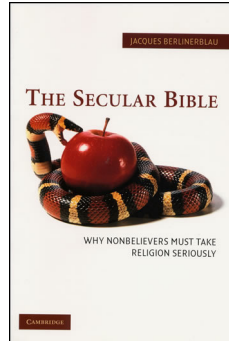


○ REVIEW OF JACQUES BERLINERBLAU, *THE SECULAR BIBLE*

Mark G Brett, Whitley College

Correspondence to Mark G Brett: mbrett@whitley.unimelb.edu.au

Mark Brett reviews Jacques Berlinerblau's *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.



The construction of a secular domain was, at least in part, an historical response to religious wars between Catholics and the early Protestant movements in Europe. The philosophical solution to religious conflict at the time was commonly seen to lie in principles of religious toleration and in a modern rationality that was distinguished from particular religious traditions or cultures. The tenor of these early modern arguments was not to exclude religion entirely, but rather, to exclude religious monopolies.

This tradition of secularity does not seem to be of great interest to Berlinerblau, and it is worth noting that his indifference to it cannot be attributed to a postmodern critique of modernist rationality. Rather, he wants to propose a secular hermeneutics as a ‘mode of discursive aggression on Scripture and, by extension, those who hold it dear’ (p.9). The aim is to contest or refute dominant interpretations through developing the arts of ‘counterexegesis’ (p.102 and 106). This is exegesis in ‘heckle mode’, with no regard for the old philanthropic moorings of a now outdated secularism (p.8).

A *via negativa* has become especially relevant in a world where, to the chagrin of lazy secularists, ‘sacred texts are not the irrelevant artefacts that nonbelievers thought they would be’. Of particular concern to Berlinerblau are cases where the Bible is used to sanction policies ‘that affect citizens of contemporary democracies’ (p.11) – for example, Jewish attitudes to intermarriage (discussed in ch.6) and conservative Christian attitudes to same-sex eroticism (ch.7). It is not that Berlinerblau has larger political motives. On the contrary, his secular approach is not especially concerned with contemporary political issues, at least not in the sense of taking sides in political debate (p.83). His negative dialectics, and parasitic wit, seem to prevent him from doing so.

The key hermeneutical arguments presented in chapters two and three suggest that the Bible is too contradictory and incoherent to sanction any doctrine. Moreover, the long recognised lack of uniformity is not the product of divine polyphony but rather of the accidental aggregation of textual assemblages. A solo author may initiate a multiplicity of meanings, but in the case of the Bible, the layered multiplicity is exponentially complex. Even in the cases where texts are juxtaposed by editors rather than by a reader's creativity, the editorial assemblage gives rise to immense numbers of unintended meanings (p.49).

Berlinerblau's argument equivocates at this point, presenting editorial assemblages as conceptually different from authorship while at the same time denying that editors make meaning. The equivocation is completed by recommending the work of Richard Elliot Friedman at the conclusion to ch.3 while suggesting, on the same page, that the question 'Who wrote the Bible?' is an inferior question. (This very question forms the title of one of Friedman's books.) Ironically, the idea of biblical texts as assemblages full of unintended meanings has been floated before in a discussion that identified the common ground between Karl Popper's view of scientific texts and Brevard Childs' canonical criticism – see Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?* (1991:123–127).

While I was beguiled by the style of this book, and delighted by its elegance, I feel compelled to register some doubt about the wisdom of its overall arguments. The subtitle is 'why nonbelievers must take religion seriously'. The content of the book in fact provides ample reasoning as to why nonbelievers need not take religion seriously. The cultured despisers of religion will find much material in this book to confirm their view that religious communities possess very little intellectual integrity. If, as it seems, religious convictions are influencing public policies in ways unforeseen in positivist dreams, then rigorous and respectful critiques of political theology are precisely what is needed. A one-sided Popperian logic that is exclusively devoted to refutations, even refutations framed as wittily as Berlinerblau's, will not provide the social visions, conjectures or wagers that necessarily frame public policy.