

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

Response Essay by Margaret C. Jacob, University of California, Los Angeles

“Gratifying” is hardly exuberant enough to express my response to these thoughtful and spirited comments from major representatives of the generation of scholars now set to inherit the historiography. Their contributions will only expand upon and improve our knowledge. They tell us that *The Secular Enlightenment* can be read by a wide audience, and I can only thank them for this observation, among many others.

All credit belongs to my critics for protecting me from the imagined accusation that I discount religion and its many forms of expression. It is surely more helpful and accurate to say that what is happening in the century is “the cordoning off of religion to its own distinct sphere of influence,” to quote Alicia Montoya. Never would I deny that a bulk of published and republished material, even in the Dutch Republic, included bibles, sermons, hymnals, almanacs and devotional works, as noted by Gregory Brown. When we say that the Republic produced about 50% of the books published in Western Europe, the statement refers to new and discrete titles, not to the bread and butter publishing of the domestic market.[1] Be assured that no one has been able to give a good quantitative account of just how many books or pamphlets we are talking about. It would hardly surprise us to find that when death inventories tallied up their library’s contents most families had more almanacs and prayer books than texts by the *philosophes*. I am also sure that when the police raided a bookshop, in Namur or Paris, they were not looking for hymnals (Montoya, Brown), thus, one reason why we may never know what else was in the shop.

Throughout *The Secular Enlightenment*, I sought to enlist and describe “ordinary, literate, reasonably educated eighteenth-century people we may legitimately describe as enlightened” (p. 66). I will stick by my claim that the definition fits a sea chaplain; a woman who wrote on sex for whom we have neither a firm birth or death date; the tubercular son, Gregory Watt (1777-1804) of a famous man; a seldom discussed author (Robert Dodsley); members of the first known women’s scientific society that also took inspiration from physico-theology; an Alsatian bookdealer who did time in the Bastille for selling “bad books,” and a raft of freemasons. They do not belong to “high-brow” (Montoya) or “educated elites” (Outram).[2] Nor are they hand workers or peasants. Viewing intellectual history with a social lens brings a wider focus to a movement that was once seen as the achievement of about fifty men. The impact of the Enlightenment was so profound precisely because ordinary, reasonably educated people participated in it, and as Montoya notes, *The Secular Enlightenment* “gives agency to historical actors who have hitherto remained silent.”

I am less certain about the agency that Outram finds in “the pulsing energies of the Enlightenment which saw the creation of Methodism...Pietism...” Remarkable energy to be sure, but its wellspring lay not in the secular Enlightenment, nor even in the Enlightenment.

What the age called “enthusiasm” alarmed people who identified with enlightened values, and it produced a very different kind of personal experience. For one such document about it, see the spiritual diary of the mid-century Leeds merchant, Joseph Ryder.[3]

Writing about the secular does not mean to denigrate the achievements of the Jesuits in China or the profundity of Catholic scholarship on Islam. Surely Montoya does not wish to suggest that their goal had been analogous to the attempt undertaken by Jean Frederic Bernard and Bernard Picart to survey all the known religions of the world. However penetrating their gaze, the missionaries were out to convert. To award the Enlightenment with credit for the founding of new religious movements like Methodism, as does Outram, confuses other events in the century with the secular moves toward deism, freethought, stadial accounts of economic and political differences, etc. Such intellectual shifts come from the heart of the Enlightenment.

I wish I had been so succinct as to say about the Anglican obsession with time that “the emergence of the Enlightenment” in England can be attributed “to the failure of the English Puritans to sustain a Commonwealth that would be an expression of the sacred” (from Brown). I intend to use it. In noting the allure of Continental Nazism and fascism—contrasting their failure in the Dutch case—the historical characteristic I had in mind (a reply to Brown) was not the nation state but the presence or absence of long-standing absolutist forms of government. Never would I endorse the notion of a *Sonderweg* as an explanation for any national history. However imperfectly, I sought to imbed the secular enlightenment in linguistic, not national, contexts and borders (GB), and as far as possible, to avoid “teleological inevitability,” as Jeffrey Burson rightly point out.

The critics observe (e.g., Outram) that the book struggles with a definition of the secular and takes refuge in examples. While the secular cannot be compared to pornography—you just know it when you see it—a profound shift has occurred when it is possible to write at encyclopedic length about all the religions of the world without an endorsement of any one of them. Such was the achievement, beginning in the 1720s, of Bernard and Picart.[4] Theirs was an entirely new and secular approach to religion.

