

The Secular Enlightenment. By Margaret C. Jacob. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. xi+339 pp.

The concept of secularization is without doubt one of the most paradoxical notions within eighteenth-century and Enlightenment studies. Although the notion of secularity and the Enlightenment seem to make strange bedfellows, secular tendencies, such as profanation and laicization, have been widely disputed phenomena in early modern scholarship. As far as the history of the concept is concerned, it should be noted that, alongside the predominant ecclesiastical interpretation (canon law), the eighteenth century witnessed a significant expansion in the semantics of the notion. Therefore, secularization and the notion of secularity became counter-concepts of religious life and tended to describe both the distance from monastic life and those persons who were freed from vows and lived at liberty in the world (*Cyclopædia, or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 1728, vol. 2, 45). In this respect, this semantic extension *per se* covers two approaches with regard to the Enlightenment. First, it stands for a religious movement which, in the course of the eighteenth century, became more and more profane by putting religious sentiment in the background. Second, it is identified with the stance of the so-called “High Enlightenment,” which by no later than the mid-eighteenth century had irrevocably distanced itself from the religious and spiritual *Weltanschauung*. From among the two diffuse interpretations, *The Secular Enlightenment* seems to choose the second path. The position of the author on this matter is clear. Jacob, however, tends to see enlightened secularism as also having had religious sources, and her book only aims to register the shift when this religious agenda gave place to a secular setting.

Margaret C. Jacob (University of California) is one of the few prominent scholars who has made significant contributions to the intellectual history of the Enlightenment in the past half century. Jacob’s view expressed in this book seems to synthesize her results in the volumes on Newtonianism (1995, with Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs) and Enlightenment Radicalism (1981). In her book published in 2019, she attempts to provide a panoramic account of the secular tendencies of the Enlightenment. From a historiographical point of view, Jacob’s perspective, on which she reflects in the Prologue (p.5), can be taken as a fresh addition to the ongoing debates (David Sorkin, John Robertson) on Enlightenment modernity. *The Secular Enlightenment* is in multiple ways connected to this traditional historiography forged by leading historians, such as Peter Gay, Franco Venturi, Daniel Roche, and John Marshall.

First, it upholds the “radical thesis,” which proclaimed that the Enlightenment project fundamentally impacted the cultural, social, and political basis on which modernity was built. However, Jacob seeks to find the balance between the religious initiations and the social and political circumstances. Second, in the Epilogue (pp.263–65), Jacob attributes to the notion of the “secular Enlightenment” a long-lasting impact on the twentieth-century European and American liberal project of democracy when she claims that, “[w]here enlightened principles survived the repression of the 1790s and beyond, democracy had a greater chance of emerging.”

As for the roots of these intellectual initiatives, Jacob’s central question is concerned with the redefinition of the narrative of secularization by displaying the transition from the religious antecedents to the secular period: “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 toward secular ones” (p.1).

In addition to the historiographical implications, Jacob lists other arguments central to the thesis throughout the eight chapters. The first three chapters explore how human life changed in the eighteenth century. Chapter 1 (“The Setting: Space Expanded and Filled Anew”) focuses on the question of how, beginning in the seventeenth century, colonial experience reshaped the existing narratives on the role of God’s providence and “celestial and terrestrial” reality. In the new intellectual setting, space tended to lose its Cartesian conceptualization and became neutral, parallel to the expansion of the new language of Newtonian physics. Chapter 2 (“Time Reinvented”), using the well-known cultural historical thesis and personal examples (such as the example of the Huygens family), aims to renegotiate how the expansion of material culture and technological improvements laid the groundwork for everyday materialism by profoundly altering the perception of biblical and religious time. As a consequence, the perception of time multiplied and secular punctuality became predominant, while “[t]he Christian meaning of time remained, but like predestination, millennial time seemed less and less relevant” (p.52). Following this logic, Chapter 3 (“Secular Lives”) pays attention to the scope of ordinary people. It offers glimpses into the cacophony of small and unheard voices of the literate, represented by freethinkers, industrialists, travelling booksellers, scholars, religious and sexual heretics, and unnamed producers of erotic poetry, pornography, and other genres of forbidden literature. By using personal and

unpublished sources, in this chapter Jacob aims to provide a comprehensive account of the wider social foundations of secularity.

In the remaining five chapters, the Enlightenment is portrayed as a collective project which had its own entangled geographical and cultural characteristics. Concentrating on these geographical and cultural differences, each part discusses one of the most virulent European centers (Paris, Edinburgh, Berlin, Vienna, Naples, and Milan) between the 1700s and the caesura of the 1790s. As far as the themes are concerned, the scope of the chapters is very broad; they cover a wide variety of topics, including economic, moral, theological, political, and scientific quarrels. The leading principle behind these chapters is that the emergence of enlightened ideas was confused everywhere in Europe, though at the same time it was inseparable from secular(ized) sentiment. Although Jacob's goal is to retell the "well-known" topoi in a subversive way by adding pieces of information that go beyond the narrow thematical frame, the orientation towards the great names and the philosophical and theological debates remains a persistent feature of her analyses. The thematical blocks, however, appear to stand on their own and to resist comparison. Thus, the case studies, even though they represent the depth of the author's knowledge impressively, seem to lose sight of the latest findings in the scholarship on the Enlightenment.

