destroying the biosphere. He also questions how we could think of economic theories as “objective” when they are incapable of integrating the scarcity of resources into their calculations.¹¹

In our analysis, we look for hybrid objects and practices on one hand and for purified objects and practices on the other. We are particularly interested in how religion and economy are transformed (or “translated” to use Latour’s term). That is, we analyze which modes of impure and pure religion and economy are created through hybridization and purification practices. Furthermore, we distinguish between religion *as* practice and the practice *of* religion (Afdal 2013). In the first case, religion is understood primarily as performative and processual. In the second case, religion is primarily something that can be put into practice. In the search for hybrid religion–economy objects, we use Latour’s concept of quasi-objects.¹² Latour understands the quasi-objects in a broad context, as a way of breaking the dualism and dialectics between nature and society (Latour 1993). Quasi-objects

open theoretically. This means that we chose our theoretical conversation partner with the analysis of the empirical material in mind. Furthermore, this being an empirical study, we will not evaluate the different nuances in Latour’s texts on religion, nor will we try to offer a comprehensive description of all of Latour’s work. Instead, we use one substantial part of Latour’s scholarship in order to discuss our empirical material. For a full critical engagement with Latour’s writing on religion and its potential for political theology, see Timothy Howles’ doctoral thesis: (Howles 2018).

⁹ Donald Trump is a symbol of this flight by the ruling classes, argues Latour, and Trump’s pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement shows how climate change is at the heart of all geopolitical issues. The message from Trump, argues Latour, is that “We Americans do not belong to the same earth as the rest of you. Yours may be threatened; ours won’t be!” (Latour 2018, p. 3).

¹⁰ (Latour 2018, p. 93)

¹¹ (Latour 2018, p. 66)

¹² Latour is here following Michel Serres’ work on quasi-objects. See for instance: (Serres 2016).

are a rich analytical concept, emphasizing both the importance of objects and their hybrid character. Here we understand quasi-objects as empirical objects loaded with symbolic meaning that cannot be reduced to the sum of things and symbols. In the texts we analyze, quasi-objects are textual; that is, they are textually constructed.

4. Comments on Method

As mentioned, this article provides an empirical contribution to the “Tanner debate” through an empirical study of the EoC and BAM. The EoC is a Christian socio-economic movement that provides support for businesses or productive organizations of various juridical forms¹³ that aim to “eradicate social injustice to help build an economic system and a society of communion”.¹⁴ The movement was initiated in 1991 by Chiara Lubich (1920–2008), founder of the Catholic lay organization *Focolare*.¹⁵ In October 2015, the EoC had 811 member companies worldwide.

BAM is a relatively new movement within the Evangelical Protestant Church.¹⁶ The network is broadly described as a “for-profit commercial business venture that is Christian led, intentionally devoted to being used as an instrument of God’s mission (*mission Dei*) to the world, and is operated in a crosscultural environment, either domestic or international” (Johnson 2009, p. 27f). The Evangelical Lausanne Movement¹⁷ has organized two think tanks on BAM, and this article will focus on the work of that movement with BAM.¹⁸

The reason for choosing these two movements is that both provide interesting examples of the entanglement of religion and economy. In addition, the two movements have not yet been compared through empirical and critical analysis. The two networks also represent very different theological and cultural traditions; however, they share the aim of challenging the classical divide between “spiritual” and “worldly” and thereby between religion and economy.

BAM and the EoC have both published several policy documents and papers, and we have chosen official statements and guidelines for our material.¹⁹ All the relevant documents are published on the networks’ webpages and can therefore be considered to be the networks’ sanctioned voices. Because the documents have not been formally published, most of them are unnumbered.

The Lausanne Movement has run two think tanks on BAM: *Global think tank 1* (2002–2004) and *Global think tank 2* (2011–2013). The first think tank resulted in an official BAM report, *The Lausanne Occasional Paper on Business as Mission*. This 88-page document describes the theology behind the movement, its aim, and the opportunities and challenges for BAM.²⁰ This paper analyzes two parts of that document: the three-page text “What is Business as Mission” (BAM 2004b) and the five-page text “The Essentials of Good Business as Mission: 10 guiding principles” (BAM 2004a).

