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

Review Essay by Dorinda Outram, University of Rochester

Few historical periods have been more debated than the Enlightenment.[1] Few have borne greater freight of arguments about the origins of the present or “modernity.” Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault debated it. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno saw the Enlightenment as the origin point of “disenchantment,” totalitarianism and Nazi terror, while Richard Rorty and Anthony Pagden, more recently, have seen it as the roots of modern liberal cosmopolitanism, in contrast to the nineteenth century which often interpreted it as the origin of the French Revolution of 1789 defined as trauma. To name only a few, the Enlightenment has borne an enormous weight of argumentation about the origins of the “modern,” the present, and thereby the future. Because of this, as Margaret Jacob points out: “In the writing of history, in many European languages, the number of Enlightenments has now proliferated: the Radical Enlightenment, the Moderate Enlightenment, the Religious Enlightenment, even the Catholic Enlightenment. I too am guilty. *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (1981) was my creation” (p. 5). The Enlightenment, indeed, is a field splintered between innumerable interpretations, and without any emerging consensus.

Recently, the monumental work of Jonathan Israel has provided yet another look at this over-interpreted century. His trilogy—*Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)—raised fundamental questions about the Enlightenment and its relationship to the French Revolution. Israel writes that the Enlightenment is the single most important subject in historical studies today, and one of “crucial significance also in our politics, cultural studies and philosophy.”[1] His own, contested, account of the Enlightenment, divides it into two strains, the “moderate” and the “radical” Enlightenment, which surfaced from a shadowy underground existence around the 1770s, and was ultimately responsible for the French Revolution as it appeared between 1789 and 1792. He maintains that the radical Enlightenment is grounded in the work of one thinker: Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza undermined belief in revelation, teleology, divine providence, and miracles, and hence the bases of the Christian religion and of ecclesiastical authority. The radical Enlightenment, Israel claims, unreservedly endorsed freedom of expression, of thought, and of the press, and thus, he argues, was the primary cause of the French Revolution. In this, he is picking up not only the argument of the nineteenth-century right wing, but also of many of the contemporaries of the revolution itself. Israel also has a larger ideological program. Debating with Foucault, he states:

Anyone believing truth is universal, and that human rights imply a common code that it is the duty of everyone to defend, cannot avoid taking up cudgels not just against Foucault and

post-modernist philosophy, but also against the exponents of historiographical theories and approaches focusing attention on sociability, ambiguities and opinion.[3]

Why spend such time with Israel in a review of a book by Margaret Jacob? Partly to point out the similarities between Jacob's work throughout her productive career and that of Israel, who appeared later. Jacob's emphasis on Spinoza in the work currently under review and in others that she has written is very like that of Israel. She calls Spinoza's ideas "foundational" to the early Enlightenment (p.162). She too has written a well-known book called *The Radical Enlightenment*, published in 1981 and thus long before Israel's volume. And like Israel, her work has looked at pantheists, freemasons, and republicans. This curious relationship between Jacob and Israel needs to be explored further. Jacob in this volume refers to Israel only obliquely (p. 91), and not by name, and by name only once in the footnotes. (Following the modern fashion, the book has no bibliography, which does not help the enquiring reader). Exploring this curious relationship would disentangle each writer's views from the other. It might also help to open a new line of Enlightenment interpretation.

In the current volume, Jacob argues that:

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century movement of ideas and practices that made the secular world its point of departure. It did not necessarily deny the meaning or emotional hold of religion, but it gradually shifted attention away from religious questions towards secular ones...it vastly expanded the sphere of the secular, making it, for increasing numbers of educated people, a primary frame of reference (p.1).

Jacob is too intelligent to make this argument into an extreme or categorical claim. As she says: "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). Her own examples are often carefully nuanced. Further, she turns away from the thesis that Enlightenment ideas can be projected forward onto the future, onto the French Revolution as Israel argues, or onto the making of modernity itself:

It is one thing to say that increasingly secular values and pursuits can be observed in the course of the eighteenth century; it is another to assert that a teleological process took hold particularly in the Western world and it is here to stay. Most recently, such an assertion allows its believers to look down upon Islam, for example. It also assumes that nation-states making it first to the finish-line of secularization would be immune to the dark forces of totalitarianism or fascism (p.3).

Yet just because of this careful nuancing—and also the very long time-period covered by her study, from the end of the seventeenth-century to the French Revolution—Jacob incurs the danger of advancing to the Scottish verdict of "not proven." The secular and the sacred have always been deeply and complexly intertwined. As usual, English and American usages do not here help each other out. English equates the former term with the non-ecclesiastical, whereas American usage takes it to mean non-religious generally. There is powerful ground for slippage. The word has also, like all words, changed meaning over time. The medieval world tended to regard all important people and ideals as in some sense sacred. Kings wanted to be *rex et sacerdos*; great ecclesiastics and the pope were lords of territories with courts and troops. Monasteries and convents owned land, exacted rent, and influenced the agrarian economy, while at the same time being refuges for godly learning and holiness. In "secular" romance, anti-

chivalric deeds could be termed sins. The investiture conflict of the twelfth century between the Holy Roman Emperor and Pope is the classic clash over who was what, and who did what, and in many forms it continued into the eighteenth-century in Catholic Europe. There were indeed in the medieval period, *ordines* constituting socio-professional groups, and though these were not standardized, one always was for those who pray, one for those who fight. But both were sacred, being categories in the mind of God. In the Reformation, secular and sacred became possibly even more entangled.

