Excerpt\_Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God\_Joerg Rieger

Bio: Joerg Rieger holds the Cal Turner Chancellor's Chair in Wesleyan Studies and is Distinguished Professor of Theology in the Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. Before that he taught at Perkins School of Theology. His Ph.D. is from Duke University and he is an ordained elder in the North Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church. He is the author or editor of 22 books.

Some might feel that the contrast between Jesus and Caesar~~, which is the subject of this book,~~ is overblown. Didn’t the Roman Empire support the spread of Christianity and help it grow? The roads on which the apostle Paul traveled were designed by the Romans. The cities in which Christianity first spread were dominated by the Romans. Roman institutions preserved and enhanced the cultures of the ancient world on which most of Western civilization was built. And the *Pax Romana*, the peace established by Roman dominance, created a certain stability. So, can we simply brush off our indebtedness to Rome and Caesar? What might be the problem when Caesar did some good (aqueducts, architecture, and art)?

Whether or not there is a problem depends on how we interpret the tensions experienced by Jesus and the early Christians that are the subject of this book. Why would religious and government officials conspire to get rid of Jesus early on during his ministry (Mark 3:6)? Who killed Jesus and by what means, and who might have had an interest in his death? Why did Paul spend so much of his ministry in prison? Were these tensions all based on misunderstandings—or were they based on some deeper understanding of what Jesus stood for?

Similar conversations can be imagined when people discuss capitalism today, the economic system that dominates the globe. The question is not whether its track record is all bad or all good (too many conversations get stuck there), the question is how we put to use its benefits (the church fathers sometimes referenced Exodus 12:36, “plunder[ing] the Egyptians”) and how we negotiate its tensions. Another question is to whom or to what people of faith pledge their allegiance when God and mammon are in contradiction, as they usually are. That is what is at stake when we ask, “Jesus or Caesar?”

There is a fundamental tension at the heart of Christianity that existed since before its earliest beginnings and has been with us ever since. But this tension is rarely understood. It is not between religion and atheism or between the sacred and the secular, as is commonly assumed. Neither is it between religion and spirituality (as the “spiritual but not religious” crowd might think), nor is it between Christianity and Judaism (another common misunderstanding!), or even between Christianity and other religions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The tension at the heart of Christianity is located deep within Christianity itself because it is a radical conflict between different forms of Christian faith: it is the tension between faith that is life-giving for all—not just a few—and faith that is not. The tension is between one kind of sacred and another kind of sacred, between one set of religious traditions and another set. And, since faith and religion are always embodied, we are also talking about the tension between some ways of life and others.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The tension at the heart of Christian faith is the tension between ways of life that are life-giving for all—not just a few—and ways of life that are not.

~~In this book,~~ This is the tension between Jesus and Caesar. This tension is not a minor one, ~~as we shall see,~~ but amounts to a matter of life and death. Caesar’s power is manifest in the conquests of the Roman Empire, which include not only military power but also cultural and religious forces of domination that can be quite subtle at times, determining the difference between winners and losers. Moreover, Caesar’s power, which is the power of empire, affects not only politics and economics but also impacts everything else, including our innermost feelings and our most deeply held religious beliefs.

~~This means that not even our most cherished images of Jesus are safe from the ruses of empire. For 2000 years, empires—conglomerates of power that seek to control all of life—have shaped Christian ways of thinking about Jesus, often unconsciously.[[3]](#footnote-3)~~ The good news, however, is that no empire has ever been able to take over Christianity completely and there have been contested and persisting images of Jesus that ~~have~~ continued to inspire alternative ways of life, not only in religion but also in politics and economics. This is the positive side of the story. ~~that this book will tell.~~[[4]](#footnote-4)

This tension between life-giving and malignant forms of religion is deeply rooted in the Jewish traditions. The Hebrew prophets were gravely concerned about certain embodiments of the Jewish religion that resulted in injustice and oppression. The prophet Isaiah hears the voice of God pronouncing judgment: “On your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers” (Isa 58:3). Life-giving embodiments of Jewish religion, the prophets remind us, will loosen “wicked restraints” (58:6), while malignant religion strikes with violent fists (58:4).

The prophet Amos has God accuse the faithful of trampling on the poor and taking levies of grain from them (Amos 5:11) and pushing aside the needy in the courts (Amos 5:11-12). The problem has to do with misguided or distorted religion rather than with the absence of religion, for God concludes: “I hate, I reject your festivals; I don’t enjoy your joyous assemblies. If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food—I won’t be pleased . . . Take away the noise of your songs” (Amos 5:21-23).

Early forms of Christian faith embodied this tension between life-giving and malignant religion as they found themselves within an empire that was also very religious. But why would there have been a tension between Christianity and the Roman Empire, considering that the religion of the Roman Empire was for the most part tolerant, open, and even hospitable in its relation to other religions?

Religion that is life-giving for all, according to the early Christians, proclaims the justice and righteousness of the God who embraces the foolishness, weakness, and resilience of the cross and the struggles of the people; malignant religion, on the other hand, embraces the logic of the wise and the powerful, which manifests itself in the oppression of the multitude (Jas 2:6-7) and the crucifixion of Jesus (1 Cor 1:18-2:8). There is a fundamental difference between the religion of privilege and its alternatives, and this is where Roman religious tolerance seems to have drawn a line. It was not by accident that Paul spent his ministry in and out of Roman prisons; neither should Jesus’s death on a Roman cross come as a total surprise.

The life and ministry of Jesus embodies this tension between life-giving and malignant religion. Jesus, as we know him from the Gospels of the New Testament and a few historical records, takes a stand against the religion of the status quo embraced by many of his contemporaries. His controversies with certain powerful Pharisees and Sadducees (not all of them, to be sure) are well known—even to those who might not otherwise remember much else about him. His struggles with those whom the Gospel of John awkwardly and misleadingly calls “the Jews” are another example of the tension between different forms of religion, although easily misunderstood. At stake is not the struggle between Christianity and Judaism but the struggle between the dominant religion of the status quo and another religion embodied by Jesus and his followers, both located within the spectrum of the Jewish traditions.

1. See, for instance, Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Misunderstood Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term religion, as used in this book, refers not only to ideas but also to practices, both public and private, which are embodied in particular ways of life. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Native American theologians Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 62-84, note how the problem is not only Caesar—our images of Jesus have been thoroughly co-opted as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also the detailed theological account of my book *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). Empires, as I define the term in that book, are “massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone” (2). While empires take on various forms in history, some more based on hard power others on soft power, they share in common efforts to dominate life as a whole, not only economics and politics but also religion, culture, and personal life. As the power of empires is typically shared among elites, even in the Roman Empire, Caesar is, thus, not merely a powerful individual but the representative of more complex structures of power. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)