

○ ROLAND BOER, *RESCUING THE BIBLE*

A RESPONSE

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For many of us who continue to read the Bible, professionally or otherwise, Roland Boer's *Rescuing the Bible* offers both a challenge, to articulate political and ethical grounds for our reading practice, and hope, that to read the Bible outside (and sometimes within) the mainstream of the churches and synagogues is desirable. In some senses it is desire rather than faith (even where there is faith) that keeps many of us reading. The text for better or worse has caught us in its webs of meaning, counter-meaning, problematic violence and unruly resistances, its prophecy, passion, and even its inseparability from traditions that have sacralised its multivalent writings as one (or nearly one) canonical text.

It is desire that keeps us reading. Sometimes when I continue this somewhat eclectic pastime of biblical interpretation that passes for labour, but is at several removes from the labour that sustains life, I wonder – in the light of all that is pressing in our world and time – if such labour can be justified. At one level Boer's manifesto is a justification of academic labour, the privileged labour of reading and writing. At another level, it is a call for the Bible and its academic (and perhaps ecclesial) readers to come out into the world and see (with apologies to Wordsworth), and for the world, by way of a worldly left, to have another look at this troublesome and strangely compelling collection of texts that, as Boer shows, has been informing leftist aspirations and actions for some time. At yet another level, in offering and expounding on his six theses, Boer espouses a desire for a better world, which he proposes by way of an alliance between the religious left and the secular left, an alliance for which the Bible might yet offer elements toward a *mythos*.

Boer's analysis of the inter-influence of religion and secularism informs his vision of a new secularism to be enacted in a worldly left. The echoes of his biblical ministerial formation are evident, performed as an ironic and strategic reclaiming of the terms *worldly, this age, this world*, which are evil and passing only insofar as we allow them to be. Contemporary environmental concerns that appear only occasionally in Boer's manifesto remind us that we cannot afford to be glib about worlds being evil or passing. Since my own practice of biblical studies is ecologically oriented, I offer my response from within the framework of what might be understood as a more than human alliance.¹ While this approach may stretch Boer's text beyond its author's intentions, I offer it with respect and appreciation for the kind of model *Rescuing the Bible* provides, for articulating a basis from which to read the Bible politically and ethically in this moment.

Rescuing the Bible is a manifesto and its style and language reflect its genre:

- a hyperbolic rhetoric, which issues a summons to action;
- what appears to be a left/right polarity and hence an inscription of the right as *other* through a concern to derogate dangerous reactionary and, what seems a synonym, conservative, political and religious ideologies and practices;
- sometimes a dismissive tone, for example, about the ecological crisis being also a spiritual crisis.

Concerning the rise of spiritualities in a purportedly secular age, Boer writes:

Why, people began wondering, did all these spiritualities spring up when secularization was everywhere dominant? An all too easy answer trotted out once too often is that our (post-)modern, materialistic world does not provide spiritual answers. You still hear this tired old reason spouted by those who feel that the ecological 'crisis' is a spiritual crisis (18).

Underlying this apparent dismissal is a suspicion of appeals to the 'spiritual' standing in for more immediate material considerations.²

If the ecological crisis is principally about spirituality, then the material conditions of more than human others can be relegated to secondary status. Nevertheless, a more nuanced understanding of the question of spirituality in relation to ecological 'crisis' is possible. John Foster (1997, 12–13), for example, writes of a double aspect of environmental crisis:

On the one hand, we are plainly facing a crisis of resources, a crisis in the relation of humankind to the Earth considered in terms of life-support functions, ... which traditional economic categories of land and capital might plausibly be revised to accommodate. On the other hand, however, we are facing ... a crisis of *spirit*: a climacteric in our relations to the world of nature beyond us, at which ultimate questions of human identity, belonging and purpose are being raised. These crises, or aspects of the one crisis, are inextricable: the crisis of spirit is a crisis of the attitude which *takes* the Earth to be basically a set of resources, conservation of which just *as* resources (the economic model) only serves to lacerate the spirit further (emphases in original).

While critical of a designation of 'the world of nature' as 'beyond us', if this means nature is *wholly separate from* rather than *more than* human, I think Foster raises an important political and ethical point. Resisting, rethinking, and reimagining relations and systems that treat Earth, and indeed human, others as fundamentally resources in a capitalist economic framework, requires a revision of our understanding of what it means to be human in this moment.³ This task includes what is understood as spirituality. What is at stake, nonetheless, in a suspicion of a turn to spirituality is the whole dualistic framing of an opposition between the material and the spiritual (cf. Plumwood 1993). Boer's call for an alliance between a secular and a religious left is one strategy for undermining this material/spiritual dualism.⁴

Nevertheless, as Boer shows, the contemporary interplay of the secular and the religious is complex. There continues to be ample evidence of a reactionary politics in which the religious and the secular cooperate, for example, the new rules in force in Sydney for World Youth Day 2008, so that the visitors would not be embarrassed by unspecified 'inconvenient' behaviour.⁵ In support of his insistence that we continue to engage with the Bible otherwise denouncing 'the reactionary use and abuse of the Bible, for imperial conquest, oppression of all types, and the support of privilege and wealth' (79), Boer gives evidence of the use and abuse of the Bible in political frameworks in both Australia and the United States (80–96) and in ongoing battles over creationism, re-emerging in the guise of intelligent design (96–103). The focus coheres with his

earlier important work, particularly on the roles of the Bible in European colonising of Australia and the production of postcolonialism (Boer 2001).

