

○ A RELIGIOUS LEFT ASSESSMENT OF ROLAND BOER'S *RESCUING THE BIBLE*

David Jobling

Roland Boer calls for an alliance between the secular left and the religious left (this means, in effect, the Christian and Jewish left, with emphasis on the former) to harness the liberative elements of the Bible in the cause of reform and revolution. He suggests ways in which the time is ripe for such an alliance, and identifies within both socialism and religion traditions of appropriating the Bible for left programs. But these traditions have been weakened recently by a conservative tide. He feels passionately and argues powerfully that the secular and religious lefts cannot do without each other.¹

Boer offers extraordinarily rich resources for his project. He begins by arguing convincingly that the old project of 'secularism' has failed: it has elicited not only massive fundamentalist reaction but also a wave of religious longing expressed in the widespread search for some fulfilling 'spirituality'. In the next chapter Boer claims to see a current resurgence of the left. I think he is correct about this. A great range of people now seem to see left positions as almost self-evidently true, though there is still a widespread feeling of impotence about how they may be realised.

The remaining chapters all deal with the Bible – its contents and qualities, and traditions of reading it. He first points to its multivalency (Chap. 3), drawing particularly on Ernst Bloch (with whom he has often engaged in earlier writings, notably Boer 2003). The Bible itself undermines partisan claims made upon it, such as the claims of the religious right. Even traditions of suppressing rebellion in the name of orthodoxy reveal that there *was* rebellion, that there was an alternative to the perspective of the powerful. He shows how some current disputes, Zionism, or church debates over sexual ethics, are disputes over how to read the multivalent Bible. In Chapter 4 he analyses and dismantles specific claims from the right that the Bible is on their side (he is strong on 'intelligent design', but even stronger on the way that American politicians have tried to insert America into the apocalyptic dynamics of the Bible). Chapter 5 is devoted to examples of the use of the Bible in revolutionary projects of the far (Thomas Müntzer, Gerrard Winstanley) and recent past (Camilo Torres; the biblical element in this section is supplied more by Fernando Belo and Boer himself than by Torres). In the final chapter (6) Boer builds up a socialist 'political myth' from the prophets, Acts and (most originally) the Bible's chaos texts.

Throughout, he employs a sophisticated hermeneutic, but does so in a way that will carry conviction with non-experts. There is very much here to attract and inform people on both sides of the alliance.

The book appears in the Blackwell Manifestos series and on its first page invokes the Mother of All Manifestos as to some extent a model. I have misgivings about this series: book length is on the long side for a manifesto; and a *series* threatens a postmodern dilution of the force of any particular manifesto ('manifesto of the month', as it were). But Boer sustains the manifesto quality of his book in the spirit of Marx and Engels. The appropriate *first* response to a manifesto is not a balanced discussion but a decision to join up or not. Before beginning a critique, therefore, I declare that I accept Boer's manifesto as my own. The ground he takes up I also want to take my stand on. I debate with him from within the alliance, rather than assess from without.

First, and briefly, though in general he is a sound guide, he can mislead. The worst example is his treatment of Paul (62). He claims that ‘the Church’s Paul’ – the persona projected in church practice – reflects disproportionately the conservative and boring ‘Paul’ of the Pseudo-Pauline letters (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus).² This is quite untrue, and there is an easy demonstration. The Common Lectionary is a sure measure of what bits of the Bible get regularly heard in church. About the same fraction of the Pseudo-Paulines as of the accepted letters finds a place in the lectionary, but since the accepted letters are, in total, about three times as long as the Pseudos (not counting Hebrews), three quarters of what congregants hear as ‘Paul’ is likely *ipsissima verba*.

My second critique is of Boer’s view of the process of canonisation which gave us the Bible as we now have it (56–66). I don’t think this issue is particularly important for his argument, but he gives it a remarkable amount of space. In pursuing it myself at some length, I am responding as much to George Aichele’s response to Boer (elsewhere in this issue) as to Boer himself. Aichele has been the main proponent of the theory of canon which Boer accepts (see esp. Aichele 2001 and my review in these pages, 2005). They both see canonisation as a powerful institutional move to control the Bible’s meaning. Both (Boer more than Aichele) accept that biblical meaning sometimes/often escapes the canonical constraint; both even argue (Aichele along semiotic, Boer along political, lines) that such ‘escapes’ are inevitable. But both think that canonisation is, by definition, an attempt to constrain meaning. The more I encounter this hypothesis the less I am persuaded by it, at least as a comprehensive account of canonisation.

