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Secularisation and the Leiden Circle

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Mark Somos has written a challenging and fascinating book. *Secularisation and the Leiden Circle* is to be commended for its topic (the much maligned origins and process of secularisation), for the author?s depth and breadth of knowledge and for his impressive research and analysis of the source material. It is a *tour de force* by any measure and as the book of a PhD thesis even more so. While I greatly enjoyed reading it, and would urge anyone interested in either secularisation in the early modern period, or the intellectual history of the University of Leiden in the first decades after its foundation, to read it, this recommendation comes with a serious health warning. Reading Somos? book requires concentration and focus of sometimes epic proportions. The problem is that it is not very well written and certainly not edited at all. As sophisticated as the content is, this book is still very much a thesis. Stylistically it sways from the colloquial to the schematic (there are many multiple pointed paragraphs), it is rambling, far too long (it could have been easily cut down by a third) and its structure leaves much to be desired. By the end I felt literally bashed over the head by the author?s arguments and rather beaten into agreeing with him, which was not necessary as I was already sympathetic to his case. Brill?s editors should be asking themselves some serious questions about their copy-editing process. This is a real shame because the author has a great deal to teach us.

Somos begins his book by stating his research question: ?when, how and why did religious justifications fade out from mainstream legal, political, and scientific writings in the West?? (p. 1) This is an important

question to ask even if some of us suspect the answer is not as clear as the author suggests. Somos finds his answer in the Dutch Republic of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, at the University of Leiden. Recently founded in 1575, it played host to a circle of like-minded scholars, with the Frenchman Joseph Scaliger as the central figure, who were closely connected and committed to a programme of secularisation by common experiences and intellectual convictions. For the author, secularisation was a process and a model, though not an end in itself. Scaliger and his fellow scholars should not be seen as proto-atheists or forerunners of Israel?s Radical *Lumieres*, although there are many connections to be made between the two, but instead as the protagonists of a necessary and, at times, seemingly inevitable development. Like Israel, Somos is concerned with Western modernity and sees secularisation is its essence. The line to the (Radical) Enlightenment is easily drawn. As Somos concedes: ?In Leiden, as in a microcosm, we see all the components of the Enlightenment present and prefigured? (p. 90).

The case of secularisation is presented as a conscious step to be taken following the devastating effects of the Reformation and the ensuing European wars of religion. Emanating from its embers, secularisation was therefore in the first place a pacifist idea as much as an ideal. Like-minded scholars and intellectuals became convinced of the need to remove theology from all aspects of thought to avoid both violent and intellectual conflict in the future. Somos sees its history as marked by setbacks and interruptions and acknowledges that its path is neither straight nor straightforward. Nevertheless he narrows its development down to three contexts, which were all connected and contingent. Secularisation projects could be found first of all among the 16th century French *politiques*; secondly within Scaliger?s Leiden Circle c. 1600; and finally among the Arminians in 17th?century England. The author explains his focus on Leiden, which provides, in his rather clunky expression, the illustration needed to prove his point. While other ?discourses or fields? could have been chosen, ?the Dutch episode around the turn of the seventeenth century, from the opening of Leiden University in 1575 to the Synod of Dordt in 1618-19 [...] was a major turning-point in the broader history of secularisation [...]? (p. 7). When the French *politique* project ended in failure following the St Bartholomew?s Day Massacre, the Dutch took over the baton of the project before passing it on to the English, making them the pivotal players in the story. Moreover, the history of the newly-established and not-yet-consolidated Dutch Republic provides the perfect backdrop to place Somos? arguments into a political context.

The book discusses four of the key members of his Leiden Circle, who were united by historicisation and irenicism. The first chapter is dedicated to the contributions of Joseph Scaliger. Born and educated in France, he is presented as leading in the second stage of secularisation after the failure of the first stage, the *Politiques?* project. Following the work done by Anthony Grafton, Somos explains how in his work Scaliger rejected all privileged epistemic status, including biblical or revelatory, in favour of critical history. Elevating history to the ?master discipline', he put down the foundations for the work of the other members of the Leiden circle. With this, Leiden secularisation was born and his legacy was carried forward by his many students who would continue this programme. Scaliger?s successor was his pupil Daniel Heinsius, a gifted scholar who is now mainly remembered for his biblical criticism or his literary influence. While his drama theory and vernacular poetry influenced generations of poets and playwright across Europe, as a political thinker he is largely forgotten. Here he is placed in a new context, namely alongside his fellow Leiden thinkers. Somos also offers a new reading of one of his most important texts *On the Constitution of Tragedy* (1610). In the early 17th century, the ethical role of tragedy in the formation of Christian citizens became an important topic of debate. The Leiden Circle now shifted its attention from history to drama: ?It is interesting to note that while the first Leiden generation (Dousa, Junius, Lipsius, Vulcanius, Scaliger) did not begin their academic careers with satirical, skeptical or stoical texts, they made sure that the second generation did. It seems that the first generation of the Leiden Circle decided to thoroughly coach their students in satire and skepticism at the earliest possible opportunity? (p. 285). In all this, Heinsius? work set new standards which precluded religion. Moreover, writing against the backdrop of the emerging battle between Arminians and Gomarists, his work also had political relevance. Three years after the publication of *On the Constitution of Tragedy*, he confirmed his secularising ideas on assuming the Chair of History at Leiden in his inaugural text, *On the Superiority and Dignity of History*. Amongst other things, it explored alternatives to Christian immortality, a notion which would preoccupy Heinsius? later works. In a very

