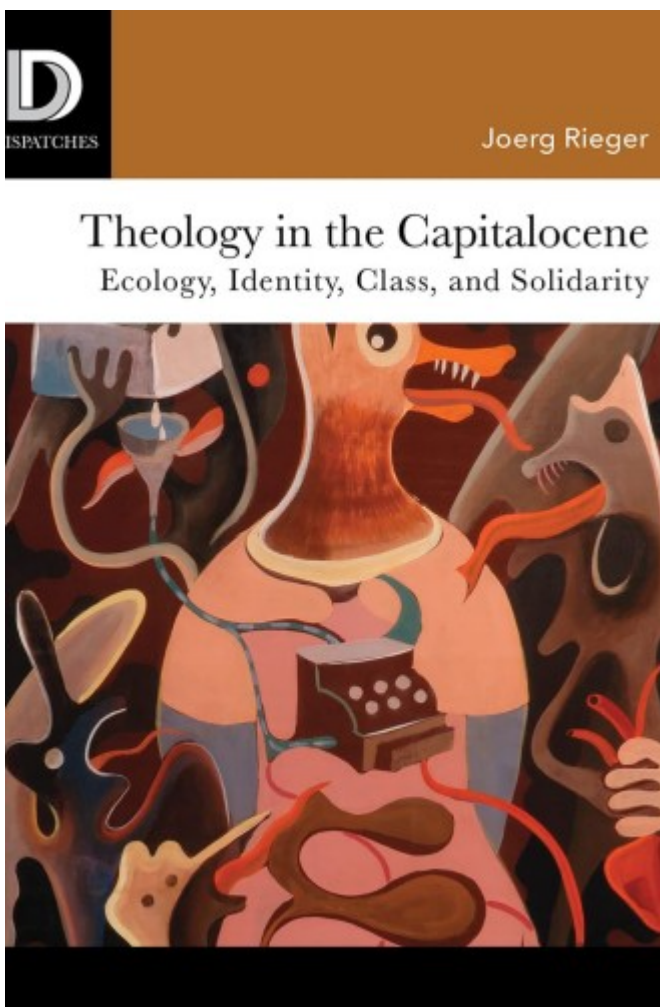


The reality of deep solidarity

For Joerg Rieger, theology must account for global power dynamics, which are largely driven by capitalism.

by [Clint Schnekloth](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

## In Review



### **Theology in the Capitalocene**

Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity

By Joerg Rieger

Fortress

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Liberal theology typically begins from a particular position: ecology, for instance, or identity or economics. In this book, Joerg Rieger goes at it entirely the other way, wrapping even into the title all of the various positions typically represented in separate volumes. This is what we might call doing theology at the seemingly impossible intersection of everything.

For the most part, Rieger makes it work. He argues, substantively in the book's content and structurally in how he lays it out, that there are connections among politics, economics, and religion—and these connections must be accounted for by anyone doing theology. "Theology can no longer limit itself to the religious, but neither can it limit itself to religion and politics without considering the economic flows of power in a global context," he writes. These power dynamics, which structure the way humans interact with nature, are largely driven by capitalism. For this reason, Rieger adopts historian Jason Moore's designation of the present era as the Capitalocene.

In previous works, Rieger used philosopher Antonio Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual to develop a concept of the "organic theologian": one who emerges from the underside of the socioeconomic system. In this book, Rieger functions as an organic theologian. He does not lift up specific minority contexts or volunteer his time for subversive enterprises. Instead, he does the difficult work of locating hegemony and power differentials (in everything) with an eye toward liberation.

This is not a thick book. It's more of what academics these days tend to call an intervention. Rieger attempts to develop the concept of "deep solidarity," which he introduced in two previous books, *Unified We Are a Force* and *Occupy Religion*. Based on the collective agency of working people in places where there is exploitation, deep solidarity constructively puts to work differences along the lines of ethnicity, race, planetary impact, gender, and sexuality.

Important to Rieger's development of deep solidarity is the distinction between liberal theology and liberation theology. He quotes economist Michael Zweig on the difference between the two:

Liberation theology . . . recognizes class conflict as a primary characteristic of society and positions itself consciously as an ally of one class against the other; whereas liberal theology, which also seeks to ameliorate the conditions of capitalism and sees the need for structural change, denies the class-conflictual nature of society and proposes instead a plan for social harmony among all classes.

Reiger notes that even the left (which is more or less on the liberation side of things) has often given up on the notion of class, so under-reflected is it in the modern context of neoliberal capitalism's "march to victory."

Reiger identifies his fourth chapter as the only one every reader ought to read. In that chapter, he makes the case for solidarity among everyone who has "some awareness of pressures along the lines of class, race, gender, and ecology." Here we learn that Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln had a correspondence. Both Marx and Lincoln, Reiger notes, saw the benefits of labor unions, at least in part because such emerging organized working-class groups were also multiracial. Marx wrote to Lincoln at one point, "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." To Marx, all independent worker movements in the United States were hampered by the way slavery held the republic captive.

With this short vignette, Reiger illustrates the long trajectory of reflection on the importance of solidarity at the intersection of race and class. However, the powerful have many tools at their disposal to defuse such solidarity. Reiger points to a variety of them. Some practices of inclusion and hospitality are themselves practical deterrents because the dominant powers remain as gatekeepers overseeing the systems of minority inclusion. Middle-class professionalism functions as another inhibitor of solidarity, where the privileges of that class promise a safe space within the system as long as no one rocks the boat. Solidarity is also hindered by individualism. Reiger writes, "Individualism is the ideology of the executive elites who seek to cover up the fact that they are more connected than everyone else, as their power and wealth are produced by the many for the few. As a result, individualism covers up what should be called 'class struggle from the top.'"

Midway through the book, Reiger asks a fascinating question: "Which material practices are currently producing the most fertile ground for the alternative agency that is needed to transcend the exploitative relationships that affect both people and

the earth?” He immediately suggests an answer:

In the times of Jesus of Nazareth, the practices of peasants seem to have provided this ground; in Marx’s time, it was industrial labor—what he called the proletariat. Today, that question is more complex—some would point to the so-called precariat, which includes not only people belonging to the traditional working class but all whose existence is precarious now.

Central to Rieger’s argument is a repeated invitation to consider deep solidarity not as a moral demand but as an observable description of reality. So many people are currently struggling under the weight of the oppressive structures maintained by the executive class. Deep solidarity is not an ideal everyone should work harder at; rather, it illuminates the state of things.

Some readers may wonder how all of this can be called theology. I wondered that at times while I was reading. But Rieger has an answer, which is worth quoting in full:

Theology is not an afterthought of solidarity but strikes at its roots. The solidarity of the Right offers a theological justification of the status quo, building on the perennial religion of empire that equates the divine with the dominant powers. This is why its solidarity implies everyone looking alike, thinking alike—often misinterpreted by theologians as “orthodoxy”—along with nationalist white racial and heterosexual gender identity. The solidarity of the progressive Left, by contrast, finds the divine elsewhere, informed by the incarnation of Christ in solidarity with the multitude of common people everywhere rather than elites. This insight requires the transformation of the status quo, building on the revolutionary religious expressions of Moses, the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and even a surprisingly radical Paul, who writes about a God who “chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” and who “chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). These multiple foundations of the faith account for another sort of orthodoxy that is grounded not in sameness but in what we might call theological solidarity, where orthodoxy and orthopraxis are always connected and mutually shape and reshape each other.

If Rieger can write a whole book and then tell readers to read just one chapter, perhaps I can be forgiven for suggesting that the essence of the book resides in a

single paragraph.