

H-France Forum
Volume 15 (2020), Issue 3, #2

Margaret C. Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Xii + 360 pages. \$29.95 (cl). ISBN: 978-0691161327.

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In *The Secular Enlightenment*, Margaret Jacob distills a lifetime of research on the cultural history of Newtonianism, Freemasonry, clandestine textual circulation, and the socio-cultural history of the Radical Enlightenment into a spirited synthesis aptly suited to seasoned specialists and introductory researchers alike. In this admirably cogent narrative, Jacob fully exploits her talent for direct but disarmingly conversational prose by painting a picture of the Enlightenment as an “eighteenth-century movement,” not just of ideas but of praxis, that “made the secular world its point of departure,” and effectively expanded and valorized “the sphere of the secular” among educated readers throughout an increasingly connected globe (p. 1). Although Jacob self-consciously considers the Enlightenment as the primary locus of modern secularization, she does so without failing to acknowledge the considerable weight of more recent scholarship that has, in recent years, highlighted the vitality of religion, religious debate, and religious transformations to the origins and course of eighteenth-century cultural history. As Derek Beales has pointed out, the “Age of Reason” was also an “Age of Religion,” and if Margaret Jacob’s depiction of the Enlightenment in this work has privileged the secular trajectory of much of the former, it does not for all that deny the latter.[1] As she cleverly puts it in the prologue, “This book does not claim that religion was en route to being cast aside like bad bacteria waiting to be knocked out by an antibiotic of deism or atheism” (p. 1). In this way, Jacob’s rather more ecumenical definition of the Radical Enlightenment, as set forth in her own contribution to the recent edited volume on *Reassessing the Radical Enlightenment*, edited by Steffen Ducheyne, has now, in *The Secular Enlightenment*, been reframed as a defining characteristic of the Enlightenment overall.[2] Jacob also very carefully and astutely resists the temptation to mistake a pervasive and uneven pattern of secularization since the Enlightenment for teleological inevitability, noting that this more recent history of secularization in the so-called West has too often been selectively used as an imperialistic or neoliberal cudgel against so-called non-Western societies throughout the world. And, after all, many species of twentieth- and twenty-first century authoritarianism emerged after the Enlightenment even in the Western world (pp. 2-3, 263).

In the first chapter, Jacob anchors the secular Enlightenment spatially by locating its emergence in the accelerated urbanization of ca. 1650-1790s, and in the “paradox” and “unintended consequence of the emergence of commercial and state-sponsored expansion” (pp. 10-11). As the mental horizons of European literate classes expanded, greater familiarity with Chinese, indigenous American, and African cultures, religious practices, and cosmological assumptions gradually undermined European certainties and induced creative thinking about political and sacral authority. Jacob emphasizes the social history of these developments in her first chapter by detailing the shaping of civil society, its new patterns of sociability, and its institutions. The basic contours of this story about the clubs, salons, libraries, booksellers, and the nascent, at times increasingly subversive, public sphere would be well recognizable to historians of the Enlightenment. But significantly, Jacob calls attention to the often-overlooked progressivism and

global range of some of these new forms of association. Drawing on her own archival research and that of Craig Koslofsky, Jacob describes cabarets and clubs in London and Paris where men engaged in clandestine marriages with one another.[3] She further describes a “Parisian coterie” of men who “took women’s names and fashioned ceremonies” of initiation and voluntary association (p. 19). Further drawing upon studies by Allison Blakely and Theo van der Meer, Jacob features voluntary associations in Amsterdam where hundreds of free men of African descent met, and she describes an uptick in the persecution of homosexuality in the early 1730s, apparently in response to an increase in clandestine books, parodies, and other forms of literature with homoerotic overtones, or at least, as this was described by authorities (p. 20).[4] Jacob further notes the often surprising global range of early Enlightenment notions. For example, in drawing on studies of Armenian culture by Bogos Levon Zekiyan, Jacob briefly notes that a periodical press sprang forth in cities as far afield as Venice, Istanbul, and Madras designed to serve a readership of Armenian traders; this press popularized decidedly republican ideas drawn from Montesquieu and Locke in particular (p. 30).[5] In bursts of literary panache, in this chapter, Jacob is indeed at her best, as the blurb by John Zammito aptly notes, when she vividly describes the social history and sheer diversity of the many forms of new seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sociability.