Parts of the Picart work display a distinct propensity for pantheism yet, as most of the other authors note, I do not endorse recent efforts to make the Radical Enlightenment all about Spinoza (Outram). Undeniably, however, a big part of its radical underside is about materialism. *The Secular Enlightenment* does make distinctions (I say to Burson) among types of materialism, and the vitalist variety, as I noted, allowed for spiritual forces that might be linked to the divine.[5] To imagine that I privilege materialism is simply to say that, like all contemporary social and natural science, I do not admit spiritual explanations. Not one of us would get up in a classroom and tell our students that the Spanish won the battle of Lepanto *because* the Blessed Mother appeared in an apparition over the Spanish ships. (Pace to my Sister of St. Joseph, professor of early modern history, Sister T.A.) There may be a Protestant bias in my account of eighteenth-century intolerance because it is obvious that—while we now know more about the Enlightenment in southern Europe—no one would seriously imagine that the institutional power of the Inquisition could be matched by Protestant censors or bloody-minded zealots (to answer Montoya). One of the reasons the Roman Inquisition was far less effective in places like England and the Dutch Republic arose not from being less vigilant, but from not having censors on the

ground.[6] It is surprising to see what the Roman censors missed out of the publications occurring in Britain or the Dutch Republic. Seeking to be even-handed should not lead us to distort the historical record. Similarly, my focusing on many French language texts—that crossed every national border—should not be construed as an account focused “primarily” on France (Montoya; apologies to the readers of H-France). The Dutch Republic, England and Scotland, German and Italian speaking Europe receive more treatment than is to be found in most books about the Enlightenment.

Few authors are as blessed to have careful, occasionally feisty, reviewers who read carefully and courteously. I am deeply grateful to Gregory Brown, Dorinda Outram, Jeffrey Burson, and Alicia C. Montoya. How lucky the field is to have them.

## NOTES

[1] The work of Andrew Pettegree and Arthur van der Weduwen, *The Bookshop of the World: Making and Trading Books in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale, 2019) points to the genre, to be sure, but it does not invalidate the larger point; see my review forthcoming in the *Journal of Modern History*. And Jeroen Salman, *Populair drukwerk in de Gouden Eeuw* (Zutphen, 1999). See Gregory Leti, *Kort begrip der heldendeugden, ofte Historische, en staatkundige verhandeling van daden en maximen, die tot voortplanting, en conservatie van alle staten, en landen noodzakelijk zijn ... / in het Italiaans beschreven door ... Gregorio Leti; en in de Nederlandse sprake overgebracht, door F. Hertogh* (Den Haag: Meindert Uytwerf, 1700) p. 17. Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, “Het mislukte offensief van de drukpers,” *Boekhistorisch Jaarboek*, (2018), pp. 11-17.

[2] See Alicia C. Montoya, note 3; the spelling of the *Encyclopédie* is correct; as is Gabriel de Foigny, *La terre australe connue* (Genève: Slatkine, 1981, a reprint). She claims that my spelling is wrong; she may have found an unidentified typo.

[3] Margaret Jacob and Matthew Kadane, “Missing now Found in the Eighteenth Century: Weber’s Protestant Capitalist,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 108, February 2003, pp. 20-49. Abridged German translation in *Hannovershe Schriften 6: Veränderte Weltbilder*, edited by Detlev Claussen, Oskar Negt and Michael Werz (Frankfurt am Main, 2006).

[4] *Cérémonies et coutûmes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde représentées par des figures dessinées de la main de Bernard Picard [i.e. Picart], avec une explication historique, & quelques dissertations curieuses ...* (Amsterdam: Chez J.F. Bernard, 1723-1743).

[5] See *The Secular Enlightenment*, pp. 44-45; 103, 131, 192, 195, 198; Andrew Pettegree and Arthur van der Weduwen, *The Bookshop of the World: Making and Trading Books in the Dutch Golden Age* (see my forthcoming review in the *Journal of Modern History*).

[6] It is remarkable to see the titles missing from Vatican Apostolic Library, Inventarium codicum Latinorum, vol. 10, #8067-8471, SALA CONS MSS. 311 ROSSO, CHART IN 4.\*; see also Archivio della Congregazione per Doctrina Fidei Archivum, Piazza del Sant’Uffizio 11, 00193 Rome.

Margaret C. Jacob  
Distinguished Professor of Research, Department of History, Emerita,  
University of California, Los Angeles  
mjacob@history.ucla.edu

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