Beyond the denunciation of uses and abuses of the Bible, Boer draws his reader, with sympathetic engagement, into a narrative recovery of ‘revolutionary readings of the Bible’ (105). He tells of Thomas Müntzer’s political agitation, Gerrard Winstanley’s ‘biblical communism’, and Camilo Torres’s liberation theology and freedom fighting (106–124). Perhaps most hopefully, Boer suggests that the Bible might yet offer a mythos for revolution, with a focus on biblical poetry and narratives that offer imagery, and perhaps also inspiration, for ‘critiquing oppression’, living collectively, and reclaiming the ‘chaotic’ (132–150).

While I have a basic sympathy with and respect for Boer’s project, I am however disturbed by some aspects of his argument, largely because I am coming from a different starting point. I want to do two things: firstly, to take up what I receive as an invitation, perhaps an imperative from Boer’s text, to read his manifesto with a dose of what he calls ‘theological suspicion’ (130); secondly, to offer (in the spirit of the gift and by way of response to Boer’s six theses) six preliminary theses of my own that may be grounds for an eco-manifesto for reading the Bible.

THEOLOGICAL SUSPICION

For Boer,

the main purpose of theological suspicion ... is to defuse the tendency to giving any object, idea or person a role in salvation, or turning them into quasi-divinities ...

The Bible is full of such tendencies, with its ideal figures such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, or indeed ‘God’, whose reputed words are pored over and mined for their meaning. ... theological suspicion is also the critique of idolatry, blocking the overwhelming drive to make an object of worship out of material things and human figures.

... [it] is another form of the Marxist practice of ideological suspicion. (130–131).

When Boer applies theological suspicion to the Bible, its interpretations and interpreters, he addresses various attempts to tame this unruly text including:

- the processes of canonisation (56–60);
- pseudepigraphy, the ascription of authorship of a text to a famous, legendary or historical figure, such as Moses, David, Paul, even ‘God’ (61–62);
- particular modes of interpretation, especially including typology, fulfilment, and allegory (62–66).

Let me apply suspicion initially in two areas, the notion of canonisation and the assessment of political leadership in Australia.

Firstly, if the processes of canonisation concern what is *in* and what is *out*, a kind of marking of the boundaries for the purposes of religious hegemony or otherwise, might there be an under-

lying canonisation in Boer's text of certain socialist writers and projects, so that what he describes as reactionary/conservative is out? Can there be a left-leaning positive 'take' on canons, biblical or socialist, and the processes of canonisation? Perhaps *Rescuing the Bible* is evidence that to some extent we cannot avoid forming canons (as we tend to do in English literature and critical theory) and, at the same time, a reminder that the circle of canonisation (like the circle of the gift) needs to be kept loose so as to let come 'the impossible', or at least the utopia of a worldly left (cf. Caputo 1997, 161).⁶

Secondly, in relation to the description of certain political appeals to the Bible as reactionary, Boer situates the former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, and key ministers of his government, Peter Costello and Tony Abbott, and the current Prime Minister Kevin Rudd together as members of the one 'pro-capitalist Christian party with different factions' (90). While I understand the basis for this assessment, I wonder what is at stake in collapsing what may become significant differences, and one major difference, between the current Australian federal government under Kevin Rudd and the government during which time Boer's manifesto took shape. The major difference to which I refer is the apology to the stolen generations which took place in and around Parliament House Canberra on 13 February 2008, an event that was bigger than the words of the politicians on the day. The event was in a sense brought into being by many people over many years and, in a particular way, by those who travelled and gathered to witness the apology both in Canberra and around Australia. In another sense, the event became possible because of an openness of the Rudd government to its possibility. Rudd's speech, if not directly referring to the Bible, alluded to Christian symbols and history, and seemed to hold a Pauline resonance: 'For us, symbolism is important but, unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little more than a clanging gong' (cf. 1 Cor 13:1).⁷ While words need to be followed by actions, the apology was a significant moment, albeit in a sparse history of moments involving Labour Prime Ministers, like the earlier Redfern address of Paul Keating at Sydney Park on 10 December 1992 and the handing back of land to the Gurindji by Gough Whitlam on 16 August 1975.⁸ These moments are all too few and sometimes speak to a preference for symbol over substance, as the ongoing tensions and failures of Commonwealth intervention in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities indicate.⁹ Interestingly, the report from a review into the Northern Territory Emergency Response, released on 13 October 2008, takes up the language of 'new covenant' from the event of the apology and offers significant recommendations for reform of relationships between government and Aboriginal communities.¹⁰ In the interim, Rudd has been criticised not only for endorsing what Andrew Hamilton (2008) names as the sin of overwork, but also for presenting himself as a kind of messiah, inaugurating a new age. While his pro-capitalist position is largely untenable given his and his party's commitments to a full response to climate change and the 'healing of the nation' to which the apology refers, I cannot help feeling that the rhetoric matters in opening spaces for action.

