

Rescuing the Bible

Roland Boer



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Preface

I have written this manifesto for general readers who are interested in the current relations between the Bible and politics. I hope that it may also be useful for specialists, but I have put aside the usual chatter of scholarly footnotes, arcane theory and quibbling over minor details of interest to only a few. I do not presume any special relation to the Bible, except that it remains an extremely important political text. The reader may notice here and there that the spirits of Marx and Engels, especially from *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, are occasionally present.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, for the simple reason that this translation does not try to smooth over the rougher and unpalatable edges of the Hebrew and Greek texts. Finally, thanks are due to Mark Crees for his invaluable work on this book.

Introduction

My task is to rescue the Bible from the clutches of the religious and political right, its most systematic abusers. It is far too important and too multi-vocal a text to be surrendered to right-wing agendas. As far as the left is concerned, the old divisions of religious left and secular left are no longer workable. So I argue that they should unite in a common front – a ‘worldly left’ – in order to reclaim and rescue the Bible for radical politics. Fortunately for such a common left, the Bible is so multi-vocal that it is perfectly plausible to draw from it a deep current of revolutionary themes. And it matters not whether those who read the Bible in this way are ‘believers’ or not.

Theses for a Worldly Left

That, in a nutshell, is the position of this manifesto, but let me put my positions in terms of six theses:

- 1 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.
- 2 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

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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 (Matthew 10:16).

- 3 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 (Ernst Bloch).
- 4 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.
- 5 Taking the side of liberation, we also need to recover the tradition of revolutionary readings of the Bible.
- 6 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.

I will say a little more about each thesis, since they encapsulate the main arguments of this book. I begin in the first chapter by proposing that the best context for rescuing the Bible is what I call a 'new secularism'. The reason for such a proposal is that the old programme of secularism in all its different dimensions is flawed and riddled with paradoxes. Despite all the efforts to see the old secularism and religion as implacable opponents, they continue to be entwined in an unholy embrace. The separation of Church and state has become a legal fiction, far removed from the daily politics of states. In biblical scholarship, the supposed distinction between 'scientific' and 'confessional' study of the Bible produces deeply inconsistent scholars who try to keep one foot in both camps. And the process of secularization has run aground with the rise of all manner of personal spiritualities and the return of

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religion – especially conflicts between the so-called ‘religions of the book’ – as a major factor in global politics and the ‘war on terror’. The answer, I suggest, is not to be found in what some have named ‘post-secularism’ (the return of spirituality and religion), but in a new secularism. The last part of the chapter outlines what such a new secularism means for the Bible. This new secular approach to the Bible has five features: it recognizes the mutual benefit of the entwining of religion and secularism; it urges a reading of the Bible in light of theological suspicion in order to block idolatrous readings of the Bible (either as the gods or as human leaders); it denounces abuse of the Bible; it fosters emancipatory readings; and it pursues a politics of alliance between the religious left and the old secular left. These five points of the new secularism really comprise the programme for the rest of the book.

The next chapter develops what I call the ‘worldly left’ – the alliance between the old secular left and the religious left – as the way to reclaim the Bible. I begin by outlining the background for such an alliance. Thus I trace the way the Bible has been stolen by the religious right. Claiming to be ‘Bible-based’, the religious right has claimed exclusive ownership of the Bible. By giving into this language, and by focusing its energy on the various causes of identity politics, especially the battles for the ordination of women and the roles of gays and lesbians, the religious left has surrendered the Bible to the religious right. The paradox that just as the religious left is under siege within religious institutions, the secular left is in resurgence, although now in new ways. In this situation, I urge a politics of alliance between the religious left and the old secular left, to the mutual benefit of both. Within that alliance, the Bible can play a central role. Or rather, it has begun to play such a role, for alongside an ever larger number of biblical scholars making use of Marxist methods, we also find an increasing fascination in the midst of the secular left with the political possibilities of the Bible. In light of these developments, I suggest that we should speak of a ‘worldly left’ as the name for an allied religious and secular left.

The third chapter makes two arguments: the Bible is political-ly multi-valent, and it is an unruly collection of texts that has been colonized and dominated by Synagogue and Church. As far as the

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multi-valency of the Bible is concerned, two phrases by Ernst Bloch express it very well: while the Bible is ‘often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich’ (Bloch 1972: 25), it is also ‘the Church’s bad conscience’ (Bloch 1972: 21). Both observations are true: the Bible has often been and continues to be read as a friend of the rich and powerful *and* it has been and continues to be an inspiration for revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow their rich and powerful oppressors. I explore this political ambivalence of the Bible in two instances: in the debates over Zionism within Judaism; and in the battles over identity politics in the churches. However, a major reason for the multi-valency of the Bible is that it is an unruly collection of texts. In order to show up its unruliness, I retell the story of canonization, which turns out to be nothing less than an effort to suppress and bring to order a fractious rabble of texts. As with any effort to confine undesirables, the texts within the Bible strain to break out and take on very different and often far more interesting identities than the official ones. Needless to say, my position is that the Bible should not remain under the exclusive control of religious institutions and monopolies, for Synagogue and Church are by their very nature overwhelmingly stuffy and conservative. There is no chance in hell that they will become progressive or revolutionary bodies as a whole. They may contain radical, breakaway elements, but, as with the process of canonization, they are either kicked out or roped in.

