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J.E.S.U.S.A.

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J.E.S.U.S.A.

Abstract

This is a film review of *J.E.S.U.S.A.*, directed by Kevin Miller. It is now available on Vimeo Prime (bit.ly/jesusa).

Keywords

Pacifism, War, Violence, Christianity, Girard

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



J.E.S.U.S.A. (2020), dir. Kevin Miller

There are those of us who have long been disturbed by the easy connection of Nationalism and Christianity, particular in the United States these last few decades. The majority of American Christians regard it as axiomatic that Christians should engage in self-defense and protection of the innocent by the use of lethal violence, and this extends not only to international police actions but to our own shores, where Christian ministers support concealed carry laws that would permit average citizens to be armed to the teeth in every public setting—presumably, so that they can dispatch the shooter or terrorist at the drop of a hat. While many Americans would find such views extreme, they generally do not reflect on whether a Christian ought to bear arms at all, or whether it is anti-Christian to use lethal violence in any setting. This film engages that question directly.

The first ten minutes or so of this documentary shows interviews of those who approve violence on Christian grounds, including those who justify owning assault weapons, and their rationales visit familiar ground used by Christians who have upheld “moral” violence through the

centuries. We are told that Jesus created an “assault weapon” to drive the money-changers out of the temple (John 2:15) and that we are righteous when we drive out evil in the same way. Christian pacifism, in the view of such people, is not even biblical. These views appear extreme, and yet their rationales are not dissimilar from those used by Christian just war theorists through the ages, up to and including the late Jean Bethke Elshtain’s defense of the “War on Terror” which included the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

But most of this documentary is comprised of interviews of Christian pacifist leaders and scholars who have worked hard to make the case for Christian nonviolence. Their arguments will be familiar to scholars who have read such views: the early Christians were all pacifists who refused to use violence against the Roman Empire that was killing them, as they believed that “Jesus is Lord” meant that they needed to emulate his own nonviolence, no matter what the cost. All empires are built on violence and forcing others to obey, but not the Kingdom of God. When the Roman Emperor embraced Christianity in the fourth century, however, Christians accepted this apparent piece of good fortune along with the authority of Rome to use force to keep order. As Brian Zahnd quips in the film, this means Christ can no longer really be Lord, for the Emperor has that title: Christ is demoted to the “Secretary of After Affairs” in the next life. The nonviolence of Jesus is no longer a model for behavior, for Christians have accepted the standards of the world—including the use of lethal force. Jesus is just a way to escape this world.

Most of the pacifists Christians interviewed also reject the Anselmian doctrine of the Atonement that would require Christ to be killed in order for God to receive payment for our sins. Rather, they argue that God “desires mercy and not sacrifice,” and that Christ’s death at the hands of evildoers does not pay a penalty to God but instead shows the extreme love of God for us, and models for us what love looks like. We do not need to kill anyone to be reconciled or to be forgiven,

and neither does God demand such: instead, we need to learn to live as God does in Christ, forgiving others without asking anything in return. Rene Girard's views on how scapegoating functions, and how it is decisively ended by Christ's death, are evident in their analyses.

There is no overarching narrator, as Miller allows the voices of his interviewees to shape the topic. The result is a well-argued case for Christianity as nonviolent, which I fully support. My only complaint about the film is that it doesn't go further in its indictment of the deformations found in American Christianity. In other words, we can argue about the legitimacy of just war theory, but in practice most recent American wars haven't even met its criteria. We have so easily justified war in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, even though the results seldom suggest violence has helped, and we continue to justify such violence as "moral"—oblivious to the fact that nonviolence is often more effective in the long run. The pacifists in the film do argue that violence is counterproductive and ultimately impractical, but I believe that more evidence could have been provided for that thesis in order to more clearly demonstrate it to viewers. They express well the theoretical reasons for Christian nonviolence, but there are some very practical reasons for it as well which receive short shrift here. I make this criticism only because I strongly believe in the necessity of the argument for Christian nonviolence, especially in America today. I do welcome this film as a teaching tool, for seminary and university classes on the ethics of war and nonviolence, and even more for viewings in churches where it might create some interesting discussions. Five decades after the death of Dr. King, most Christians still assiduously avoid confronting one of his central arguments for nonviolence: the realistic observation that those who live by the sword, shall die by the sword. If this film gets some more people to consider that, I will be pleased.

The film is now available on Vimeo Prime (bit.ly/jesusa).