From the spatial to the temporal, Jacob’s second chapter is somewhat at pains to describe the secularization of Euro-American conceptions of time between the period of the Reformations to the late Enlightenment. From a concept of time rooted in Christian cosmology with an end determined by providence marked by sacramental milestones and saints’ days, the socio-political conflicts of the Revolutionary Era, especially between the 1780s and ca. 1800, as Jacob contends, completed a long process by which “time became an entirely human invention without end, open to narratives of every individual life ” (pp. 37-8). This innovative chapter holds forth the possibility that the emergence of the secular as a “lived category” (p. 40) was intimately linked with transformations in the experience or description of the temporal. In Jacob’s telling “the distinction between things spiritual and things secular” began to make its way into print late in the seventeenth century in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, and in those of many Dutch historians (p. 39). This second chapter, however, remains somewhat occluded by an impressionistically developed contrast between sacred and secular time. The definition of Christian time as “belonging to the realm of the sacred,” “divinely appointed,” and “assured” with respect to its end, in contrast to early modern “earthly time” as something that “just flowed slowly, marked generally by personal events or matters of state ... or a religious feast” leaves the starting point for this chapter a bit under-developed (p. 36). There may also be space for further investigation into the process by which post-Enlightenment conceptions of time were shaped by tension between classical and Christian temporalities. The intellectual and cultural history of early modern Europe, after all—even before its engagement with different histories and different temporal discourses throughout the world—routinely turned on the productive tensions between the Greco-Roman and the Christian (or more broadly, Western Eurasian Monotheistic) traditions.

Chapter 3 is among the book’s most significant and well-wrought: this is Jacob at her absolute best in so far as she distills the breadth and depth of her archival research into a single chapter that narrates the lived experience of diverse women and men across multiple literate classes. The chapter vividly argues that, however much the Enlightenment may have been primarily an elite phenomenon, aspects of its secularizing tendencies resonated with, and were creatively

appropriated by many ordinary people as well. In her choice to rely as much as possible on the diverse voices of her subjects, often by letting their quotes speak for themselves, Jacob's third chapter affords a very useful glimpse into the social history of Enlightenment secularization. In both length and lucidity, this chapter could well prove suitable for assignment in any upper-division or graduate seminar on the Enlightenment.

Chapters 4-7, then, take as their point of departure the rootedness of Enlightenment culture in the increasingly cosmopolitan city life throughout Europe, before the French Revolution redirected and inflected "secular Enlightenment" during the 1790s (see chapter 8). Thus, by focusing on the role of individual urban nodes of Enlightenment (Paris, Edinburgh, Berlin and Vienna, and Naples and Milan) Jacob affords us with glimpses of just how diverse was the process of secularization in various states and monarchies (France, Scotland, and the still politically divided Germanic and Italian-speaking regions). Chapter 4 is a synthetic *tour de force* through her well-known research that situates the emergence of radical Enlightenment in networks of Francophone diaspora writers, journalists, publishers, and booksellers who benefited from the relatively freer press in the Dutch Republic, ca. 1685-1740s. In their zeal to publicize critiques of Louis Quatorzian absolutism—especially what many of these largely Huguenot individuals had intimately experienced as the entrenched intolerance of the French Catholic clergy—notions of rational skepticism, more egalitarian practices of voluntary association, and support for, both, the universal historicity and moral virtue of civil toleration of confessional pluralism, became increasingly widespread. Such dissemination of secular discourse and praxis eventually contributed to the transformation of Enlightenment in Paris itself.

Jacob's fourth chapter then closely traces how the first generation of refugees associated with Pierre Bayle gave way to a second one overlapping the turn of the eighteenth century. This generation of editors and booksellers, of which Prosper Marchand was paradigmatic, were instrumental in the cross-fertilization of Amsterdam-Paris nexus of secular Enlightenment with the pantheistic and political ideas associated with early English deism (John Toland and Anthony Collins in particular). In what were most likely early versions of Freemasonic societies, Marchand, Charles Levier, and Jean Rousset de Missy began to discuss and eventually circulate novel and scathing critiques of institutionalized revealed religions in favor of pantheistic approaches that often shaded into avant-garde species of materialism and pantheism. From this circle, Jacob insists, emanated the influential and "outrageous" text: *Le Traité des trois imposteurs*, which "labeled Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed as imposters" (p. 92). While the basic narrative of this chapter is now widely known, Jacob has provided both senior and relatively uninitiated scholars with an updated and concise synthesis that contains several new insights about Freemasonry and connections to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the later French Enlightenment. She has also newly reframed the avenues of transmission linking the first generation of philosophes in mid-century France with the networks of authors and publishers active in the earlier eighteenth century Franco-Dutch milieu of Amsterdam.[6] Of particular importance, and newly underscored in Jacob's new treatment in chapter 4, is the intimacy of these networks anchored first in the Netherlands, and whose influence crisscrossed Northwestern Europe. Jacob has also elaborated anew on just how frequently important women (whose role in such networks continues to be insufficiently appreciated) proved to be a vital part of the story of secularization during the Enlightenment. For example, when the *Traité des trois imposteurs* achieved renewed publication later in the 1700s, this was due to the famous Amsterdam

