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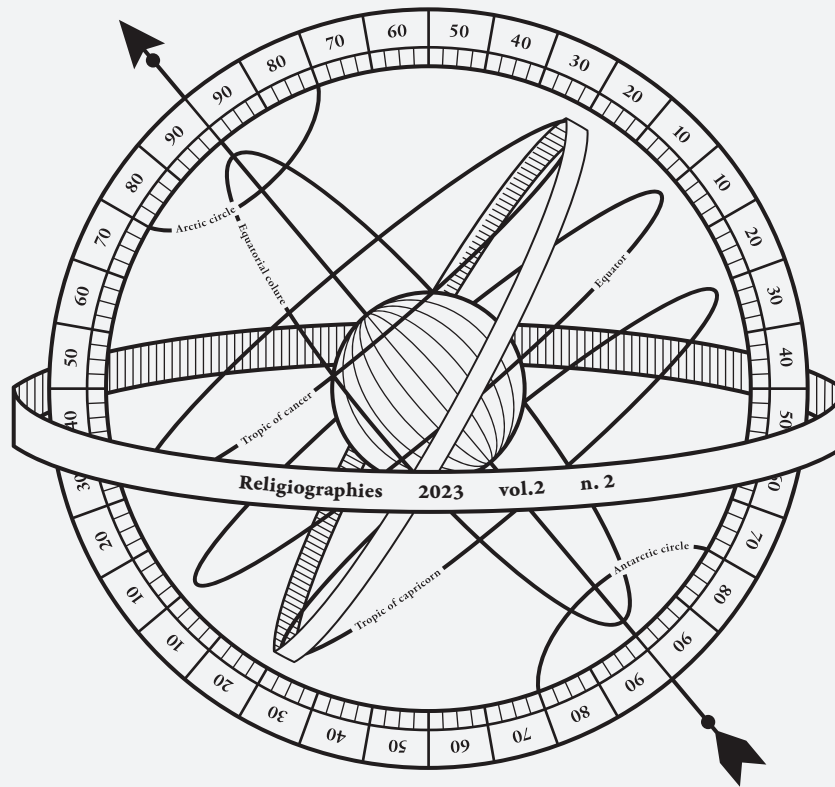
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Divine Secularisation: a Possible Genealogy of Nationalism
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Abstract

This article questions the idea that secularism always comes about by the gradual elimination of the sacred from the political sphere. It also aims to discuss how in the case of seventeenth-century Netherlands, religious sentiments and an early ethnic claim participated in moulding a political regime characterised by a peculiar form of divine secularisation and by a fusion of ethnic-centred demands capable of compacting and unifying the Dutch people.

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Ermanno Arrigoni, *Alle radici della secolarizzazione: La teologia di Gogarten* (Torino: Marietti, 1981), 9–39; Carl Schmitt, "Teologia politica: Quattro capitoli sulla dottrina della sovranità," in C. Schmitt, *Le categorie del politico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1972), 61–74; Eric Maulin, *La Politica e il Sacro: I fondamenti teologici del pensiero politico europeo* (Napoli: Diana Edizioni, 2021), 14.

3

Roberto Lambertini and Mario Conetti, *Il potere al plurale: Un profilo di storia del pensiero politico medievale* (Milano: Jouvence, 2019), 102–3, 156–58.

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See Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), exposing the religious roots of the ostensibly secular age to this day.

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Harold J. Berman, "The Spiritualization of Secular Law: The Impact of Reformation," *Journal of Law and Religion* 14 (1999–2000): 313–49.

Introduction[1]

The term secularisation often refers to either the exclusion of religion from the political discourse or to the transfer of sectarian arrangements into civic religions. On the other hand, modern nationalism is generally believed to be born out of secularist arguments, as the merging of identitarian claims with religious formulas.[2] We often read that the seventeenth century was characterised by a progressive removal of religion from the public sphere and that it was during this time that the emerging core of modern statehood and its civic discourse had begun to replace medieval political theology.[3] However, my argument is that this vision is too naive and schematic and that in, some cases, religion nourished a peculiar form of secularisation.[4] In this paper, I offer a new account of the path that nationalism can take. What may be defined as proto-nationalism and the alleged undermining of religion that occurred during the course of seventeenth century were not a product of rising secularisation but rather the outcome of the most theologised century of the modern era.

