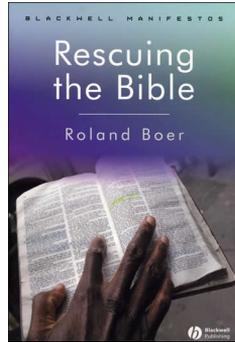


# ○ REVIEW OF ROLAND BOER, *RESCUING THE BIBLE*

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Influenced by postcolonial criticism, many Biblical scholars tend to describe the Bible as a deeply ambiguous collection of texts, bearing potentials of both oppression and liberation. Therefore, I was somewhat surprised when I saw Roland Boer's book with its cover image of a black man's hand reading the Bible. Rescuing the Bible for purposes of liberation is not possible, I thought, without idealizing its texts and neglecting its patriarchal and intolerant theologies.

Already in the introduction such questions are addressed. The Bible's multi-valency is for Boer a reason not to surrender it to right-wing agendas. This brings us to the purpose of the book, which is to 'rescue the Bible from the clutches of religious and political right, its most systematic abusers', and 'reclaim [it] for radical politics' (p. 1). Such a rescuing project, Boer argues, requires a merging of the secular and religious left, a forming of an alliance that he calls 'the worldly left'. In a manifesto-like manner, Boer sums up his argument in six theses, which in a pedagogical way correspond to the book's six chapters.

In the first chapter, Boer draws the contours of a 'new secularism' as the context in which the Bible could be rescued. The anti-religious 'old secularism' that stemmed from the nineteenth century, Boer argues, has been superseded by a situation characterized as post-secularism. Instead of becoming less important, religion has gained influence. In contrast to a vanishing old secularism, Boer's new secularism recognizes the problems of defining and marginalizing religion from public and political life. Instead it affirms a close entwinement of religion and secularism.

In Boer's diagnosis, given in the second chapter, the right wing churches have stolen the Bible, resulting in notions that churches with a right wing agenda are 'Bible-based' (p. 37). As a reaction, Boer claims, the religious left has mistakenly given up using the Bible and focused instead on issues of 'identity politics'. The religious right has then managed to place those questions in the periphery. Hence, the religious left is a minority 'in desperate need of alliances' with groups in the resurging secular left (p. 40). For the secular left, in turn, Boer suggests that a critically read Bible has the potential of offering motivation and political mythology. The worldly left, then, includes a range

of different groups: those struggling in synagogues or churches for issues such as queer, gender, indigenous, environmental, and animal rights. By the (old) secular left, Boer does not primarily mean social democrats, but rather more radical groups who realize that ‘the system is deeply flawed’ (p. 42): various socialists, communists, anarchists, anti-globalization movements, green movements. Boer also mentions a range of left philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek.

In the third chapter, the multi-valency of the Bible is expanded. Quoting Ernst Bloch: ‘the bible has always been the Church’s bad conscience’ (p. 51), Boer argues that it is both liberative and oppressive at the same time: it is ‘folly to the rich and scandal to the poor’ (p. 50). But in contrast to Bloch, Boer does not search for a revolutionary core in the Bible to be discovered or rescued. There is no later layer that can be taken away in order to preserve an original biblical truth. Instead, Boer states that ‘it is impossible to insist that one interpretation is correct and another is not’ (p. 50). It all depends on where you are located. What Boer regards as abusive readings are then only abusive from his leftist position.

In chapter four, Boer clarifies what he understands as (ab)use of the Bible. He means not only misinterpretations of biblical texts. The Bible ‘has plenty of obnoxious and toxic texts’ and when such texts are *used* to oppress others, it is also *abuse* (p. 80). As illustrations, Boer gives two examples from political rhetoric in Australia and the USA. In both cases, he demonstrates how politicians use the Bible to claim a status of the Children of Light, or even the Chosen People in order to validate their political and ideological agendas. He also points at how ‘Bible-believing’ Christians are presenting the theory of ‘intelligent design’ as a scientifically respectable position.

