

On the shelf: Capitalism and Christianity, American Style, by William E. Connolly

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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What motivates so many evangelicals—with their preference for *heavenly* treasure and their devotion to the Bible, a book full of diatribes against wealth—to support an economic agenda of free-market fundamentalism and less progressive tax policy? Most commentators answer that the marriage between those who want to rescue the government from a sea of ungodliness and those who want to [drown it in a bathtub](#) is one of convenience—they don't like so much as need each other.

According to William Connolly in [Capitalism and Christianity, American Style](#) (Duke UP), it's not quite that simple. Connolly claims that an "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine" provides mutual reinforcement for the religious right and "cowboy capitalism":

The radical Christian right *compensates* a series of class resentments and injustices...by promising solace in the church and the family; it then cements (male) capitalist creativity to the creativity of God himself, fomenting an *aspirational politics* of identification by workers with men of prowess and privilege...encourag[ing workers] to demonize selected minorities as nomadic enemies of capitalism, God, morality, and civilizational discipline.

This isn't just a denser version of [What's the Matter With Kansas?](#) (or, for that matter, [Bittergate](#));

Connolly isn't arguing that working-class evangelicals are easily manipulated rubes. Instead, his "resonance machine" works in both

directions. He's saying that an assortment of parallel beliefs and shared anxieties add up to a sum far greater than its parts, which strengthens both economic and religious conservatism.

Connolly

betrays the limits of his knowledge of the Christian landscape when he characterizes right-leaning Christians as those who follow the Jesus of Revelation and left-leaning Christians as those who follow the Jesus of the Gospels. This leaves out Revelation readers focused on nonviolence or liberation, not to mention John 3:16-thumping culture warriors. He also seems to use the words "evangelical" and "evangelist" interchangeably. But these are just distractions—Connolly does the real work of his critique not as a dubious theologian but as an insightful sociopolitical observer.

The critique is not socialist but liberal—Connolly seeks to reform capitalism, not abolish it. (The distinction may seem obvious, but then so did the fact that a slight difference between two candidates' tax plans makes for a pretty lousy [red scare](#).) Connolly stresses that capitalism is always wrapped up with other forces, and that a resonance with a different *kind* of religion—one without the vindictive and absolutist tendencies of the Christian right—could nurture a more egalitarian capitalism.

To

pursue this, he urges readers to organize across religious lines to "consolidate a counter-resonance machine." He also calls on secular people to welcome religious perspectives—a point that recalls a 2006 [speech](#) by Barack Obama. According to Connolly, religion is not a constituency that needs to be shored up or a private matter to leave at home. Instead, it's a potential point of unique and significant resonance with a fairer, more humane capitalism. With the economy in turmoil and the White House changing hands, could this counter-resonance machine start to flourish?