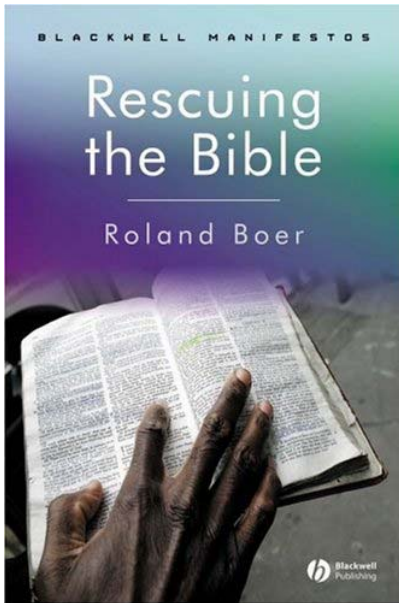


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**Boer, Roland**

***Rescuing the Bible***

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Roland Boer, Reader in the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University in Australia, provides us with an argument in six theses, each of which then takes up one of the six substantive chapters of the book.

*First thesis:* “Since the old programme of secularism has run aground, I propose a new secularism that sees the entwinement of religion and secularism as necessary and beneficial, that reads the Bible in light of theological suspicion, denounces the abuse of the Bible and fosters liberating readings and uses.” Boer begins with a handful of definitions. He draws his understanding of what is secular from the Latin *saeculum*: “it designates a system of thought, indeed a way of living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world” (8). The problem, Boer asserts, is that such a notion of secularism easily slips into meaning that it is opposed to supernatural religion, at which point it becomes equivalent to atheism. But this antireligious overtone is “derivative and not crucial” to the understanding of secularism (9). As for Boer’s understanding of “biblical studies,” the operative catchwords to adopt are “science” and “reason.” “A discipline is ‘scientific’ and operates according to principles of ‘reason’ if it makes use of evidence and develops its hypotheses and theories on the basis of such evidence, not on any divine revelation. As for the Bible, even theology and biblical studies must be

scientific in order to be disciplines of any value” (10). Boer insists that, if lecturers in biblical studies in a college preach from Scripture in a service, it only shows “how much the old programme of secularism is flawed” (11). These and other tensions, such as the rise and popularity of many “spiritualities,” Boer lists to demonstrate the failure of the old secularism. “People hunger for spiritual realities, they say, for a deeper spiritual truth. As politely as possible, let me say that this is rubbish. Rather, the rise of spirituality is a major—I hesitate to write ‘first’—sign of the tensions within secularism and the beginnings of post-secularism” (18). The problems are compounded by the return of religion to prominence in the wake of 9/11: Boer does not hesitate to list a *bête-noir* or two whom he treats with exquisite scorn: Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and, in his native Australia, Peter Costello. So what we need, he says, is a new secularism nicely summarized in five points: it recognizes that religion and secularism are inevitably entwined and asserts that this is to the benefit of both; it operates with a “theological suspicion” that treats the Bible neither as a sacred text nor “merely” as profane literature but is suspicious of both secular and religious (ab)uses of the Bible and denounces both, so as, wherever possible, to foster “emancipatory uses of the Bible,” seeking a politics of alliance (23). By “(ab)use” of texts Boer means “the use of texts in order to dominate, oppress and denigrate others” (27)—not least in the cases where the text itself is denigrating others (as one of several examples, Boer offers “When to Stone Your Whole Family” [Deut 13:6–10]). What Boer wants is an alliance between these new secularists, so committed, and believers of the left (as opposed to “reactionaries” and “fundamentalists”). Much of the rest of the book unpacks this agenda.

*Second thesis:* “Since the religious left has been marginalized and has had the Bible stolen from it, and since the secular left is on the rise, in order to rescue the Bible we need a politics of alliance between the religious left and the old secular left. I call this alliance the ‘worldly left’, one that is as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” The “religious left”—people in the past such as Wilberforce and those in synagogues and churches today who are passionate about social justice—are on the defensive. Boer claims that the religious right have “stolen the Bible” from the left, claiming that they alone are “Bible-based.” Boer mentions those who are caught up in discussions of the “rapture index,” along with the Hillsong crowd of Sydney and the Planetshakers of Melbourne; by contrast, he says, the religious left is small and weak. The secular left is experiencing a slight resurgence. These two forces of the left must combine their strengths. For those who are of the religious left, unlike Boer himself, inspiration can be found in the “ground-breaking work” (43) of Norman Gottwald, who has “provided a road-map for the social and economic formation of ancient Israel” (43), and the studies of Richard Horsley, who consistently attempts to interpret not only Jesus but nascent Christianity within the social matrix of a brutal Roman Empire. By combining the influence of the religious left and the

secular left into one social force, Boer seeks to establish a powerful “worldly left”—“a way of thinking and living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world” (46), even while the word “world” simultaneously conjures up other connotations, “such as experience, maturity, and indeed worldly wisdom” (46).