Thus, when Jacob writes that the “distinction between things spiritual and things secular began to make its way into print in the late seventeenth century... The state of being secular, being in the world and clearly distinct from the spiritual or ecclesiastical, had just become available as a lived category” (pp.39-40), she is making an argument which sharply divides the period of the Enlightenment from the rest of the concerns of the previous millennia. It is not surprising that the secular and the sacred in fact continued to mix. In her erudite discussion of almanachs, for example, Jacob notes, “The mundane began to mix effortlessly with prophecy” (p.41). But the mundane had always been part of prophecy, as the astrologers who worked out auspicious days for the joining of battle or for royal marriages had always known. It is this blend of past and present, secular and sacred, which places great weight on Jacob’s idea of the secular as a lived category. For evidence she relies on travel diaries and personal journals, which show her protagonists living in a secular time punctuated by appointments and the times of the arrival of coaches, and unsupported by any mentions of the divine. Their distaste for Gothic architecture and preference for the cool regularities of classical edifices is brought in to show their repudiation of the historical mixing of the secular and the sacred (p.69). But a few diaries do not make an argument. This essential distinction between examples and evidence can never be avoided. The argument from silence—from what is absent from the diaries—is always a tricky one.

It is equally possible to point to the pulsing religious energies of the Enlightenment, which saw the creation of Methodism, Hasidism, the religious revivals of the American colonies, Moravianism, Pietism, all of which influenced people whose lives lay far outside the educated elites that Jacob primarily deals with. Moravian artisan missionaries brought the Word to the furthest reaches of the habitable world; Methodism produced many a spiritual autobiography and diary of a quite different turn from the secular personal documents brought forward by Jacob. How can we tell which is the more persuasive? Is not the point the parallel survival of the secular and the sacred?

My own argument, for what it’s worth, would be that there was indeed an influx of secular time, but that it happened much later in the Enlightenment. The two major revolutions toward the end of the century—in the American colonies in 1776 and in France in 1789—each instituted, at the level of the state rather than of individual preference, a new order of secular time. Jacob’s argument might have been on firmer ground had she taken the actual emergence of the motto of the *Novus ordo saeculorum*, on the great seal of the new United States, as one of the topoi for her argument. The motto was intended to convey a new order of the ages that began with the Declaration of Independence. The great Seal that contains the motto was designed by Charles Thomson, an Irishman and Secretary of the Continental Congress, who proposed it in 1782. A break in time was thus proposed as essential to the new state. Only eleven years later, on 24 October 1793, the French Revolution proposed another break in time, with the institution of a new secular republican calendar to replace the old one. This new calendar put time itself on a

decimal base, setting up a ten-day week and a one hundred minute hour, and naming the months after naturally occurring weather. The whole intention of the calendar was to bring measurement back to bases in nature. At the same time, the revolutionary system of measurement set aside the old weights and measures particular to towns and regions, and based it on a 'natural' unit, the measurement of an arc of the meridian. This revolutionary reform was logically thought through and carried out. The first year of the new era began on 22 September 1792, the date of the proclamation of the new French Republic. Everywhere, history and the quirks of variation were put on one side, and the category of the "natural"—that is, the transparent, right, good and uniform—substituted for it. The new calendar, like the decimal system, encountered widespread opposition, and—unlike the decimal system—was abolished in 1806. But the fact that it existed at all showed a deliberate attempt to involve the successive new French regimes, well into the Empire, in a secular time which erased the Christian framework. The revolution in fact, as Jacob also notes, caused fundamental changes also in the lived experience of time. Everything speeded up. Nothing is more common in the private writings of the period than to find exclamations to this effect. Jacob cites a young enthusiast who remarked "...the very short time which passed in 1790 which to my memory was years, although in truth only a few months..." (p.38). The dechristianisation campaign of 1793 is, to cite only this, another example of the way in which the extremists of the revolution tried to remove every remaining Christian symbol and observance. Over the gateway of the cemetery at Nantes, the ex-priest, terrorist, and future secret police chief Joseph Fouché hung the motto "Death is an eternal sleep."

In conclusion, Jacob's new book is an erudite and clearly written piece of historical analysis. But her case is not proven. For some eighteenth-century people it rings true, for others it does not. No criteria are established, and maybe no criteria can be established to say that one is more important than another. The secularization campaigns of the French Revolution are important, and culminate with the great Feast of Reason of spring 1794. Also important, however, is the backlash they aroused amongst the devout and faithful—backlash which sent the Revolution careering on an extremist path towards the Terror, permanently de-stabilized its politics, and undermined all the liberal reforms of its early years. The Revolution did not succeed in forming any stable successor regime to the monarchy. In this sense, Jacob's argument oddly, and surely unintentionally, meets that of Joseph Barruel and other conservative commentators round the back.

Maybe, in the end, the term "Enlightenment" has been so thoroughly filleted by modern historians that it has ceased to have much meaning. Perhaps no consensus is possible on its significance, unless we look at it as a structure, or to filch a term from immunology, a "pocket" containing debates, practices, and lived experiences interacting in characteristic ways. Nonetheless, Margaret Jacob has performed a valuable service which the reader may lay alongside Richard Sorkin's *The Religious Enlightenment*, Peter Gay's *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, and Keith Thomas's and Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world." Her work, however, still leaves unanswered Hegel's famous question: "When all prejudice and superstition has been banished, the question arises: Now what? What is the truth which the Enlightenment has disseminated in place of these prejudices and superstitions?"[4]

NOTES

[1] For a synthetic discussion of these debates, including authors cited below, see Dorinda Outram, 'Enlightenment Struggles,' in C. Scott Dixon and Beat Kümin, eds., *Interpreting Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 417-442.

[2] Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 11.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

[4] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. JB Baillie (New York and Evanston IL, 1967), p.57.

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