publisher and bookseller Marc Michel Rey, whose “wife was the daughter of Jean Frederic Bernard, from whom she learned about the book trade”(p. 92). Jean Frederic Bernard, along with the famous engraver, Bernard Picart, were instrumental authors of the *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723-43)—a lavishly illustrated and vastly influential work studied by Jacob, Lynn Hunt, and Mijndert Wijnhart, and one arguably most responsible for making it possible for readers to consider the anthropological and sociological dimensions of all religious practices, including those of Catholic and Protestant Europe (see also chapter 1, p. 13 for the work of Bernard and Picart). Bernard’s daughter—an educated bookseller in her own right—also carried on a brief affair with Rousseau.[7]

In chapter 4, Jacob makes a persuasive case that, while “the French refugees in the Dutch republic blazed an intellectual trail that in turn flourished in the French Enlightenment” (p. 96), this trailblazing was in large measure because of the way in which French exile journalism and clandestine literature circulated among urban centers linking Britain, France, and the Netherlands. This clandestine circulation—the subject of now innumerable specialized studies—managed to craft radical readings of Newton, Spinoza, Hobbes, and esoteric Renaissance writers such as Giordano Bruno into “a deeply threatening materialism” or pantheism (p. 103).[8] While this socio-cultural history Jacob provides, and its implications for the emergent secularization of the later Enlightenment (most notably and extensively in its Parisian modalities) is fundamentally sound, one wonders, in light of much recent scholarship, whether materialism was really the most decisive ingredient most definitive of the Radical Enlightenment. Ann Thomson, John P. Wright, and this reviewer have all spoken of “vitalistic materialism” as an increasingly pronounced countercurrent of Enlightenment thought, one that invested matter with an immanent capacity to evolve and change.[9] This Enlightenment countercurrent of vitalistic materialism had already been pervasive among the Ancients, persisted in some fashion in the arguments of early Christian authorities, and found itself reinforced by the revival of the Ancients during the Renaissance. Even in the early to middle eighteenth century, when forms of substantial dualism associated with modes of Cartesianism were briefly ascendant, the revolutionary growth of experimental medicine, in addition to growing familiarity with global religions and philosophies, reinforced the possibility that forms of matter were capable of their own (possibly purposive) locomotion.[10] Was materialism, then, a definitively or uniquely characteristic source of Enlightenment radicalization? In effect, even vitalistic materialism could be diversely understood: did matter self-evolve blindly or opportunistically? Or, did it do so purposively—that is, with a seemingly intrinsic force directed toward specific or even providential ends? If the latter, then vitalistic materialism, characterized for example by Leibnizian monadology, or more ambivalently by the Montpellier vitalist, Théophile Bordeu, was often considered by contemporaries as compatible with more traditional Catholic or Lutheran doctrines, because there was still space for providential design or divinely driven intelligence.[11] But if the vitality of matter could be said to have emerged blindly, without intelligent direction, then the “R” in Radical Enlightenment, however one defines it, did not come from the materialism but from the blind fatalism or unfettered “naturalism” implied by some forms of vitalistic materialism.[12]

As portions of a book written self-consciously in the tradition of “Ernst Cassirer . . . , Peter Gay, Franco Venturi, Daniel Roche, and John Marshall,” (p. 5) and with the laudable aim of attempting to avoid further multiplication of separate Enlightenments, many of the later chapters of *The Secular Enlightenment* unwittingly appear to suggest a reversion to narrations of separate

national Enlightenments. This seems especially to be the case in chapter 6 on Milan and Naples, and in chapter 7 on Berlin and Vienna. Nevertheless, I think this observation must be tempered by the reality that Jacob's point—a demonstration of the diverse paths toward Enlightenment secularization by focusing on urban case studies—is still an important one with heuristic value. This overarching aim is largely successful in its execution even if stylistically the effect is occasionally blunted. Nevertheless, chapters 5-8 function well as detailed but elegantly styled narrative histories of the Enlightenment in Scotland, in German states, and in Italian states; as such, these chapters could be useful as assignments in advanced undergraduate or graduate courses.