With such a history behind it, it is no wonder that the religious right finds fertile ground in the Bible for its political and religious programmes. Thus the subject of the fourth chapter is to condemn the (ab)use of the Bible by the religious right. However, by ‘abuse’ I mean not merely the twisting of biblical texts away from their supposed original meaning, but especially the *use* of those texts that openly support oppression and exploitation – whether in terms of economics, politics, religion, gender, race and so on. It involves, in other words, the *use of abusive texts* from the Bible. Here I am concerned with the Bible in politics, science and education. We find it abused in Australia by the efforts of conservative politicians to construct a myth of a comfortable Christian Australia, untroubled by those annoying

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interest groups such as feminists, gays and lesbians, indigenous and environmentalist activists and, of course, Muslims. In the USA, we find a sustained effort to slip into the Bible as a superpower, one whose task is to protect an Israel that really becomes an extension of itself. As far as science is concerned, the conflicts between the theories of 'intelligent design' (a slick makeover for an older 'creation science') and evolution increasingly have a profound effect on education, from primary to tertiary levels. Like the current trends in global politics, this is also an abuse of the Bible.

However, the Bible is too multi-valent to be surrendered to the religious and political right, so I turn in the fifth and sixth chapters to ask what a rescued Bible might look like. Such a Bible has two features: a long revolutionary legacy and a basis for a political myth for the worldly left. Thus, in the fifth chapter, I trace that revolutionary legacy. What is it, I ask, about this text that continues to inspire revolutionary movements and trenchant criticisms of political and economic oppression? In order to gain a sense of this tradition, I discuss Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' Revolt in sixteenth-century Germany; Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in seventeenth-century England; liberation theology in our era, especially the guerrilla priest Camilo Torres; and then the long history of religious socialism. Perhaps the most intriguing feature is that secular revolutionary movements have also drawn from the Bible, and so I consider both Georges Sorel and Ernst Bloch.

In the sixth chapter I offer a few suggestions for building a biblical political myth that may be of use to a worldly left. I speak of myth quite deliberately, and especially of political myth. And the reason is not merely that the Bible deals in mythology, but also that myth is an extraordinarily powerful political medium. Some of the ingredients of such a political myth may be found in the vast biblical storehouse of progressive and revolutionary images, metaphors and stories. There are three elements in the proposed political myth: the repeated condemnations of economic and social exploitation and oppression, the metaphors of a better social and economic order, and the deep theme of rebellious chaos and disorder.

1

The New Secularism

First Thesis: Since the old programme of secularism has run aground, I propose a new secularism that sees the entwining 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.

This chapter explores what the first thesis means in some detail. It sets up the context for rescuing the Bible in terms of the collapse of the old secularism, the false hopes of ‘post-secularism’ and the possibilities of what I call the new secularism.

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In late 1999 I taught a class entitled ‘Culture, Religion and Spirituality’. Such a course had never been taught before at this particular place, the University of Western Sydney, but at the first class the students flooded in and I found myself with more than I could handle. In particular, there were two surprises in store for me. The first was more personal: I suddenly realized that I had slipped into another generation, for these students were the age of my eldest children. The true meaning of those things I had been denying, such as the wombat nose, sprouting ears, and an increasing chrome dome, was now revealed to me.

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More importantly, however, was the fact that virtually none of the students in the course would admit to being religious. If they were anything, it was spiritual. No one, apart from a stray fundamentalist or two who had wandered into the class by mistake, read their Bibles. But they read and did a great many other things. There was the Satanist who gave a tutorial telling us how nice Marilyn Manson really is. Or the sports freak, who told us she felt spiritual when her stomach muscles ached from too many sit-ups. Then there were the crystals passed around another tutorial group; ‘feel how warm they are’, we were instructed, as we heard how they help calm and orient oneself in the morning. In another tutorial, a student told us about the spirituality of the *Matrix* films, showing snippets of the film from a badly pirated copy that must have been made with a hand-held camera in the cinema. Perhaps my favourite was a presentation, held off until the last day and given a little nervously. After a last drag on a menthol cigarette the student pulled a pile of books out of his bag in order to bolster his position. He then proceeded to explain – with abundant ‘proof’ – how all the great religious leaders were actually from a superior civilization that happened to live on one of the comets that passed the Earth every few centuries. Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and the Buddha had all leapt to earth for a time, passed on their wisdom recorded in the various scriptures, and then rejoined their galactic home as it moved on. When I asked him how they had managed that small problem of leaping through space onto Earth and back again, the reply was disarmingly simple: they are superior to us, aren’t they?