¹³ These include for-profits and non-profits; social and civil businesses; cooperatives; associations, etc. See (EoC 2020c)

¹⁴ (EoC 2020c)

¹⁵ *Focolare* was founded in Trent, Italy, during the Second World War. The movement sprang from the Roman Catholic Church but is today fairly ecumenical. The heart of the movement is the local *focolares*, groups of five to eight people who make a lifelong commitment to live as a community. Most of the people living in these communities have regular jobs and share all their possessions in common. Today, the movement is a global network and has developed internationally recognized NGOs. See (Gold 2010, pp. 46f, 52).

¹⁶ In this context, the expression “evangelical” refers to the big Protestant movement that brings together groups both within and outside the Anglican church that were formed by the awakenings in the 18th century and the non-fundamentalist but Bible-centered evangelical groups in the USA. See (Larsen and Treier 2007).

¹⁷ The Lausanne Movement was founded in 1974 at an international congress on mission and evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland.

¹⁸ While the EoC project is closely connected to the *Focolare* movement with its Christian communities, BAM is a more loosely connected network uniting businesspeople, scholars, and missionaries from different but mainly evangelical churches and organizations.

¹⁹ These documents have been chosen because they provide specific information about the self-descriptions of BAM and the EoC and practical instructions on how to run a business. However, other papers, books, and documents were also read in advance of this study to get a broader understanding of the two organizations.

²⁰ Even though several later reports are available on particular topics, a new official BAM report with guiding principles has not yet been written.

Many books, reports, and papers have been written on the EoC. The material we will focus on in our analysis comprises several shorter texts from the homepage on the movement's website that present the organization's self-description (EoC 2020a, 2020d): the 2017 annual report (EoC 2017) and the two-page text "Guidelines to running an Economy of Communion Business" (EoC 2020b).

In order to understand the dynamics between the different key concepts and the context of the discourses, we chose a thematic analytical approach (Ryan and Bernard 2003). First, we identified all sections that use concepts related to religion and economy. Second, we analyzed the kinds of religion and economy that are created in the texts. Third, we looked at the interrelation between the concept of economy and the concept of religion. Fourth, we reconstructed the interwoven economy/religion quasi-object.

The analysis is abductive in that, for instance, religion or economy was not an a priori theoretical given, and neither were the processes of difference or dedifference taken for granted. Still, we employed theoretically sensitizing concepts and conceptions, such as purification, impurification, and quasi-objects.

5. Business as Mission: Religion as Application

First, a theological premise for BAM is that God calls people to serve him through business and that businesses *in themselves* glorify God. However, in order to define the distinctiveness of the movement, BAM is described in relation and in contrast to "business as normal" (BAN). Although the emphasis is on the things that set BAM apart from BAN, there are overlapping principles that are described as the "characteristics of any good business".

Long term viability and success requires an unflinching commitment to excellence, and a reputation for hard work, honesty and fairness. This is a basic law of economics, and holds true regardless of whether the company is owned by a Christian. There are standard business practices and benchmarks of excellence that no business, including a kingdom business, can afford to neglect. (BAM 2004a)

According to this passage, there is "a basic law of economics" that is true for all businesses. To "work hard" and to "strive for excellence" are practices that no business aiming for success can disregard. We see here how a specific kind of work ethic is constructed as a core economic law that religion neither should nor could regulate because this law is constructed as something universally true. Economy is, it follows, construed as a pure dimension that in principle need not have anything to do with religion.