Boer also sees that the rhetoric matters, but where Boer prefers revolution (106), I think there is room for dialogue in a spirit of reform. Reading *Rescuing the Bible*, I am left unsure whether the preference for revolution is always about being outside of, and in tension with, the structures of power or whether Boer envisions a workable political structure to replace current ones. My feeling is that one also needs to work within current structures to effect change. Not either re-

volution and reform, but a strategic engagement in both revolutionary and reformist agendas. But Boer may say I am fence-sitting.

Reading Boer's manifesto, with I hope a respectful theological suspicion, I need to highlight four further concerns. Firstly, at times in the way Boer constructs the Bible, there seems to be an appeal to pure origins, so that as an unruly, uncanonised, uninterpreted (if this is possible) collection of multivalent texts the Bible itself is returned to us as a paradise lost (albeit a far feistier one).¹¹ Secondly, in the discussion of the (ab)use of the Bible, especially where certain biblical texts are seen as abusive in their own right before any malevolent/abusive interpretive mediation, I wonder if, in an avoidance of signifying certain literary, historical, and socio-cultural approaches as the interpretive 'proper', there is a new kind of literalism in relation to the Bible. How can we avoid this? Thirdly, and somewhat playfully, the title *Rescuing the Bible* could be read as messianic in its own right. While it seems to echo John Shelby Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, it could be understood not as a rescuing *from* but as a rescuing *for* a reconstituted worldly left. Can the notion of rescue be recovered, without carrying in its wake the accompanying concept of messiah? Fourthly, in passing Boer refers to biblical images of a more than human alliance, principally as portrayed in the peaceable kingdom motif (142–146). This motif, which is not really 'ecotopian' (145), concerns me insofar as it finds its symbol in a vision of the extinction of significant species differences between predator and prey (cf. Elvey 2005). In the vision of community harmony a different level of unruliness, albeit a violent one, is smoothed out. What other kind of more than human alliances might be possible?

AN ECO-MANIFESTO

Far more modestly than Luther, Boer offers us six theses. In reading his manifesto, I enjoyed the engagements with biblical texts and the biographies of Boer's Bible-reading revolutionaries. I was struck, in Boer's valorisation of revolution, insurrection and unruliness, by what might be construed in a more than human context as a preference for the wild (cf. Keller 2003). As I read, however, I was concerned with how sparse were the references to a more than human context, and how humanist (without necessarily being wholly anthropocentric) the framework of the manifesto was in general. So, I was challenged in the end to suggest my own preliminary principles for an eco-manifesto. I could have adopted the excellent ecojustice principles (also six) so carefully worked out by the Earth Bible Team (Habel 2000, 24). But those principles deal less with how the Bible might be approached as with a foundation from which to approach it. Boer's principles offer a model of both foundation and approach.

So, six principles for an eco-manifesto:

1. A more than human alliance is necessary for human response to contemporary ecological damage, much of it occasioned by particular human groups engaged in what has become a system of global capitalist consumerism that has focused on particular notions of the individual elite subject as consumer, whose habits of consumption rely on the labour of many more than human others, including other humans. A more than human alliance requires a shift of subjectivity, and an extended understanding of sociality, so that humans are understood as embodied and embedded within the plural otherness of a more than human Earth community.

2. A politics of more than human alliance recognises both human power and human vulnerability with respect to more than human others.
3. The politics and ethics of this more than human alliance are based in an ecophilosophical, and ecotheological, analysis (in the mode of Plumwood 1993, 2002 and Ruether 1992) of the intersections between oppression of human and other than human members of the Earth community, and the recognition of difference within and between human communities regarding practices of more than human alliance.
4. In the context of this more than human alliance, the Bible is a material artefact of one Earth species, more particularly of certain cultures (religious and secular or new secular) within that species. The Bible is moreover a site of interconnectedness between matter (plants, minerals, fossils), bodies, breath, language, oral and written traditions, societies and their stories, human habitats, climates, and the dissonances amongst these.
5. Its cultural status as sacred text needs to be taken seriously and re-imagined within a more than human alliance that potentially includes a divine otherness, understood not as presence, but in terms of a negative theology/phenomenology that does not privilege divine presence (or absence) over material exigencies.
6. Reading the Bible for, and in the context of, this more than human alliance needs to be twofold: firstly, resisting readings and texts that promote abuse of Earth (including humans), that occurs either through direct action (e.g., cutting down trees because God gave them) or through supporting systems of such abuse; secondly, developing readings that offer not so much an impetus to care for Earth (though this is important) but that empower ecotivism, resistance, lamentation, and a capacity to turn toward Earth.