Chapter 4 ("Paris and the Materialist Alternative: The Widow Stockdorff") places the Francophone Enlightenment in the contexts of anti-royalism, Anglophone political literature, and natural scientific discourses shaped by materialist ideas. According to Jacob, secularism in the French Enlightenment was preoccupied by a set of vibrant political and social visions which were debated extensively in unofficial literature. Therefore, the radical ideas could find expression "more commonly in cities rather than in the countryside" (p.89). Chapter 5 ("The Scottish Enlightenment in Edinburgh") depicts a more balanced and sophisticated image of the Scottish tendencies. As Jacob argues, the beginning of the Scottish Enlightenment in the 1690s was rather hesitant. In contrast to French radical sentiment, the lack of forbidden literature and the alliance between the moderate Presbyterian clergy and the university elite proved to be constitutive throughout the century. Here, the secular framework was equivalent to discussing a set of issues (such as literary works, agriculture, manufacturing, politeness, social progression, Newtonian science, and the participation of women in society) in front of a wider audience.

Chapter 7 ("Berlin and Vienna") with its almost fifty pages aims to extend the scope of the investigation to the German-speaking lands by outlining

the developments from the post-Westphalian intellectual climate to German idealism. Here, the two most substantial assets advancing secularization were the advanced university culture and the widespread anti-scholastic sentiment. Thus, as Jacob argues, in the early Enlightenment, more attention was paid to theology and religion than in France or Scotland (p.159). The search for “secular freedom” had a significant impact on the later philosophies represented by the prominent thinkers of the High Enlightenment, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Kant, and Herder (p.166).

Chapter 7 (“Naples and Milan”) brings further arguments into negotiating the Italian experience, where secular tendencies appeared to have met the need for pragmatic reform. As the cases of eighteenth-century Naples and Milan exemplify, the enlightened vision could be channeled via the cultural transfers of experimental physics, political economy, and anti-tyrannical literature, into the Catholic scholastic mindset in various forms. As for the reform of agriculture and the penalty system, they were unquestionably connected to social and political needs.

As the title indicates, chapter 8 (“The 1790s”) provides an outlook on how the French Revolution impacted the Enlightenment. By accepting the conventional explanation that the Enlightenment came to an end with the French Revolution, Jacob offers glimpses into the variety of reactions to the French tendencies, such as the Irish rebels, the distant supporters of the Revolution, the members of secret societies and masonic lodges, and the rejection of the Low Countries and German-speaking lands. Although the chapter begins with an evocation of the Romantic vision when, for the vast majority of people, it seemed like “everything could be questioned, rethought, reimagined, and even lived in new and unprecedented ways” (p. 237), it portrays an incomplete victory over enlightened secularism. This dramatization of the revolutionary sentiment has its purpose, as the earlier reviews have already pointed out, but many notable developments which would have merited more attention have been left out of the book.

While Jacob’s scholarly experience, which draws on American, Scottish, English, Dutch-Belgian, German, French, and Italian narrative and archival sources, is impressive, the book focuses mainly on a conventionally Western-centered canon, and it fails to reflect on the experiences of the enlightened peripheries, such as Northern Europe (the Swedish and Danish Kingdoms), the Iberian peninsula, and East Central Europe (Austria, Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, and Russia). The disproportion is the most visible in chapter 6, in which the

assessment of Habsburg absolutism is restricted to the culture of the masonic lodges and Mozart's *Zauberflöte* (p.172–78). Apart from these, Jacob's book takes the secular experience as evidently accessible in the context of the eighteenth century but pays no attention to the conceptual and contextual concerns that may make the notion of "secularity" less apt for historical analysis. Jacob's distinctly secular view implies that the progress of secularism as a Western-born phenomenon which became closely related to enlightened sentiment proceeded from the late sixteenth century onwards, contributing to the development of a set of seemingly "modern" questions, the effect of which on nineteenth-century modernization is hardly deniable.

All in all, *The Secular Enlightenment* is a thought-provoking collection of ideas, which provides an impressive account of the secular tendencies of the eighteenth century which were most substantial to the intellectual movement. Jacob guides her readers with considerable confidence and compassion over a set of topics which demand serious attention even from experts. Thanks to her elegant and fluent prose, the book reads easily. Merely with its choice of subject, the book merits scholarly attention, and Jacob approaches the topic in a way which will lead to constructive debates on the field.

Tibor Bodnár-Király
Eötvös Loránd University