Following Norman Gottwald, I have long understood (and taught) the canon of the Jewish Bible as inscribing a fundamental conflict of ideologies. This can be expressed roughly in terms of the Priestly and the Deuteronomic, or the monarchic and the prophetic; as Boer knows, I prefer to think of it as a conflict between different modes of production instanced in Israel in various times and places. I therefore understand this canon in dialectic terms. (I am no expert on the New Testament, but I think a similar view could be developed there.) The genius of the canon is to maintain the conflict as a *productive* one. Boer seems to see canon as determined and imposed by leaders. I see it much more as produced by the faith community, whose acceptance (or not) of a particular book the ‘canonisers’ cannot ignore. The Jewish canon enshrines an ideological conflict which remained alive and productive in the community. (In fact, the conflict over Zionism which Boer so well expounds [67-74] is just another variant of it!) It seems to me important that the group who presided over canonisation, the Pharisees/Rabbis, emerged from Jewish sectors that had been historically *disadvantaged*.

Why, if canonisation is supposed to constrain interpretive options, has there been the need for all the other safeguards which have historically arisen – the embargo on translation of or access to the Bible, the various forms of teaching office, the lectionary? (The last is my particular bugbear, particularly as churches use it to reduce the meaning and even the extent of the Jewish Bible to what Christians may find amenable.)

I can exemplify my point from Boer’s own discussion. He cites the well-known example of the end of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes). The last few verses seem self-consciously ‘orthodox’, and Boer adopts the usual view that they are an addition designed to give an orthodox veneer to a heterodox book. If so, it is surely a pathetic gesture – too little too late! If the idea of the canonisers was to offset any bad influence Qoheleth might have, wouldn’t it have been more effective to

leave it out of the canon than to limply pretend that it doesn't say what it seems to say? The famous saying of R. Aqiba from the Mishnah, which Boer actually cites (64), confirms my point. It is usually cited (as by Boer) for what it says about Song of Songs, and I agree with him that Aqiba 'protests too much' that no one ever questioned the canonical status of the Song. But note the last sentence: 'And if [the canonisers] disputed, they disputed only concerning Qoheleth'. The exclusion of Qoheleth must have been seriously proposed, presumably on the ground of its extreme heterodoxy. But the canonisers either couldn't exclude it – because of its popularity? – or they didn't want to. Neither possibility is compatible with canonisation as a control mechanism.

My main argument with Boer, which will occupy the rest of this response, is his attitude to organised religion. He is totally pessimistic about its usefulness for his project. He allows himself in general, perhaps, a bit too much of the rhetoric of fashionable left pessimism, and it is interesting that, after the Obama victory, this has already begun to *feel* wrong. After all, the US president most identified with the Christian right is now judged the worst president in history by many more than those on the left! Of course the jury is out – and will be for a long time – on whether we have real grounds for being less pessimistic than in 2007 (when the book was published). But in fact Boer's pessimism is selective, concentrated at two points: organised religion and Australia. As to Australia, I can only say that, from a distance, Mr. Rudd seems a decided improvement on Mr. Howard; but Boer declines to see improvement (see also Anne Elvey, and Boer's response, in this volume).

His entire notion of alliance seems biased to the 'secular' side. It is 'a new secularism' that he seeks (1) – why not equally a new religion? The adjective he proposes for his new left, 'worldly', is simply a translation of 'secular'. He sees the secular left as resurgent, but can find no glimmer of a surge in the religious left. Let me cite at length a passage which, though it raises my problem in its acutest form, is not, I believe, seriously unrepresentative of the book as a whole:

... lest there should be some suspicion that I am a closet advocate of religious institutions such as Synagogue and Church, let me be perfectly clear: I do not harbour any hope that they can become progressive institutions as a whole. You simply have to be kidding if you think they can on their own become prophetic bodies, offer possibilities of improving society or make the world a better place. They are inherently conservative, patriarchal, stuffy and often brutal institutions. Yet there are elements within them, elements I have called the religious left, that continue to struggle despite the odds, and their struggle is worth all the support it can get. (41)

