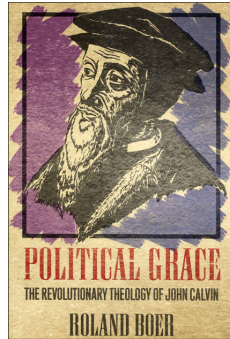


○ REVIEW OF ROLAND BOER, *POLITICAL GRACE: THE REVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN*

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‘Political grace’, ‘revolutionary theology’: appropriately provocative phrases for a book that explores the intriguing proposition that there is more in common – perhaps even ‘paths’ – between theology and radical politics than what is usually assumed (especially in secular, capitalist societies), commonalities or paths that may, for example, be gleaned from the works of a man who is ordinarily considered *anything but* a political radical, John Calvin.

How, then, does Boer reveal a revolutionary Calvin? He begins where he ought: with Calvin’s context. Boer explains that there were significant political and religious upheavals during Calvin’s time (the Affair of the Placards, the Münster Revolution, the Peasants’ Revolt), so he was keen to stress to the authorities that what he was doing wasn’t rebellious – a case of ‘protesting too much’. Boer meticulously examines and exposes the ways in which Calvin’s denial not only discloses certain features of medieval feudal society, but also his acknowledgement of the relation between theology and politics, as well as the revolutionary element within Calvin’s own work. In order to expose and explore this inner tension, Boer examines a number of issues like the status of the Bible for Calvin: a ‘high view’ of Scripture typically leads to a conservative stance, but Scripture itself is heterogeneous in terms of conservative *and* progressive elements – Boer refers to biblical instances of prophetic criticism of oppression (Isaiah, Micah, Amos); of collective living (Acts of the Apostles, Gospels); of inclusion and openness (Peter’s dream in Acts). And this heterogeneity cannot be contained – especially by someone as anchored in Scripture as Calvin.

The internal tension in Calvin’s work is then explored via his extreme figuration of grace, especially in terms of human ‘corruption’ i.e. that *all* of us are *utterly* depraved, *wholly* sinful. Of course, no-one can fathom how much psychological damage this has done (and Boer, whose father was a minister, touches on its consequences for the Boer family and for fellow-parishioners), but the astonishing thing about Boer’s discourse on this question is his identification of a *positive*

element: 'it is a deeply democratic and egalitarian doctrine', 'a *democracy of depravity*' (p. 41). Calvin's doctrine on depravity may be a doctrine of depravity, but it is nevertheless a kind of equaliser, in which the rich and powerful do not escape its scope or grasp. It also has the effect, as Boer notes, of intensifying the power of grace, as it has an inverse relation with fallenness-sinfulness. In the context of such extreme configurations of key concepts, Boer scrutinises the notion of 'conversion' and related words in terms of revolution. The upshot is that Calvin configures grace in very radical terms – so much so that he is forced to 'rope grace back in'.

The same goes for Calvin's configuration of words like 'freedom'. Once again, there are revolutionary resonances, such as freedom from the law, so Calvin is pressed to distinguish between interior freedom and the public realm. The tension in Calvin's work also expresses itself when he grapples with the question of politics (the last chapter of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*). Boer remarks: 'Every sentence of this chapter manifests the tension that I have been tracing' (p. 75). He explores this tension in terms of Calvin's insistence that divine obedience has precedence over earthly obedience, so when worldly rulers contravene the Bible, there is an 'exception' (Calvin's term) to earthly obedience. This opens up the possibility of revolution. The final chapter discloses how Calvin's ambivalence – multivalence – reflects the duality in Paul's writings. As Boer explains: 'In the same way that Paul equivocates over the radical possibilities of this new message and his tendency to recoil, so also does Calvin' (p. 110). The Conclusion, which Boer explicitly introduces as being more speculative than the preceding chapters (p. 111), frees Calvin's revolutionary element/potential from the conservatism and biblicalism that restrains it. It is here that Boer identifies modern thinkers who have identified the revolutionary kernel in Christianity (e.g. Engels, Kautsky, Luxemburg) – a task that Boer himself has taken up in this and other books.

There are those of us who enjoy and are edified by thinkers who identify and nobly subvert the tensions and paradoxes in culture-shaping works such as Calvin's *Institutes*, a task that is carried out in Boer's *Political Grace*. This task of identification and subversion requires patience and incisiveness – as well as the necessary doses of irony and playfulness, for to seriously propose that there is a politically radical Calvin requires a certain amount of cheekiness, perhaps even a certain courage. And Boer carries out this task with all of these skills and stylistics. Of course, there is always the danger in a work like this one that its author is searching for something that may not be there – Boer himself acknowledges that he will be accused of 'ventriloquising, of making Calvin speak with my own voice' (p. 45), and he himself rightly realises that interpretation is a process of exegesis and eisegesis/reading-into (p. 57). However, there is not an inordinate amount of eisegesis going on in this text – *but even if there were*, it would still be *admirable*. Why? Because what the world needs more than anything else is revolution, and if Boer discerns or 'imagines' something of the revolutionary in Calvin, then this is a good thing, for it may inspire Calvinists and other Christians – indeed, believers of various faiths – to join forces with revolutionary atheists/secularists for the kind of solidarity needed for overcoming oppressions (religious, political, sexual, racial, ecological, etc.) and for transforming the world.

The question that remains, however, is whether the revolutionary Calvin can eclipse the conservative one – in other words, perhaps baby Calvin is still too dirty and therefore needs to be thrown out with the bathwater.