At least one important question, which is more begged than addressed by this book, concerns just what we mean by “secular.” In so far as *The Secular Enlightenment* is addressed to a very broad audience of readers, one can scarcely fault its author for defining the “secular” by example as the narrative unfolds, and in ways that reference, as their point of departure, popular understandings of secularism or secularization. In the prologue, for example, the concept of the secular is referred to simply as “a life lived without constant reference to God,” as “attaching to the world,” or as “living in the here and now” (pp. 1-3). Any casual reader—specialist, student, or general reader alike—will understand these straightforward if impressionistic definitions well enough. But to define that which is secular mostly in reference to what it is not—i.e., something equally capacious and contested called “religion”—is to leave unaddressed one of the most fascinating contributions of the Euro-American Enlightenment to global history. Our contemporary definitions of “secular” and “sacred” underwent considerable qualitative transformation during the cultural revolution we think of as the Enlightenment.[13] The consensus of much recent scholarship conspires to suggest that the long eighteenth century, however one demarcates the period, was responsible for accelerating the entangled process by which “religion” was defined; “theology,” redefined; the “secular,” constructed; and “Enlightenment,” first named.[14] In a way that Jacob has herself previously suggested, the Enlightenment can and should be understood as a period of secularization, but it is also in many respects the accidental offspring of early modern religious impulses and controversies.[15] Indeed, the conceptual history of the “secular” began long before the Enlightenment, deriving originally from the Latin word *saeculum* which, depending upon usage, could mean “world, century, or age” in Late Antiquity, and among early Christian apologists and theologians such as Augustine of Hippo.[16] The construction of the secular and the attendant redefinition of the religious most certainly occurred during the Enlightenment; but this very process was also in many ways a laicization and pluralization of theological truth claims, and a transformation in the varieties of conceivable religious experience. Modern secularization was not just a property of the Enlightenment, although it is certainly that. Secularization—as described, lived, and sometimes contested today—was a constructed outcome of the Enlightenment characterized, as Charles V. Taylor has argued, by a transposition of religious categories and practices on to mundane and material concerns.[17]

My cautionary tale regarding the need to further historicize, both “religion” and “secularization” does not fundamentally alter the merits of the story Jacob recounts in *Secular Enlightenment*. A new valorization of this-worldly concerns does indeed emerge from the period of the Enlightenment. Also characteristic of it are more pervasive critiques of blind obeisance to traditional myths, doctrines, or metaphysical systems, and of politically entrenched sacral

authorities. This legacy of the Enlightenment is important, on its scholarly merits to be sure, but also by virtue of its indispensability as a bulwark against the excesses of this age. The year 2020 finds humanity threatened by numerous global challenges, including now a pandemic unprecedented in recent memory. These challenges simply cannot be solved by resorting to xenophobic authoritarian nationalisms, or to selective retreats into neo-traditionalist or fundamentalist religious silos. Achieving a more fully serviceable, pluralistic, and coherent understanding of the Enlightenment thus remains vital to our present, and the endeavor remains incomplete apart from ongoing investigation into how our present concepts of “secular” and “religious” were, if not invented, then significantly transformed in the crucible of *le Siècle des Lumières* itself. Jacob’s work insightfully beckons us to continue this important scholarly endeavor.

NOTES

[1] Derek Beales, “Religion and Culture,” in *The Eighteenth Century: Europe, 1648–1815*, ed. T. C. W. Blanning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131-170.

[2] Margaret C. Jacob, “The Radical Enlightenment: A Heavenly City with Many Mansions,” in *Reassessing the Radical Enlightenment*, ed. Steffen Ducheyne (London: Routledge, 2017), 48-60; see also Jacob, “How Radical Was the Enlightenment? What Do We Mean by Radical?” *Diametros: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 40 (June 2014): 99–114. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13153/diam.40.2014.631>.

[3] Craig Kosolfsky, “Parisian Cafés in European Perspective: Contexts of Consumption, 1660-1730,” *French History* 31 (2017): 39-62.

[4] Allison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Theo van der Meer, *De wesentlijke sonde van sodomie en andere vuyligheenden. Sodomietenvervolgingen in Amsterdam 1730-1811* (Amsterdam: Tabvla, 1984).