thorough and at times rather laboured reading of these texts, Somos concludes that, despite (or even because of) his devout Calvinism, Heinsius? preoccupation served a pacifist purpose, summing up his contribution as ?not mere humanistic exercises in rhetoric [...] but elements of a systematic attempt to minimise potential areas of religious conflict?.

As important as Scaliger?s and Heinsius? contributions were, the key member of the Leiden Circle and their programme of secularisation, and this book?s main protagonist, was Petrus Cunnaeus, another one of Scaliger?s students. He is best known for his work on the Hebrew Republic, entitled *De Republica Hebraeorum Libri Tres*, but Somos leaves this text to one side, briefly summarising its achievements as showing both discontinuity between the divine and the worldly republics as well as the potential for comparison, ?making the divine polity not special, but fully comparable with others? (p. 202) .Instead he focuses his analysis on Cunnaeus' *Sardi Venales* , a satire which 'marks a milestone in the progress of secularisation in Leiden and in general?. He sees it as the culmination of the programme of the Leideners, complimenting both his predecessor Heinsius and his successor Grotius, and anticipating Cunnaeus' own *De Republica Hebraeorum.* Written as a Mennipean satire, the *Sardi Venales* combined three discourses to ?prevent the mystical, scientific, or philosophical reassertion of Christianity?s normative monopoly? (p. 215). Cynicism, Rabbinism and Christian minimalism provided the trio of approaches needed to achieve this goal. While the author is sensible in warning against reading secret codes and messages without good reason, he proceeds to analyse multiple layers of esoteric meaning in Mennipean satire in general and in the *Sardi Venales* in particular, running the risk of falling into this very trap. Yet largely he manages the multi-layered background of Cunneaus? masterpiece, which includes humanism, Kabbalism and other Jewish traditions with remarkable skill. The analysis is impressive and convincing because of the author?s erudition, although too often the arguments are buried too deep under numerous layers. And when, after some 180 pages, the reader finally gets to the reception and impact of the book, it feels as if not only the reader, but the author as well, has run out of steam. A better balance between analysis and impact would have strengthened Somos? case.

The final member of the Leiden Circle and the most famous of Scaliger?s students to be discussed is the legalist, Hugo Grotius. Cunneaus? *Sardi Venales* was a companion piece to his *Ordinum Pietas*. But in other work there was also contingence between Grotius, Cunnaeus and the other Leideners. Of particular importance was Grotius' *De Iure Praedae*, the precursor to his more famous *De Iure Belli ac Pacis.* Here the reader is again on more familiar ground. Grotius' ?removal of theology from law? (p. 387) is well known, although, again, Somos? contextualisation and analysis do shed some new light. Interpreting Grotius? work against a *politique* backdrop, it is argued that Grotius was already ?thinking in terms of the essentially secular, new system of laws that we find in *De Iure Belli ac Pacis*?, although the message comes across less confidently here than in the analyses of the other members of the Leiden Circle. Somos struggles with his argument and appears on shaky ground when he discusses some of the New World elements in the book. Unfortunately, he does not appear to have consulted some of the most recent work on this text, most notably that of Martine van Ittersum.

Somos concludes with an at times rather personal assessment of the process of secularisation. Summing up his book, he identifies its dual focus: secularisation as a ?generic set of solutions to the generic problem of repeatedly religious conflict? and the ?short yet seminal period of intense localized secularizing activity undertaken by the Leiden Circle? (p. 439). This assessment then sums up both the book?s ambition as well as its shortcoming. Somos? starting point is that of the process of secularisation as a model and the Leiden Circle is used as an example to illustrate this. The result is an analysis which, for all its erudition, feels manipulated and at times jars. Secularisation is presented as a conscious project and a coherent programme, in which its contributors had a division of labour (p. 51). While this may not be entirely what the author means to convey ? indeed he often adds qualifying comments to that effect ? the finished product does appear to make this case. However, when reading this as a history of Leiden?s earliest scholars and their scholarship, the book succeeds and offers virtually unparalleled insights, reinstating some of the more obscure figures and their work. For this reason alone, the book deserves great praise and despite my reservations regarding the premise and the editorial problems ? not least the incredibly frustrating use of

abbreviated titles in all footnotes, presumably to keep their length down, and the use of abbreviations for all the key texts mentioned ? I not only enjoyed it very much but will return to it often, as I am sure others will as well.

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