

Rieger, Joerg. *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 2018.

Reviewed by Danny Hunter.

There have been many works published in the last several years dealing in one way or another with what may be called “empire critique:” the use of biblical narrative to argue that the social-political-economic power complexes of the world stand in opposition to God and his people. Many of these have been written by Joerg Rieger himself. But this current offering may be one of the most commendable yet. He makes a succinct yet thorough critique of the way many Christians (of all persuasions and traditions) uncritically marry theology to dominant social, economic, and political trends. More conservative readers will likely balk at his constant references to inequality and privilege. And more liberal readers may chafe under his insistence on alternative solutions rather than policy reform. But it is precisely in this call to all sides to consider their idols (of privilege or progress) where Rieger’s wisdom dwells.

Perhaps the most unique thing about this book is that, from the outset, it places empire critique firmly in the tradition of the OT prophets, as a form of anti-idol polemic. The issue at hand, according to Rieger, is not one of political expediency or philosophical difference, but of serving the wrong god. He argues that the marriage of religious impulse to complexes of power constitutes a malignancy that stands in stark contrast to the life-giving religion of God. He then explores five consequences of ignoring the dichotomy between life-giving and malignant religion in contemporary society, each in its own chapter. He unpacks how Christians have substituted the rule of the world’s power complexes for the rule of God in matters of faith, politics, creation-care, economics, and truth. He then advocates for life-giving approaches in

each of these areas by elucidating the alternative perspectives embedded in the teachings of Jesus (with particular emphasis on the Lord's Prayer).

One of the great strengths of this book is that Rieger manages to weave together academic rigor and popular accessibility. He also anchors his perspective in first-century Christians' postures toward the Roman empire, yet faithfully and relevantly applies those insights to contemporary imperial projects (a feat not often achieved by empire criticism). Additionally, while certainly critical of empire, he brings nuance to the conversation around Christianity and power. He is not content to simply say empire=bad. Instead, he distinguishes between the trappings of empire (institutions, infrastructure, etc.) and its essence: the founding mythos, the idolatrous "powers" that order our complexes of power and their underlying logic. The question he raises is not whether a given imperial project is all good or all bad. He is more interested in whether Christians have any business using their faith to secure imperial interests and whether they owe allegiance to the principles (principalities?) that order our socio-political world or the Logos that seeks to radically re-order it.

Rieger sometimes undermines his own attempts to be even-handed in his critique of US politics, he seems more vocal about the idolatries of one side of the political spectrum in particular and is less harsh in his criticism of the ideologies with which he is more comfortable. Yet this book remains a superlative resource for any class that deals with (or personal interest in) the intersection of power and religion.

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