The idea of a contrast between the religious and the civil sphere that had allegedly started in the eleventh century has already been questioned by legal scholar Harold Berman, who distinguishes between a tentative "first secularisation" that occurred during the Middle Ages and what he called the "spiritualisation of the secular" of early modernity.[5]

To support this argument, which takes Berman's conceptual itinerary a step further, I will start by investigating the case of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces in the Low Countries, which formed after the Dutch Revolt of 1566–1648. I will show how the creation of a national myth, that of the Batavi, laid the foundations for the first true ethnic claim in history. My analysis also looks at how Reformation's Hebraist erudition, as it developed during the struggle against Spanish King Philip II, claimed

that Moses' biblical constitution considered religious and civil laws to be on the same plane. In conclusion, I argue that what we see in the Netherlands is not one of the first examples of what Carl Schmitt referred to when he talked about how "all significant concepts of the modern theories of the state are secularised theological concepts."[6] Rather, we witness a religious practice that is also nationalist-like, civic, and state-centred. To some extent, seventeenth-century Dutch Calvinist theology, national claims, and the coeval Political Hebraism[7] combined to produce a sort of divine secularism, something that might still come as a surprise.

The first empirical data we can look at is how in Romance languages we can find different shades of the adjective "secular." Words like *laicità* or *laïcité* in Italian and French, or *laicismo* in Spanish imply distance from a religious sphere. The general notion of secularism was also expressed by removing God from public space. Nevertheless, in seventeenth-century Netherlands, people understood secularism differently. The Dutch Reformed political discourse saw the relationship between sacred history and human history as continuous and blended, rather than conflicting.[8] Even the term "rebel," in reference to the Dutch provinces fighting the Spanish central government, denoted a certain ambiguity. According to both sides of the conflict, while the word had a political connotation, a rebel was also a deviant of all sorts, including from a religious perspective,[9] as religion marked out and conceptualised the political side of the conflict of the revolt. The divine benevolence accorded to one of the struggling parties was demonstrated by emerging victorious, as in the eyes of Reformed scholars and theologians, historical development could only be understood through the Holy Scriptures. Thus, the Calvinist perspective would interpret the long history of Dutch people through the lens of biblical events,[10] as long as their religious sentiment was preserved.

In this respect, if in today's analysis we keep these aspects separate, while they were instead closely linked at the time, we would be implying and anticipating that long process of contemporary secularisation, which, perhaps, had not even begun at the time.[11] The requests of Dutch Calvinist congregations permeated the political affairs of the state, especially at a local level. Dutch civil authorities were well aware that they could not rule without heeding the opinions of the *predikanten* (preachers).[12] In fact, during their theological training, young Dutch scholars and ministers learned to provide political responses in line with the language and mindset of their time. As a consequence, the substantial support for the intermingling of state and religion, widely demonstrated by these Dutch theologians, implied a defence of the political stability of the fledgling Dutch "rebel" Republic, as well as a gradual reflection, undertaken by Calvinist theologians such as Gijsbert Voet (1589–1676), on an embryonic idea of territorial and *national* sovereignty.[13]

From the point of view of the most uncompromising Dutch Calvinist scholars, both political and moral freedom constituted one of the main aspects—if not *the* main aspect—of national integrity. Thus, reluctance to tolerate denominational variations other than the rigorous Calvinist one is easy to understand. A wide array of Calvinist theologians objected to religious tolerance, believing that it would undermine the strength inherent to the power required to rule the new state. In these Calvinist theories, the Netherlands were linked to a single faith, and Dutch people were political extensions of a religious doctrine that summarised the concept underlying the Revolt. If both the Republic of the United Provinces and the

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Schmitt, *Teologia politica*, 61.

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See Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Political Hebraism: Past and Present," in *The Liberal-Republican Quandary in Israel, Europe and the United States: Early Modern Thought Meets Current Affairs*, ed. T. Maissen and F. Oz-Salzberger (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 30–48.

8
See Johannes Hoornbeeck, *Oratio de Studio S.S. Theologiae* (Ultrajecti: Apud Iannem à Waesberge, 1644), 12; Richard A. Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 345–75.

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Rosario Villari, *Politica barocca: Inquietudini, mutamento e prudenza* (Bari: Laterza, 2010), 100.

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See Aaron Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

11
Lea Campos Boralevi, "La politeia biblica nel pensiero politico dell'Europa moderna," in *Alterità. Esperienze e percorsi nell'Europa moderna*, ed. L. Felici (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2014), 12.

12
Johan Huizinga, *La civiltà olandese del Seicento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 47.

13
Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum disputationum Theologicarum, Liber II* (Ultrajecti: Apud Joannem à Waesberge, 1648), 791–826.

14

See Joris van Eijnatten, "Religionis Causa: Moral Theology and the Concept of Holy War in the Dutch Republic," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (2006): 609–35.

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See James Tanis, "Reformed Pietism and Protestant Missions," *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974): 68.