This way of constructing economy supports Latour's argument that economics today has taken on the role that religion once held in the Western world. Latour further argues that these laws of economics are met either by a sense of fatalism or by hubris; they generate feelings of total helplessness for those who are subjected to their decrees and complete disinhibition as to the long-term consequences of their actions for those who profit from them (Latour 2014a). This example from BAM can be seen as an example of the latter where the laws of economics and capitalism are understood as presenting possibilities without further in-depth discussion about the long-term consequences or any sense of belief that things could be different.²¹

Second, one important feature that distinguishes BAM is its aim of *holistic transformation*, which is described as "leverage[ing] every opportunity to bring spiritual, social, economic or environmental benefits to the community at large" (BAM 2004a). Instead of separating evangelism from social concerns, as if there was a divide between the "spiritual" and the "secular" or "physical" (BAM 2004b),

²¹ However, there are places in the document where the flip side of unrestricted capitalism is discussed. Evangelicalism, however, has generally been described as being closely connected with capitalism and the promotion of capitalism, as the evangelical focus on free will easily correlates with free choice in the marketplace. See, for example, (Lambert 2009, Chapter 1).

BAM wants to avoid such fragmentation and talks instead of a "truly holistic paradigm". A business in Asia provides an example:

The D weaving company started as a job creation project, targeting the economic, spiritual, and personal welfare of the villages in which it works. More than a decade after its founding, this commitment had outgrown the initial project and produced an additional commitment to founding schools. Today, D company supports more than ten schools, which have impacted over 600 families in 100 villages. It has also helped finance the construction of several churches in the surrounding villages. (BAM 2004a)

This case describes a business that supports various social projects. The holistic dimension is thereby exemplified by a business that is engaged in the local community and that financially supports different projects in the area. However, holistic transformation does not mean that the divide between the spiritual and the material or between religion and the economy is dissolved. On the contrary, the economy is still treated as something pure, as something that generates goods that can be used for development. In this case, religion might restrict or modify economic processes, but it does not essentially transform or redefine the economy.

Finally, in discussions about the distinctiveness of BAM compared to other businesses, the moral and ethical principles of the Bible are highlighted. Religion is further described as putting Christian teaching and ethical principles into practice.

Kingdom businesses operate on the moral and ethical principles of the Bible. These can be followed by all business people to their benefit. Kingdom businesses are enterprises whose purposes are to produce goods and to perform services that accomplish God's will on earth as revealed and proclaimed in the Bible. They intentionally apply Christ's teaching to their business life and practice [. . .] They (BAM practitioners) carefully evaluate their goods and services to ensure they do not conflict with the message of the gospel.²²

This quote shows how in BAM religion is seen as the moral and ethical principles found in the Bible and in Christ's teachings. These principles are something that businesses "operate on", "follow", and "apply". In other words, religion is defined not as a practice but as *putting* Christian principles and teachings into practice.

The moral and ethical principles are further described as bringing benefit to the individuals following those principles. This way of talking about religion in the workplace aligns with the literature on the "faith and work" movement and its often uncritical emphasis on the positive outcomes of integrating religion and business for both managers and employees.²³

6. Religion and Economy in Work

In BAM, religion is constructed as both a metaphysical phenomenon and a concern for the individual. Religion is a metaphysical given in the shape of religious language, texts, principles, and beliefs. This metaphysical reality may be accepted and believed by the individual, who in turn puts these Christian beliefs and ethical principles into practice. The emphasis here is on the practice of religion and not on religion as practice.

In BAM, economy is deontologically restricted by religious principles, meaning that while religion regulates the boundaries, it does not transform the economy. The emphasis is placed on the religious motives and purposes of individual entrepreneurs and businesses. BAM does not see the economy as a system that ought to be transformed; instead, it places ethical demands on individual actors.

²² (BAM 2004a)

²³ (Miller 2007). However, Glennon and Lloyd criticize Miller and argue that the broader ethical responsibilities of businesses when it comes to, for example, facilitating low-paid labor are neglected in this kind of literature (Glennon and Vincent 2017, p. 220).