Finally, one of the effective myths of socialism to which Boer refers is the general strike (30). This leads me to wonder what an ecological general strike might look like. Unfortunately, there are senses in which this is upon us, in the degradation of land and river systems that can no longer sustain other lives, and for the inhabitants of Kiribati [Kiribas] and other Pacific atolls in the effects of climate change. In avoiding eschatological and apocalyptic renderings of these events, can we perhaps envisage an eco-socialist more than human alliance that responds at multiple levels to the ‘natural’ resistances these events may represent, realising that in our relative privilege as labourers of reading and writing we are ourselves largely on the side of capital. *Rescuing the Bible*, with its engaging articulation of a worldly alliance, perhaps opens a space beyond its primary focus, for an eco-socialist biblical engagement to come.¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ The term ‘more than human’ is not intended to exclude humans; rather, more than human includes humankind as one diverse species among many constituents of an Earth community of which mammals, and animals more generally, are only a part.

² This is a concern that Gerald West shares, in particular, in his paper ‘From a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for the economy to the RDP of the soul: public realm biblical appropriation in postcolonial South Africa’, given at the Bible and Justice Conference, Sheffield, 1 June 2008.

³ Such a revision is a, and perhaps the, major task of ecospirituality within an increasingly broad field of ecohumanities, that includes highly nuanced analyses in the fields of ecocriticism, ecophilosophy,

and ecotheology, to name a few (see, for example, Keller 2003; Mathews 1994; Morton 2007; Plumwood 1993, 2002; Rigby 2004).

4 Later, Boer, in his somewhat provocative example of the ordination of animals, suggests that the inclusion of other than humans as agents in a more than human framework, may indeed unsettle our understanding of the human at the level of our relation to, and mediation of, the sacred (77–78). I think, however, that both strategically and critically talk about the ordination of animals is not the place to begin. We need careful observation and consideration of roles and relations between all constituents of the Earth community, humans and otherwise, to understand how agency is operating, what it means, and what mediations (economic, sacred, compassionate, resistant, and so on) are occurring. Boer’s description of the post-secular as calling into question secular/religious; secular/sacred; secular/spiritual distinctions is also very pertinent here.

5 See particularly cl 7 (1) (b) World Youth Day Regulation 2008, version current for 1 July 2008. Note that ‘On 15 July 2008, the Federal Court in *Evans v State of New South Wales* [2008] FCAFC 130 declared that “cl 7 (1) (b) is invalid to the extent to which it is applied to conduct which causes annoyance to participants in World Youth Day events”. Available at <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/fullhtml/inforce/subordleg+32+2008+FIRST+0+N> (accessed 17 October 2008).

6 I am stretching John Caputo’s reference to ‘the impossible’, drawn from Jacques Derrida (1994), to include the play of the possible and the impossible in the utopian vision that resonates in Boer’s manifesto.

7 See both the speech of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the very different, and what many found offensive, speech of the Leader of the Opposition Dr Brendan Nelson in Hansard of 13 February 2008 at <http://www.aph.gov.au/Hansard/reps/dailys/dr130208.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2008).

8 For the relevant speeches by Paul Keating and Gough Whitlam see <http://www.nswalp.com/redfern-speech> and <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/telegraph/speeches/whitlam.htm> (accessed 17 October 2008).

9 See for example, Brown and Brown (2007); Robson (2008); ‘Northern Territory Intervention One Year On’, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2008/06/20/2279542.htm>; Amnesty International, ‘Reviewing the Northern Territory Intervention’ <http://www.amnesty.org.au/aus/comments/17830/> (accessed 17 October 2008).

10 See the full Report of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Review Board at <http://www.nterreview.gov.au/report.htm> (accessed 17 October 2008).

11 Admittedly, Boer criticises just this aspect of Bloch’s thought (55).

12 Such an engagement may have an ear to the ecojustice orientation of the Earth Bible; the liberation hermeneutics of Leonardo Boff (1995), Ivone Gebara (1999, 2003) and others; ecofeminist critiques of globalisation (Shiva 2005, Eaton and Lorentzen 2003); Marxist engagements with the Bible (Boer 2003) and ecology (Foster 2000); and a world of more than human others whose livelihoods remain mostly unacknowledged background and resource for global consumer capital.

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