16

See Annabel Brett, "Natural Right and Civil Community: The Civil Philosophy of Hugo Grotius," *The Historical Journal* 1 (2002): 31–51.

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Jeroen Dewulf, *Spirit of Resistance: Dutch Clandestine Literature During the Nazi Occupation* (New York: Camden House, 2010), 102–3.

entire Dutch nation had departed from a self-identification with Calvinism (which was anti-Socinian and anti-Arminian), they would have renounced the reasons for their historical existence.[14]

People and religion: from the Batavi to the Israelites

As can be imagined, the inevitable internal contrasts amongst the various reformed confessions of the Dutch Republic grew entwined with an internecine conflict, which threatened the stability of the Netherlands from within. It should be remembered that the dispute between the Gomarists, followers of Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641), and the Arminians, Jacob Arminus' supporters (1560–1609), on the question of the authority of religion over politics divided Dutch people deeply. With city against city, congregation against congregation, and university against university, the underdeveloped Dutch political entity was poised to be disintegrated by centrifugal forces.[15] Due to these controversies, Dutch thinkers advocated for the implementation of a common identity policy to find a pacifying solution to a sectarian disagreement that was tearing Dutch society apart. This necessity eventually developed into two parallel public discourses, the first of which concerned the proto-nationalist and ethnic rhetoric of Batavian genealogy.

In order to trace the Batavian myth, we need to go back to the work of ancient Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus, who was probably the first to mention the Batavi in his treatises. In one of his first writings, *Germania*, composed around AD 98, Tacitus first discussed this Germanic people, one of the feuding tribes living in today's Netherlands. In Books IV and V of his *Historia*, the Roman historian described the revolt of this unruly tribe against Roman legions in AD 69–70, inspired and led by their warrior leader Claudius Civilis.

Ideas about the Dutch nation pivoted around this line of direct descent from the ancient Batavi, who at the time had also fought against foreign invaders. Now the vehement and greedy Romans had been substituted by the insidious and opulent Catholics, enemies of the true Christian faith.

This identity rhetoric, which foreshadowed the historical or pseudo-historical identifications of Romanticism, whilst it essentially imagined an ideal continuity between the Republic of the United Provinces and the Batavi, clearly sought to overcome the disagreements that pitted large groups within Dutch society against each other. The first author to delve into a political and nationalist-like narrative of the Batavian myth was Hugo Grotius (1583–1645). In his *Liber de antiquitate reipublicae Batavicae*, also published in Dutch as *Tractaet van de Oudtheyt van de Batavische nu Hollandsghe Republique* (1610), Grotius, whose Calvinist views were similar to those of Arminius, stated that freedom, unity, endurance, and independence were central characteristics of the Dutch national identity. He actively argued that they made up the most native essence of the Dutch people, and he called on the Dutch nation to preserve these ancient and unitary traditions.[16] To hold Dutch society together, the Stadtholders thus encouraged the spread of this Batavian heritage and the idea of a libertarian nation that resisted Latin colonisation.[17] On these grounds, Amsterdam-born poet Johan van Heemskerck (1597–1656) wrote the popular poem *Inleydinghe tot het ontwerp van een Batavische Arcadia* (i.e., Introduction to the idea of a Batavian Arcadia, 1637). The text described a trip from The Hague to the seaside town of Katwijk, where a group of nymphs

and shepherds peacefully and joyfully conversed in a courteous and idyllic atmosphere. Later, playwright Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) used Heemskerck's theme for his famous play *Batavische gebroeders* (i.e., Batavian brothers, 1663), which again highlighted the tight connection between the fierce Batavi and the proud Dutch people.

If the Batavian myth played a major role in the Dutch seventeenth-century imagination,[18] a second public discourse derived from the emphasis the Reformists put on the rediscovery and reading of original biblical sources. In this process of national definition, the new Dutch subjects also sought their roots in identifying as a true and solely biblical nation. This created an additional level of moral contrast with Catholic Spain, depicted as a pharaonic tyranny that opposed the legitimate struggle of the Netherlands for civic and religious freedom. Spanish monarch Philip II was associated with the anonymous biblical pharaoh, whilst the Dutch people were associated with the Israelites. For example, the rescue of the citizens of Leiden in 1574 by the Dutch Navy was linked to the events narrated in Exodus (Ex. 13:18 and 14:24–29), when the Egyptians were overwhelmed by the sea. Leiden's rescue was seen as the divine endorsement of the true faith, and the indication of God's closeness to the resistance of the Netherlands. The episode, both the historical and the biblical one, galvanised the Dutch ruling class so strongly that it grew into a real national iconographic motif, with dozens of artistic representations being made.[19]