The quasi-object BAM is stitched together using theological language. There are no significant changes in religion or economy—there are only adjustments—but there is an ontological compounding. To a large degree, religion and economy are constructed as separate and pure entities, constituting a weak quasi-object.

7. The Economy of Communion: Accepting Impurity

First, when talking about “today’s economy” a distinction is made in the EoC documents between current economic practice and theory and the culture of the EoC. Contemporary economy is described as having the potential to offer many people the opportunity for well-being. However, this has the potential to turn the whole world into “a giant supermarket” where relationships function like businesses and everything becomes geared towards the economic good (EoC 2020a). The culture of the EoC, however, is described as an alternative to the dominant lifestyle under capitalism (EoC 2020d) and as an answer to contemporary economic challenges (EoC 2020a).

In the Economy of Communion, the producers—entrepreneurs, workers, and their businesses—are inspired by principles rooted in a culture different than what prevails in today’s practice and theory of economics. We can define this ‘culture’ as a ‘culture of giving’ which really is the antithesis of a culture of having.²⁴

Here, the operations of current economic life are contrasted with those of the EoC. The first represents a pure economics and is not understood as a given. Relating this to Latour’s perspectives on economy, we see how the EoC is facing today’s economic life neither by means of fatalism nor hubris; it is expressing neither helplessness nor enthusiasm. Instead, it is promoting the culture of the EoC, which is described as a response and an answer to the challenges of today’s economy.

Second, we see how religion and economy are interwoven in the policy documents. The 2017 annual report includes a video recording of a speech that Pope Francis delivered on the 25th anniversary of the EoC in 2016. In the speech, Pope Francis talked about the two words *economy* and *communion* and how in our culture they are often separated and put in opposition to one another. The Pope argued that the EoC in life and in work shows that the two words are better when working alongside one another; he stated: “Economics become better, but so does communion since a spiritual communion becomes even fuller when it becomes a communion of goods, skills, and profits” (EoC 2017).

This quote shows how economy and religion are not held separately but are interwoven to constitute a hybrid object—the economy of communion. In this hybridization process, it is quite apparent—given the aim of the organization—that economics is seen to gain from being interwoven with religion. However, religion also gains from being understood as interwoven with economy.

Finally, the analysis shows that religion in the EoC is construed as practice. The network’s homepage includes the following description of the movement under the heading “What is the EoC?”

The Economy of Communion (EoC) [. . .] draws entrepreneurs, workers, directors, consumers, savers, citizens, scholars, economists, all committed, at various levels, in promoting a practice and an economic culture imprinted on communion, gratuity and reciprocity. Through their own example, they propose an alternative lifestyle to the dominant one within our capitalistic system. (EoC 2020d)

The focus here is on supporting a “practice” and an “economic culture” of communion, meaning that it is through what people do and say in communion that the EoC proposes an alternative lifestyle. In other words, the alternative is not created as a Christian ideal regarding economic life but as a practice-oriented economy of communion. It is through the members’ “own example” and

²⁴ (EoC 2020a).

through their participating in different practices that they suggest an alternative. The ethical ideal or force is understood as something that is implicit in and arising out of a specific community of practice.

Another example of religion as practice can be drawn from the “Guidelines to Running an Economy of Communion”. Here, businesses are instructed to adopt communion as a fundamental value at all levels of the organization. In order for this to happen, special attention is paid to the practice of interpersonal relationships within the business itself.

One of the fundamental objectives of an EoC business is to become a real community. To this end, periodical meetings are programmed to verify the quality of interpersonal relationships and to contribute to resolving situations of conflict, availing themselves of so called ‘instruments of communion’ [. . .] Special attention is given to physical health, sports, and care of the environment, since communion embraces nature and body as well. (EoC 2020b)

Here, religion is constructed as a community of practice. Religion is doing and making, not an application of pre-defined principles or convictions. In other words, it is meetings, sports, and health activities. Religious practice is not a representation of pure, metaphysical religion; religion is understood as collective practices. Everyday communion configures religion, and the good is implicit in everyday communion not as a transcendent, cognitively grasped ideal. Religion is, one must conclude, impure.

