

The History and Implications of Secularisation: The Leiden Circle, 1575-1618

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My recently published work on Grotius's *De iure praedae* and Heinsius's *De tragoediae constitutione* is part of a larger inquiry into the history and consequences of secularisation. The present paper advances the larger thesis that the historical reason why the international community regularly fails to avoid and resolve conflicts that have a religious dimension is that the Western conceptual framework is not simply secular, but was designed to be blind to religious legitimacy claims. From the fourth to the seventeenth century Christian theology underpinned all aspects of thought, from the natural sciences to political theory. As the Reformation eroded Catholic doctrinal monopoly, much of European thought broke down. Secularisation is the process whereby Europe's *Weltanschauung* was rebuilt without theology. European conquest spread secular norms around the world, often with stabilising effect. However, as the historical contingency of secularisation was forgotten, and its norms started to be mistaken for universal ones, conflicts with a religious dimension (including the Middle East, and the integration of Muslim immigrants in the West) became irresolvable.

Convincing accounts exist of Swiss, Italian and French secularisation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Given the iconic and substantial significance of Grotius and the Treaty of Westphalia, which effectively ended the Wars of Religion, and given the scarcity of scholarship on Dutch secularisation, my current research revolves around a group of thinkers at the University of Leiden between 1575, its foundation, and 1618-9, the Calvinist reaction that destroyed the Dutch *politique* project. It is an illuminating synecdoche of the broader argument.

During the Wars of Religion the Dutch had to learn how to neutralise, and institutionalise the neutralisation of, numerous sources of conflict and instability. These included external threats from Spain, France, England, the Empire and the Papacy, as well as domestic religious, ethnic and social tensions, and destabilisingly fast commercial and colonial expansion. A long-term antidote had to be found to the religious and social divisions.

At Leiden a group of teachers, students and friends co-operated in post-Reformation reconstruction. J.J. Scaliger (1540-1609) treated ancient calendars and the Bible as equally reliable sources, and in *De emendatione temporum* (1583) and *Thesaurus temporum* (1606) he extrapolated from them a unified linear chronology that

put European awareness of time on a new footing. He also proved that the Hebrew language changed over the centuries, thereby gainsaying those who insisted that the Bible was an unchanging source of truth, not to be subjected to rational criticism. Lipsius (1547-1606) was Professor of History at Leiden. Here he perfected his editions of Tacitus and Seneca, and proved instrumental in reviving Stoicism and Tacitean political realism. Arminius (1560-1609), Professor of Theology, broke with Calvinist predestination and formulated a new doctrine of free will and salvation. The year after his death the Remonstrant movement was launched by his followers, led by Uytenbogaert (1557-1644) and Episcopius (1583-1643). Under Arminius's influence, Vorstius (1569-1622) and Cocceius (1603-69), a member of the third Leiden secularizing generation, developed confederative theology, in which all parties are bound by a voluntary contract or covenant. As previously the absolute power of monarchs was derived from an analogy with God, now both God and kings became accountable, and both inevitably diminished in stature. Modern politics and secularisation connected: individual responsibility turned out to be the price of autonomy, in religion as well as in politics.

The famous Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was one Scaliger's favourite pupils, and was also influenced from his Leiden student days by Uytenbogaert and Episcopius. The secularising import of many of his Leiden works, including *De republica emendanda*, *De iure praedae*, *Meletius* and *Ordinum pietas*, will receive detailed analysis in my book. Petrus Cunaeus, a friend and peer to Grotius at Leiden, is best remembered as the author of *De Republica Hebraeorum* (1617), in which he deployed Scaliger's historical method to profound political effect. One of the book's great merits – recognized by contemporaries and into the nineteenth century – was that it compared OT stories with ancient histories as fully equiparant and gave an ethnographic description of the Hebrew Republic under God's direct rule. This made it intellectually impossible to use ancient Israel as a source of right claims and the model of post-biblical 'divine' forms of government. This second generation of the Leiden Circle also included Daniel Heinsius (1580-1655) and Gerhardt Vossius (1577-1649), whose contributions to secularisation similarly extended the Scaligerian method to debunk Christianity by setting up a comprehensive method of *Symbolforschung* and a comparative anthropology of religion that overrode Christianity's truth-claims and rendered it comparable to other religions in every respect. However, the 1618-9 Calvinist purge destroyed this Arminian experiment, and exiled or executed the leading figures of Dutch secularisation.

Heavily influenced by the Leiden experiment, secularising ideas first became sustainable political reality in early modern England. English Arminians and republicans like Locke, Milton, Harrington, Tillotson, Clarke and Newton, and supporters of the Glorious Revolution were the first to engineer a successful transition to modernity. While much superb work has been done on this period, the story of English secularisation remains to be told, especially in its European and wider imperial context. The Arminian lesson in the correlation of the individual's religious, political and economic autonomy has profoundly shaped the new parliamentarianism that emerged from the English Civil Wars; and the constitutionalism of the Glorious Revolution, including the replacement of a royal dynasty with another, more respectful of Parliament, aimed directly to revive the failed Dutch experiment. England at the end of the seventeenth century was essentially Erastian and tolerant in her

politics, empiricist in her science, and ready to become the model for the Enlightenment.

Biography

Mark Somos holds a BA (Hons). in History and an M.Phil. in Political Thought from the University of Cambridge, and an AM in Government and Social Policy and PhD. in Political Science from Harvard University. He is currently a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Sussex, where he is teaching and supervising BA Theses on the history of human rights, and preparing a book on secularisation for Brill.

Relevant publications

- Dec. 2009 “[Saint Augustine of Hippo, Step-father of Liberalism](#)”, *History of European Ideas* 36:3
- Nov. 2009 “[Enter Secularisation: Heinsius’s *De tragoediae constitutione*](#)”, *History of European Ideas* 36:1
- April 2009 “[Secularization in De Iure Praedae : from Bible Criticism to International Law](#)”. Reprinted in ed. Hans W. Blom, *Property, Piracy and Punishment: Hugo Grotius on War and Booty in De iure praedae – Concepts and contexts*. Leiden, Brill
- 7 Dec., 2008 “[Secularization in De Iure Praedae : from Bible Criticism to International Law](#)”, *Grotiana* 26-28: 147-91
- 1 June, 2006 “Securitization and religious divides in Europe: Islamophobia in Western Europe”. Editor and contributor, with Dr. Jocelyne Cesari and Peter DeWan, of Deliverables No. 59. and 92 to [Workpackage 10, “Securitization and religious divide in Europe after 9/11”](#), for CHALLENGE: The Changing Landscape of European Liberty and Security.