If the Bible is so (ab)used and it is possible to use to justify almost any position, why bother to rescue it? For Boer, the Bible is an ‘extremely important political text’ (p vi), and in chapter five he calls attention to movements and people that have used the Bible as motivation for ‘left revolutions’. Presenting as examples his personal favourites, he describes 1) the peasants’ revolt in early sixteenth century Germany led by Tomas Müntzer, 2) Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers’ building of egalitarian rural communes in seventeenth century England, and 3) the movement of liberation theology in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, in particular Camilo Torres, a Roman Catholic Priest who joined an armed guerrilla group in Colombia. These are all examples, Boer claims, of how the Bible has been used in ‘the construction of a revolutionary worldview’ (p. 127).

In chapter six, Boer proposes how the Bible could contribute to the worldly left in terms of offering a language for metaphorical imagination of a utopian future – a political mythology. In order to prevent the idolizing of leaders or saviour figures he stresses the importance of incorporating theological suspicion into the myths themselves. For instance, the story of Exodus is for Boer just as much a story about liberation from oppression as about the victims becoming oppressors. The most innovative of Boer’s suggestions is probably what he calls the myth of ‘rebellious chaos’. In Genesis’ story about how God’s word creates order out of chaos, Boer suggests we could read against the grain and take sides with the formless void and deep covered darkness ‘over against the obsessive desire for order and control’ (p. 147). Similarly, in the story of the Flood (Gen 6-9), the threatening streams of chaotic water could be read as an image of a ‘joyous chaos’ that rebels against a ‘God of order and control, a God of the palace guard and secret police’ (p. 148).

In the conclusion, Boer puts citation marks around ‘rescue’, which adds a somewhat ironical or ambivalent twist to his rescuing project of the Bible (p. 151). Perhaps fittingly so. The irony could be seen as a self-distant playfulness in relation to an otherwise all highly serious project. But it could also invite discussions around areas of disagreement, of which I will mention three.

First, Boer should be credited for adjusting his position to the postcolonial suspicion against claims of universalism and objectivity, including notions of the Bible as an unambiguous text. Still, his suggestion of a worldly left, centred in a traditional Marxist analysis of what kind of struggles are radical and necessary, seems to uphold a problematic socialist universalism. Issues of sexism, racism, queer and others are lumped together under the umbrella of ‘identity politics’ and placed on the sideline. The central issue for the left, Boer seems to argue, should rather be to get rid of the capitalist system. But it is not clear how such a (Marxist) position is based less on identity than a position of for instance anti-sexism. Further, Boer does not explain how getting rid of capitalism will solve the problems of sexism or some other issue of ‘identity’.

Second, Boer’s deep pessimism regarding churches and synagogues implies that the movement he calls for have its center outside those institutions. One question is then if his suggestion is appealing from faith based perspectives. I find four problematic circumstances: A) Boer’s proposal of a new secularism lacks a discussion about post-secular theology and the related movement of radical orthodoxy that is quite strong in many churches. B) It is hard to see how the distinction between revolution and reform that Boer upholds could be relevant from a Christian or Jewish perspective. For instance, would the ordination of women as priests be a revolution or a reform? C) His pessimism runs the risk of ignoring important struggles where churches actually take a radical stand (ie solidarity with refugees and stopping the illegal occupation of Palestine). D) Boer avoids issues of peace and nonviolence, issues where religious and secular groups are already cooperating. His seems unaware of the problems of armed struggle and parallels Camilo Torres with Jesus without acknowledging that Torres joined the armed struggle whereas Jesus did not.

Third, although Boer’s ‘rebellious chaos’ reading of Genesis is quite intriguing, it implies serious unaddressed problems. In Genesis it is always God who has power over chaos, which is most evident in the story of the Flood where God uses chaos as a punishment for human sin. This makes it rather difficult to take sides, as Boer suggests, with chaos against God. Also, considering that God in Genesis actually regrets himself after having seen the brutal results of the forces of chaos that he released (Gen 8:21, 9:15), it seems as ‘siding with chaos’ implies siding with a God that hasn’t really understood the importance of anger management.

Despite these problems, Boer’s book has provocative and thoughtful suggestions and anecdotes that contribute significantly to a wider discussion in a worldly left about the Bible and politics. Although his book may not ‘rescue’ the Bible, it certainly has the strength of not only offering theological suspicion and criticism but also suggestions of how the Bible could contribute in struggles for social change.