Finally, we will look at how the material surroundings in the workplace play an essential role in how spirituality is construed in the documents.

Beauty and harmony in the workplace are the first impression of an EoC business since communion is also beauty, without need for luxury. Surroundings are expressions of relational harmony and are themselves part of business relations [. . .].²⁵

In these documents, “communion” is a keyword for religion. Therefore, the quote can be read as “religion is also beauty”. Religion, aesthetics, and materiality are thus interwoven. In these texts, beauty and materiality are described in very mundane terms, as reflected in buildings, lighting, and ventilation. Furthermore, the agency is distributed between the material and the human, when beauty in the material surroundings proclaims the attention given to relationships.

8. Religion and Economy in Work

The analysis shows how in the EoC religion is translated as communion. Religion is collective, relational, and performative, and the good is implicit in the identity and practice of communion. Even though each individual worker, entrepreneur, client, and supplier is highly valued, the EoC does not understand religion as an individual phenomenon. In other words, the focus is not on how to put theological beliefs and values into practice. On the contrary, the Christian ethics underlying the EoC are implicit in the community. The emphasis is on religion as practice, not on the practice of religion. The analysis also demonstrates that within the EoC the economy is a community-ethical economy that focuses on practice. It is an impure economy, meaning it is translated and transformed by religion.

Using Latour’s concepts, it becomes clear that the EoC can be understood as a hybrid and impure quasi-object and not merely as a correlation between pure economy and pure religion. The quasi-object is more than and different from the sum of its parts: religion and economy. It is an impure translation. Furthermore, the quasi-object EoC is practically constituted as an object. The hybrid object of religion does not exist prior to, so as to be applied in, practice. The quasi-object is performed in everyday communities, and these practices shape how religion and economy are interrelated and changed.

²⁵ (EoC 2020b).

9. Two Logics that Configure Religion and Economy

In summary, our analysis of BAM and the EoC identifies two different configurations of the relationship between economy and religion that operate according to respective logics. One is the *logic of purity*; the other is the *logic of impurity*.

The logic of purity is characterized by an understanding of economy and religion as two separate spheres. The two may be in relation; one may, for instance, analyze the causal effect of one on the other. One may also argue normatively that one, for instance, religion, should affect the other, economy, in specific ways. The analytical given, however, is a relationship between two distinct and different spheres.

The logic of impurity frames religion and economy differently. It claims that neither religion nor economy are discovered as given and pure entities and that it is more fruitful to analyze the different practices where economy and religion are interwoven. The point is that these hybrid religion/economy practices cannot be explained or understood as the effects of one sphere on the other, nor as the interplay between them. Instead of starting analytically with a separation between religion and economy, one must start with the actual intermingling of the two and then trace their different transformations. This means that one can analyze how religion and economy are distinguished in concrete practices, but one cannot *separate* religion and economy.

The two logics have further implications. A pure logic implies a theoretical *abstraction* of pure religion and pure economy from fuzzy empirical practices. In addition to its practical consequences, such an operation of idealization may have grave consequences for both the level of analysis and for a theological critique of finance capitalism. Religion is almost invariably produced as a cognitive construct that individuals may understand. By contrast, an impure logic implies that religion and economy are *collective practices*. Here, religion is a bodily, material, affective, and distributed cognitive interaction. We can now turn to the relevance of these contrasting logics for theological ethics and the critique of finance capitalism.

10. An “Impure” Contribution to the Tanner Debate

We venture that our analysis regarding the logics of purity and impurity has implications for theological ethics, as we will demonstrate with respect to the Tanner debate. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, Flores and Cloutier criticize Tanner for being too generic in her critique of capitalism and for leaving out both the poor and the regular workers from her analysis. However, Thiel argues that Tanner is exaggerating a very specific style of Christian faith as “Christian” in her anti-work ethic, without contextualizing her Christianity.