Does Boer really think that this is the rhetoric with which to advocate an alliance with the religious left? He seems to see us as everywhere beleaguered, everywhere 'driven ... underground' (36 – into some latter-day catacombs?) He projects the situation of those of us who advocate left politics in the church as one of nothing but 'struggle', as if our typical relationship with fellow Christians, with congregations and denominations, were a desperate fight for our lives, from which his alliance will bring us blessed relief. This is quite remote from my experience and from that of some of the people Boer takes as exemplars of left religious engagement, notably Gerald West (48–49; West also provides back cover blurb). Of course there are massive differences

between and within denominations, and many left Christians have a hard time. But Boer's vision is simply miles away from my experience in the United Church of Canada, and if that experience is unusual it is certainly not unique. I am not 'kidding' if I suggest that the UCC's decision, more than 20 years ago, to open ordination to self-declared homosexuals, was 'prophetic' and 'made the world a better place'! The use of 'patriarchal' for the UCC is particularly funny. And this is not some lunatic fringe sect, but the largest Protestant denomination in Canada.

The UCC has long had a close association with the New Democratic Party, which has deep socialist roots and whose present socialist credentials are respectable. Within the last few days it has been announced that the next principal of my seminary will be the former NDP Premier of Saskatchewan. (Another of Boer's exemplars, Erin Runions [47], has stood as a candidate for the NDP.) I could go on, for it is a theme I enjoy. One of the UCC's senior theologians is noted for the slogan, 'Not every socialist need be a Christian, but every Christian must be a socialist'. I don't believe he could get a majority even in the UCC to subscribe to this, but repeating it has not landed him in any trouble in the denomination or in the school where he taught (he is retired now), even though it is an interdenominational school including Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

I have always plied my trade as a biblical scholar in seminaries, and I do not relish being included among 'deeply inconsistent scholars who try to keep one foot in both camps' (2; he means 'in each camp'), or who 'live double lives, one of secular scholarship and the other of a personal life of faith, and never the twain shall meet' (11). It is not entirely clear what Boer is saying in this latter passage, for he sees these 'double lives' as one sign of the failure of the old secularist project, and I agree with that. But he still seems to regard us as, in fact, 'inconsistent', etc. I simply have no empathy with this. I do – continuing to borrow Boer's own words (11) – take my Bible freely back and forth between classroom and chapel (oftener than 'weekly'!) No paradox, no contradiction, no double life. This is not to deny the historical, and still in many places current, reality of struggles between scientific biblical criticism and confessionalism. But in many places they are over. My biggest problem is to convince my colleagues that my postmodern biblical meanderings really are relevant to their leftist projects!

To study the Bible with scholarly integrity entails, of course, constantly working with colleagues outside of religious frameworks. And of course, as Boer so well shows, the Bible is present (omnipresent, one might say) outside of religion. But this does not entail (as he seems to think) that the Bible as an element of religious life is somehow separable from the rest. I certainly know of cases where a biblical professor feels and is felt as a misfit in a seminary faculty, for the sort of reason that Boer gives. But this is not necessary and is not the norm. In fact, some of my colleagues, in church history or pastoral counselling, for example, need just as much as I to collaborate with 'secular' colleagues.

In my experience, the secular left, at least such sectors as are interested in alliance with the religious left, expects and *wants* the religious left to be religious! I find among such sectors lots of people who are far from stridently anti-religious, who feel themselves separated from active religion by no great distance, whose separation is perhaps due to some small circumstance. Religion has much to offer to leftists ground down by the struggle. A lot of the time, it is just about enjoying life together. Particularly, we sing together. The left used to sing together (*The Red Flag*, and so forth). I do not know to what extent various lefts sing together now, but I have a hunch that a left that does will have more stamina than one that doesn't! (This paragraph owes much to an

experience I had of attending for a day, through the good offices of Gerald West, a gathering of South African trades unionists, churched and unchurched, over the Jubilee Initiative.)

Boer argues the necessity of alliance between secular and religious lefts, to counteract the damaging social influence of the right, particularly on pages 37–40, and I shall spend some time with these pages. I appreciate and mostly agree with his argument but I have a few comments to make.