[5] Boghos Levon Zekiyian, *The Armenian Way to Modernity* (Venice: Supernova, 1997), 64-71.

[6] Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans*. 2nd rev. ed. (New Orleans: Cornerstone, 2006).

[7] Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijndart. *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010); and idem, *Decoding the Divine: The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of All the Peoples of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[8] On clandestine manuscripts and texts, see essays in *Clandestine Philosophy: New Studies on Subversive Manuscripts in Early Modern Europe, 1620-1823*, ed. Gianni Paganini, Margaret C. Jacob, and John Christian Laursen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020): open access through <http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=1007705>. For important further perspectives on Newton

and Newtonianism, see also J.B. Shank, *The Newton Wars and the Beginning of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and *Before Voltaire: The French Origins of 'Newtonian' Mechanics, 1680-1715* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[9] Ann Thomson, *L'âme des lumières: Le débat sur l'être humain entre religion et science Angleterre-France, 1690–1760* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2013), and *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Ann Thomson, "'Mechanistic Materialism' vs. 'Vitalistic Materialism'?" in *La lettre de la Maison française d'Oxford* 14 (2001): 22–36 ; John P. Wright, "Materialismo e anima vitale alla meta' del XVIII secolo: Il pensiero medico," in *L'eta' dei Lumi: Saggi sulla cultura settecentesca*, ed. Antonio Santucci (Bologna: Mulino, 1998), 143-57; Jeffrey D. Burson, "Vitalistic Materialism and the Theological Enlightenment of Abbé Claude Yvon in the *Encyclopédie*," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 40, no. 2 (2014): 7–33; also Burson, "Unlikely Tales of Fo and Ignatius: Rethinking the Radical Enlightenment through French Appropriation of Chinese Buddhism," *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015): 391–420.

[10] On the diversity of possible "Cartesianisms," see Tad M. Schmaltz, *Early Modern Cartesianisms: Dutch and French Constructions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[11] Catherine Wilson, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: A Historical and Comparative Study*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Elizabeth A. Williams, *A Cultural History of Medical Vitalism in Enlightenment Montpellier* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); also E. Williams, *The Physical and the Moral: Anthropology, Physiology, and Philosophical Medicine in France, 1750–1850*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); see for more extensive development of these points in Burson, *Culture of Enlightening*, 163-202.

[12] On the classical roots, and more detail about the heterodox implications of "Epicureanism" and "Naturalism," as summarized above, see Alan C. Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); on traditions of Christian materialism, see Kara E. Barr, "'A Crucible in Which to Put the Soul': Keeping Body and Soul Together in the Moderate Enlightenment, 1740–1830" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2014).

[13] Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 155-72.

[14] On the invention of "religion" and "comparative religion," see Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); for the early modern reconceptualization of "theology," see Jonathan Sheehan, "Thomas Hobbes, D.D.: Theology, Orthodoxy, and History," *Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 2 (2016): 249–74, and Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization," *American Historical Review* 108 (October 2003): 1061–80; on the transposition or

“recalibration” of religious categories in the Enlightenment see Charles V. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007); also Carly Coleman, “Resacralizing the World: The Fate of Secularization in Enlightenment Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 82 no. 2 (2010): 368–95; for the eighteenth-century narrative genealogy of the Enlightenment, see Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); for the transformation of the concept of the Enlightenment throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see throughout Schmidt, James G., ed. *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers to Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[15] Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Culture of Enlightening: Abbé Claude Yvon and the Entangled Emergence of the Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019); Margaret C. Jacob, “Dichotomies Defied and the Revolutionary Implications of Religion Implied,” in *Religion(s) and the Enlightenment*, ed. David Allen Harvey, special issue, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 40, no. 2 (2014): 108–16; see also William J. Bulman, “Introduction: Enlightenment for the Culture Wars,” in *God in the Enlightenment*, ed. William J. Bulman and Robert G. Ingram (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-41.

[16] For the meaning of “saeculum,” and at least one conceptual history of the secular before the Enlightenment, see Emmet Kennedy, *Secularism and Its Opponents from Augustine to Solzhenitsyn* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1, and 1-89.

[17] See above n. 10-11, and Burson, *Culture of Enlightening*, 372-82; also Graeme Smith, “Talking to Ourselves: An Investigation into the Christian Ethics Inherent in Secularism.” In *The Sources of Secularism: Enlightenment and Beyond*, ed. Anna Tomaszewska and Hasse Hämäläinen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 244.

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