We fully agree with this criticism and argue it has to do with Tanner’s working with a pure logic of religion and economy. Tanner is creating theoretical abstractions that—as Flores, Cloutier, and Thiel have already pointed out—stand aloof from the fuzzy empirical realities of different work practices as well as the variegated Christian practices that she wants to discuss. Moreover, however much Tanner has argued, on several occasions, for the importance of theological reflection on social practices, she does not seem interested in considering specific practices as a normative source for theology. In other words, the underlying assumption is that theology should correct practices, not the other way around (Tanner 2002, p. 234ff).

As previously mentioned, Tanner argues that religion has the potential to challenge capitalism. Tanner, like the EoC, presents a critical assessment of finance-dominated capitalism. For the most part, though, Tanner’s argument resembles the construction of religion and economy in BAM. She separates the spheres of economy and religion, constructs the religious resources as normative principles, and assumes that individual cognitive beliefs may change political behavior and thus the market economy. BAM can be understood as a practical example of Tanner’s theoretical project, with the

significant exception that BAM neither aims for nor ends with reform or revolution.²⁶ One can argue that the reason for this discrepancy is evident. The theological principles of BAM differ from those of Tanner, and from Tanner's point of view they do not optimize the critical theological–ethical potential of religion. However, this way of arguing could also be used against Tanner, namely that *her* theological principles are not good enough. We see, for example, how Cloutier and Thiel work within this logic when they comment on Tanner's project. The solutions they suggest are all corrections of the theological *content* and not of the configuration of the relationships between theology and economy as such—a correction that would reconsider the relationship between theory and practice. We argue that there is a different explanation, namely that the problem is not only a theological *what* involving ethical content and principles but also a theological *how* involving the mode in which ethics are enacted. At this point, we note a potentially fruitful dialogue with Philip Goodchild's critique.

Like Latour, Goodchild discusses how the Enlightenment led to a separation between theology and economics. Religion could have a role in one's inner life, while worldly necessity governed material life. Therefore, religion should have nothing to do with economy. Goodchild argues that for some Neoplatonic and Protestant Christians, this liberation of the market also enabled a liberation of theology to focus on its strictly spiritual concerns. However, when the "self-regulating market" started to collapse, beginning with the Great Financial Crisis of 2007–2008, a new field of inquiry, called "economic theology", began to emerge.²⁷ This new field, argues Goodchild, brings to light what has previously been invisible for theologians and economists due to their enlightenment assumptions. Therefore, the primary aim of an "economic theology", is to illuminate each realm in light of the other. This, argues Goodchild, is something totally different from having dialogues between economists and theologians. It is also different from the *Catholic Social Teaching* or *Protestant Social Ethics* that comment on the conduct of Christians and institutions within economic life (Goodchild 2019, p. 2). It is important to note, however, that even though the term "economic theology" is relatively new, studies of the theological underpinnings of modern economic thought have been going on for decades.²⁸

While Tanner's work can be seen as an example of this new "economic theology" approach, Goodchild criticizes Tanner for primarily locating this common domain as a field of discourse and for making a sharp distinction between an economic project on one hand and a religious project on the other. Goodchild shows how Tanner describes the economic project in rich detail, while the religious project is underdetermined.

[S]ince it is God's work of grace already achieved rather than human work anyway; the human contribution seems to be limited to an admission of failure. One prays and repents on a daily basis; yet one continues to go to work and borrow when necessary—at least now with a cleared conscience. (Goodchild 2019, p. 5)

Goodchild further criticizes Tanner for hardly mentioning any material practices for consideration or discussing how "faith offers remedies for the actual ways in which people are constrained to exploit others".²⁹ We agree with Goodchild that in avoiding discussing material conduct, Tanner is constructing a "pure" Christianity. Goodchild, on the other hand, wants to understand dynamics in impure hybrids instead of the relationship between two isolated phenomena. However, we do see a limitation in Goodchild's theological project.

