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Rieger's "Jesus vs. Caesar: For people tired of serving the wrong god" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Rieger, J. (2018). *Jesus vs. Caesar: For people tired of serving the wrong god*. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press. 164 pp. ISBN 9781501842672

Joerg Rieger, Cal Turner Chancellor's Chair of Wesleyan Studies, and Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt University's Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion, sets out in his very readable book *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God*, to illustrate the tension between who he believes is the real Jesus with Caesar, the proxy for status quo Orthodox Christianity. The tension he is writing about is not between Jesus and the Roman Empire, but it is between Liberation Theology and traditional Orthodox Christianity. Though it is not directly stated, Rieger's sympathies lie with Liberation Theology and he is sending out a clarion call to individuals who are searching for a different Christianity.

To Rieger, Jesus provides a life giving religion that is in contrast to the malignant religion of traditional Orthodox Christianity. Rieger uses Caesar to convey his view of a malignant religion, one that sees the world as a top-down power structure. For Rieger, Jesus came as a servant warrior, living in solidarity and fighting for justice for the oppressed, comfort to the poor and organizer of local communities, bringing him in direct conflict with Caesar. He argues that both Jesus and the early Church intended to blatantly challenge the top-down power structure of the Roman Empire. It was the early church fathers, who were influenced by Constantine, who constructed a top-down theology with God as omnipotent emperor. Since Jesus is of one substance with God, He is also placed in that dominant position. However, Rieger believes this theology is contradicted by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and His bottom-up paradigm.

Rieger also argues that there are efforts within the malignant religion to steer believers' attention away from this World and to be overly focused on the afterlife and Heaven. He believes that this causes believers to dismiss the World and its people. For Rieger, Jesus embodies both the material and the spiritual and is in stark contrast to Orthodox Christianity's world-denying and anti-material theologies. The importance of the crucifixion is that Jesus demonstrated his solidarity with the world's marginalized and brought community without erasing their differences. For Rieger, Jesus' power is relational and stands in contrast with Caesar, it flows from the bottom up.

Though theologically misguided, Rieger makes some salient arguments on Christian responsibility to the World's poor, oppressed and environment. Even traditional Orthodox Theology has this responsibility within its teachings. However, Rieger selects and edits verses to support his intent without taking a broader knowledge of biblical context. For instance, to support his argument that it is responsibility of Christians to challenge political power, he uses Jesus' procession into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-11) and his statement on taxes (Mark 12:17) without considering Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-15. That being said, offering discussion questions at the end of each chapter, *Jesus vs. Caesar* would be a thought-provoking book for biblically and theologically strong small groups and is accessible to undergraduates and above.

Reviewer

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