My experience with this class raises in an acute form the topic of this chapter: the relation of the Bible to secularism, post-secularism and what I will call the ‘new secularism’. In particular, the question I faced was why it had become perfectly acceptable, cool even, to be spiritual. It was certainly not what I had assumed was the status quo: not that long ago, if you showed a tendency to meditate and hum the sacred syllable, ‘om’, or if you actually went to church and read the Bible, you were a ‘weirdo’, part of a fading minority, and definitely not cool. What had changed? I wondered. Why was secularism on the retreat after a century and a half of a somewhat rocky march forward?

So in the chapter that follows I need to make a detour through the issues of secularism and post-secularism before returning in the second half to consider the impact of these developments on the Bible and how it might be read.

The Paradoxes of Secularism

As for my discoveries in the ‘Culture, Religion and Spirituality’ course, I soon found a term for the development of all manner of spiritualities, a development that had somehow escaped me, trapped as I was at the time in an insular church-based theological college. It is post-secularism. But before I discuss that, a few words on secularism are in order. Although I am usually wary of etymologies that trace the meaning of a word back to its Latin or Greek origin, occasionally the exercise is useful. ‘Secularism’ derives from the Latin term *saeculum* (adjective, *saecularis*); it means an age, a generation, or the spirit of the age. The basic meaning of secularism (it was coined by George Holyoake around 1850 after a short stint in prison for blasphemy) draws from this Latin sense; *it designates a system of thought, indeed a way of living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world.* That is the positive sense of the term. Of course, it has an implied negative, namely that secularism does not draw its reference point from something beyond this world, whether that is a god or the gods above, or a time in the future, or indeed a sacred text such as the Bible that talks about both.¹

If secularism designates a certain way of living and thinking, then its related term – secularization – deals with the process by which secularism comes about. More specifically, secularization is the long process in which the key reference points for the everyday workings of a capitalist society focus on this age and this world and not any world beyond. With a few bumps and hiccoughs on the way, secularization has generally been understood as an inexorable process. One by one, social assumptions concerning everything from sexuality to food have been shifting their focus away from religious authority.

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These are the basic senses of secularism and secularization with which I work. However, there are some derivatives or secondary features of these terms that I will discuss briefly: secularism as an anti-religious programme; the nature of intellectual inquiry, especially biblical studies; and the separation of Church and state. Most significantly, I want to highlight the fact that each secondary feature has a number of problems and paradoxes. Finally, I consider the paradox of secularization itself.

Anti-religious secularism

The problem with a term such as secularism is that its sense has slipped to mean anything that is opposed to supernatural religion. Secularism then becomes another word for atheism. This slippage and confusion of the term was made quite clear to me in the story of a now distant friend. He had been appointed as the inaugural lecturer in studies in religion at a rural university. On enrolment day, he dutifully took up his seat in the enrolment hall, seeking to enlist the odd student who wanted to take his only course for that year, 'An Introduction to Religious Experience'. In a few minutes, a stout grey-bearded lecturer from another discipline walked up to his desk and boomed out so that all could hear, 'Are you the new religious studies lecturer?' My friend replied in the affirmative. 'Are you religious?' asked the other lecturer. This time the reply was negative. 'I don't believe you', said the man. 'This studies in religion you're supposed to teach – it's just a cover for religious proselytizing. Religion has no place in a secular university'. The other lecturer thumped off to his desk as my friend pondered what he had walked into.

This bearded lecturer had made the popular confusion of secularism with a non-religious or indeed an anti-religious stance. However, we can distinguish this sense – the anti-religious one – from the basic sense of secularism rather easily. If secularism means a system of thought and a way of life that is based in this world and this age, then the anti-religious sense is derivative and not crucial to its meaning.² The catch is that too often implications like this one are understood to be *the* meaning of secularism. Yet the anti-religious position

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may follow from secularism, it may even be an implication of it, but it is secondary to the meaning of secularism itself. Too soon problems arise with the anti-religious position. If we take such a position, then secularism becomes confused with atheism, which is itself a religious position. It is an old point, but the denial or rejection of a god or gods would not be possible if there were no religions. Formally, atheism is no different from the many other religious commitments one might make.

Further, there are a good many people who are religious secularists and who see no contradiction in holding both religion and secularism together. What they mean by this is that secularism is the basis for religious tolerance, arguing that secularism was an effort to deal with the religious conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Europe. No one religion should lord it over another, and the only way to ensure such tolerance is to insist on a secular society that favours none. Again, this is an implication or one of the outcomes of the basic sense of secularism.

Biblical studies

As far as intellectual disciplines are concerned, secularism means that they must operate in a secular manner. Here the catchwords 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. One still hears claims that biblical studies is a scientific discipline, concerned with the hard data of textual manuscripts, history, archaeological artefacts and other sundry pieces. Indeed, some claim that biblical studies has been a secular discipline for well over a century, and that this tradition is well worth fighting for over against the return of faith-based readings. What is meant by this claim is that when biblical scholars deal with the history of the text – its gradual development into the final text we have now – and the history behind the text, or indeed