*Third thesis:* “Despite the best efforts to impose dominant viewpoints on the Bible, through canonization and interpretation, it remains an unruly and fractious collection of texts. For this reason it is a multi-valent collection, both folly to the rich and scandal to the poor.” Following Ernst Bloch, Boer argues that the Bible “has an uncanny knack of undermining any position one might want to take” (51). On the one hand, if the church sides with those who feel it necessary to go to war, it faces texts about loving enemies (Matt 5:44) and turning the other cheek (Luke 6:29); on the other hand, if the church wishes to encourage peace, love, and understanding, it nevertheless reads that Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword (Matt 10:34). Bloch puzzled over the fact that the Bible is claimed by *both* sides of many of the conflicts he examined. His own solution was to assign the more reactionary texts, those that apparently support power and authority, to a later overlay. Boer prefers to learn from Antonio Gramsci, who argued that any hegemony is inherently unstable—a point picked up and developed by Jacques Derrida and other postmodern thinkers. Similarly, Boer argues, the very act of using the Bible to support any authority or hegemony is intrinsically unstable and calls forth countervailing voices. Boer appeals to what he judges to be later and domesticating additions to Ecclesiastes (so here he is closer to Bloch than he admits) or to ecclesiastical interpretations of the Song of Songs. His point is to assert the multivalence of Scripture and thus to undermine appeals to the Bible’s authority by Christian Zionists, by those who reject homosexuality by appealing to the Bible, and so forth.

*Fourth thesis:* “The Bible is too important and too multi-valent a text to be left to the religious right. Thus it is necessary to take sides with the liberatory side of the Bible, and in doing so we denounce the reactionary use and abuse of the Bible, for imperial conquest, oppression of all types, and the support of privilege and wealth.” Here Boer surveys a number of issues from an unyielding left position that heartily avoids any nuance or suggestion that his opponents may occasionally have a point—the war in Iraq, political visions articulated by a John Howard or a Condoleeza Rice, (un)intelligent design, and so forth—laced with an array of critical judgments (e.g., “no reputable biblical scholar believes that” Moses existed [83]). The right thing to do is to undermine all these stances by choosing those options from Boer’s multivalent Bible that agree with Boer—and, where necessary, simply by contradicting the Bible.

*Fifth thesis:* “Taking the side of liberation, we also need to recover the tradition of revolutionary readings of the Bible.” His personal favorites, Boer asserts, are Thomas Müntzer, Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, and Camilo Torres.

*Sixth thesis:* “The Bible is one source for a political myth for the worldly left, a political myth that, while keeping in mind the perpetual need for theological suspicion, condemns oppression, imagines a better society and draws deeply on the mythic images of rebellious chaos.” Boer acknowledges that in Marxist critiques of oppression there is already “a deeply biblical current running” (129). Boer wants to strengthen this by fostering a hermeneutical, theological suspicion that is analogous to the Marxist practice of ideological suspicion. Inevitably, then, he wants to lean on Amos and some of the early chapters of Isaiah, on the exodus call “let my people go” (Exod 5:1), and on images of collective living in the early chapters of Acts. Finally, since the Bible draws many links between chaos and rebellion—and this rebellion is cast both “against God and against rulers who claim to be appointed by God” (146)—it is worth reappropriating the value of chaos. Korah becomes a hero, and the attempt to squash chaos and produce order is nothing other than “a desperate effort to overcome the threat of revolution” (149).

This book, a fascinating mix of dogmatic left-wing self-righteousness combined with rich and scathing condescension toward all who are even a tad less left than the author, is rich in unintended irony. Boer cannot see how implausible his arguments become. While nominally allowing “religious” people to believe in the supernatural so long as they support his left-wing agenda and join forces with him in a “worldly” secularism, what he says about the Bible and about biblical scholarship is so blatantly committed to philosophical naturalism and historical minimalism that even the most mild supernaturalism is ridiculed: no allowance can be made for divine revelation, anyone who thinks Moses existed is not really a scholar, biblical studies can be called “scientific” only if the scholars themselves do not preach, and so forth. Boer consistently damns everyone on the right by ridiculing the obvious targets, but probably he would not appreciate it if a counterpart on the right ridiculed those on the left by skewering Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot. It turns out that Boer wants to “rescue” the Bible not only from what people on the right say that it means but from what the Bible itself says, for whenever the Bible, in all its multivalence, disagrees with Boer’s vision of the *summum bonum*, it is to be undermined, set aside, and mocked—not even wrestled with. Readers are repeatedly told that those nasty right-wingers have “stolen” the Bible. Boer never considers the possibility that quite a few left-wingers have simply abandoned the Bible, leaving the terrain open for those who at least take it seriously. What will satisfy Boer, it seems, is not the liberation of the Bible but the liberation of the Bible from any agenda he considers right-wing, so that it can be locked in servitude to a left-wing agenda. Boer’s dismissive arguments to prove the Bible is hopelessly multivalent—a commonplace among many modern and postmodern

readers today—is spectacularly unconvincing because he does not interact with any serious literature (and there is two thousand years' worth of such literature) that argues, with various degrees of success, how the Bible *does* hang together. But perhaps this is not too surprising from an author who cherishes chaos precisely because chaos undermines *God's* authority—and all authority save Boer's must be overthrown. I think that many biblical writers would call that choice idolatry. At the end of the day, Boer is trying to rescue the Bible from God.