The religious right makes a strong bid to ‘steal’ the Bible (such claims – ‘we are the rightful owners because we read it right’ – are at least as old as the Qumran sect). What to do about it? We still have our Bibles (they haven’t been literally stolen) and we keep on using them to develop and communicate our social positions. In relatively left religious environments, the Bible continues to command a lot of attention. Events that our seminary puts on for a broad UCC audience are better subscribed when they have a biblical focus. This is partly to gain ammunition to combat the right at the local level; but we don’t have to convince our constituency that the Bible is on the side of the oppressed – they are convinced of that already. Maybe we just don’t make as much noise about the Bible as the right does, because what we want to say is more subtle and complicated. When, for example, Rosemary Ruether (1983, 23 and *passim* in Chap. 1) suggests that the Bible’s liberative impulse (‘prophetic principle’) encourages feminism even when the text is misogynistic in specifics, this gets plaudits among my people. But it is hard to say something like this quite as *spectacularly* as that Christ is coming the day after tomorrow or that gays will burn in hell!

We go on fighting the social battles as best we can, the sort of thing that Boer gathers under ‘identity politics’ (39). (I cannot take space to contest this term at length, but for Boer it includes an awful lot, stretching as far as ‘indigenous rights’ and ‘environmental good practice’. I catch a whiff of the pejorative, a side-swipe at any attempt to raise gender and race to the level of class. But this may be because of other conversations I have had with him.) And we seek alliances with whoever wants what we want. One of the advantages we have over the right is that we are not spooked by contact with ‘outsiders’! There is an awful lot of Boer’s sort of alliance already going on (for Canada see, e.g., Lind and Mihevc 1994).

And, strangely, we begin to hear frequent rumours that a few sectors of the Christian right are taking seriously the biblical mandate to be in solidarity with the oppressed – seeing it as part of the core of faith rather than just ‘issues’ (38). A fear, perhaps, that on this point we have stolen the Bible from them?

This was a book which absolutely cried out to be co-written. A call to alliance comes best from people representing different ones of the parties to be allied. And here I have to say that the *place* from which Boer proposes his alliance is mysterious. He does not define any particular secular left from which he speaks. He seems not decided about how far left he wants to project himself as being in this book. He welcomes reformers as well as revolutionaries, but sometimes lets slip that he can be really content only with a far left position (he does not see social democracy as ‘proper left’ [42], and see my earlier remarks about ‘identity politics’). He is especially anxious not to be thought a closet religionist. So from where, exactly, is he addressing us?

I think that he wants to derive authority from his *knowledge* of the religious left while shunning identification with it. And here I must personalise a little; my motive is not personal, it is a concern for the success of the alliance. Boer speaks of being at one time ‘trapped ... in an

insular church-based theological college' (8). An unknowing reader will assume that this college must fall within Boer's characterisation of the religious right rather than the religious left. This is not the case. That I happen to know this college well is due entirely to Boer; one of his last acts before his lucky escape from there was to invite me to give a series of lectures. It is a seminary of the Uniting Church of Australia. I know little of the problems Boer encountered, but I made good friends there and have subsequently visited on several occasions. I find it an easy place to be. The unknowing reader might be surprised to learn that Boer's successor there was not some dyed-in-the-wool conservative, but one of the world's leading postcolonial biblical scholars, and no more 'right' (though the political terms become elusive) than Boer himself.

I cannot see how Boer is furthering his project by alienating the substantial religious body in Australia, the Uniting Church, most likely to take an interest in it. But this is of a piece with how he projects religion *as such* throughout. Boer is knowledgeable about left religious groups in history and brings them effectively into his discussion. He helpfully directs attention to individual biblical scholars who are doing good things now in religious or partly religious settings. But I cannot recall where he speaks in a positive way about any religious groups of which he has direct experience or, to put it the other way around, recounts any direct experiences with religious groups towards which he feels positive. This will undermine his appeal to left Christians like the ones I know in my own setting, even though they will be hugely enthusiastic about what he has to say.

I don't want to be impertinent, but having been myself called (by implication) 'deeply inconsistent', it seems fair to press Boer as to the consistency of his own position. My point in doing so is to suggest that before there can be an effective call to the alliance he proposes, there needs to be an authorial alliance between people speaking clearly and confidently from both the secular and the religious left: co-authorship. But it will not be easy to find collaborators who can match Boer's massive knowledge of the issues.

ENDNOTES

¹ This response is altogether different from the one that I made at the SBL International Meeting in Auckland. This is both because I want to say something different and because I have contrived to lose all trace, both hard and soft, of my Auckland presentation! See the editorial introduction, above, to all the papers.

² I am not sure whether he wants to include Hebrews as well, since at this point he makes seven and seven equal thirteen; in fact, virtually nobody nowadays uses Hebrews to build their picture of Paul.

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