²⁶ Tanner has left the reform ambitions that she presented in *Economy of Grace* (Tanner 2005) and is now presenting a radically revolutionary project (Tanner 2019, p. 7).

²⁷ For an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of economic theology as well as to its historical background, see (Schwarzkopf 2020a).

²⁸ See, e.g., (Agamben 2011; McCloskey 1999; Milbank 1991; Nelson 2001). In his introduction to the academic field of economic theology, Stefan Schwarzkopf argues that Nelson and Agamben are the foremost representatives of two different forms of economic theology today. While Nelson situates modern economics as a science in "Western progressivists-liberal thought" and as a kind of secular religion, Agamben makes a genealogical study of the economy and builds his concepts on thinkers such as Michael Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt. See (Schwarzkopf 2020b).

²⁹ (Goodchild 2019, p. 2).

Goodchild argues that the world is headed towards an ecological, social, and economic crisis caused by a modern capitalist way of life (Goodchild 2002, p. viii f; Goodchild 2019, p. 12). Further, Goodchild gives the direction an “economic theology” should take as a response to this crisis, where “a first task is to locate the common domain of economics and theology in the human relation to what is beyond its control—not in discourse, culture, governance, or desire but in trust, credit, and faith” (Goodchild 2019, p. 12). Moreover, this new “economic theology” allows for a rethinking of Christian theology “as constituted by its conduct of what lies outside it, where credit and faith are required [. . .]”.³⁰ Goodchild’s rethinking of Christian theology—a theology that tries to escape the trap of modern reason—is intriguing and much welcomed. However, as Francois Gauthier points out, there is a limitation with this project that, at least in part, has to do with the method and sources of philosophy. Goodchild seems to define modern thought merely with respect to reason, but modern thought is always, as Gauthier points out, “both and at the same time reason and its critique, reason and its other: emotion, passion sympathy, etc.: they are the two sides at the same coin”.³¹ Moreover, Gauthier argues that when Goodchild defines modern thought as reason, he “leaves half of the problem unexamined”, meaning he does not account for how capitalism also relies on rituals, emotions, passions, etc. In line with this critique, we take a different direction than Goodchild.

Assuming, like Latour (Latour 1993, pp. 76–79), that impure hybrids are more than the sum of their pure and abstract parts, one should analyze particular hybrids and not only their general, abstract parts. One should start from the middle of things, from the actual mixing of religion and economy, in order to understand how they may be intertwined and configured. This means, we argue, that a critical analysis of the relationship between religion and economy would benefit from starting with empirical studies of impure religious–economic practices.³² The transformations of religion and economy in these practices should not be understood as causal relations but as mediated, inter-relational processes. We further argue that normativities are established through these practices in both interaction and language, something that theologians need to take seriously and further explore.³³

Having argued that theological ethical research on the relationship between Christianity and capitalism would benefit from starting with empirical studies of the messy intermingling of religion and economy, it is now time to return to where we started: namely, the dialogue with Kathryn Tanner. Tanner convincingly argues that in order to challenge capitalism one has to work for structural, political changes and not only improve conditions within the market economy system. However, this does not necessarily imply the use of pure and abstract normative principles. Normative ethical insights that are developed through analyses of everyday religious–economic practices may turn out to be as convincing.

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³⁰ (Goodchild 2019, p. 12)

³¹ This, Gauthier points out, is the main argument behind Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. See (Gauthier 2012, p. 366).

³² For an interdisciplinary discussion on what theology can learn from anthropology and social sciences, see: (Lamb and Williams 2019). On how the empirical turn has generated an emerging field of ethnographic studies within the field of theological ethics, see (Scharen and Vigen 2011). For a methodological reflection about ethnography and the study of practices in theology, see (Bretherton 2012).

³³ For a discussion about normativity and empirical material in theological ethics, see chapters 2 and 3 in (Scharen and Vigen 2011).

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