With a domino effect, it was almost natural for religious discussions to move on to an external political debate. Despite their religious differences, all the Reformed scholars noted that the Hebrew Bible also dealt with politics and the organisation of power. Prominent Dutch Calvinist theologian Sixtinus Amama (1593–1629) was convinced that the principles of the Reformation favoured the study of Hebrew in order to defeat the Catholic threat.[20] Reformed theologians were interested in deciphering, understanding, and investigating the politics described in the Bible, the kind of organisation of power that God legitimated, and what kind of regulations Moses implemented. Thus, seventeenth-century scholarship witnessed the dissemination of books and treatises that explored the so-called *Respublica Hebraeorum*—the ancient Hebrew Commonwealth—following this fresh Reformed interest. Jewish sources were becoming a vessel of political norms which God himself had provided to the Israelites in the form of a civic government. And Moses in particular, as the Israelite lawgiver, was represented as the founder of this ancient government. It is clear that the consequences of such a "secular" reinterpretation of the Bible were quite relevant: if God had depicted a typology of civil government, then the aims of a true Christian nation would have to be entirely re-organised.

This context is crucial for understanding the trends emerging in this period. It explains why Arminian Calvinist Petrus Cunaeus (1586–1638) in his *De Republica Hebraeorum Libri III* (1617) attempted to demonstrate the free, orderly, and victorious character of Mosaic law. In other words, he tried to provide a civic-religious model for the new Dutch state, capable of mediating between the rashness of the Exodus events and the political stability of the biblical Commonwealth.[21] Thus, the classical republican word *libertas* became the distinctive Dutch *Vrijheid*, nourished by biblical, Jewish, and Latin sources, fusing into a political discourse that used terms of classical antiquity, but with a much wider conceptual range. Moreover, the Hebrew commonwealth provided not only biblical parallels of a chosen people and a promised land, but also a confederal blueprint for the

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Simon Schama, *The Embarassment of Riches: An Interpetation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988), 78.

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Steven Nadler, *Gli ebrei di Rembrandt* (Torino: Einaudi, 2017), 112–13.

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Peter T. van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship and Rabbinical Studies in the Seventeenth Century: Constantijn L'Empereur (1591–1648), Professor of Hebrew and Theology at Leiden* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 69–70.

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See Lea Campos Boralevi, "La Respublica Hebraeorum nella tradizione olandese," in *Politeia Biblica*, ed. L. Campos Boralevi and D. Quaglioni (Firenze: Olschki, 2003), 431–63.

22

Helmut G. Koenigsberger, *Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments: The Netherlands in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 241–321.

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Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation through the Protestant Reformation* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–3.

24

See Lea Campos Boralevi, "Classical Foundational Myths of European Republicanism: The Jewish Commonwealth," in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. M. Van Gelderen and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 253–55.

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Martin Van Gelderen, "Aristotelians, Monarchomachs and Republicans: Sovereignity and Respublica Mixta in Dutch and German Political Thought, 1580–1650," in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 197.

26

Jonathan Jacobs, "Return to the Sources: Political Hebraism and the Making of Modern Politics," *Hebraic Political Studies* 3 (2006): 336–37.

27

See Lea Campos Boralevi, "Linguaggio biblico e repubblica ebraica nell'Olanda del Cinque e Seicento," in P. Cunaeus, *De Republica Hebraeorum—The Commonwealth of the Jews* (Firenze: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 1996).

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Alberto Scigliano, "Johannes Hoornbeeck, la Nadere Reformatie e lo ius ad bellum: Un percorso fra calvinismo ortodosso ed erudizione ebraica nell'Olanda di metà Seicento," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 1 (2022): 114–16.

organisation of the Republic of United Provinces.[22] Being tied to a biblical imagery also entailed continuous references to the Jewish notion of *berith* (i.e., the Covenant) between God and Israel. The covenant mediated by Moses was referred to because it possessed a moral strength that could bring Hollanders together thanks to its religious nature, which was being absorbed in the civic amalgamation process being undergone by the Dutch Republic.[23] Biblical references, through the only official Dutch translation of the Bible, the *Statenbijbel,* allowed Calvinist preachers to become political agitators of sorts in the service of the state. Likewise, Dutch intelligentsia received and reworked these ideas within their cultural and intellectual activities, trying to make the Republic of the Seven United Provinces appear as if it belonged to both past and present republican regimes. The Hebrew model was efficaciously inserted amongst other similar or compatible models, such as Geneva's (or the Swiss model), Venice's,[24] and that of the Germanic *mixtae* republics.[25] Reformed scholars looked at the supposed Constitution conceived by the Holy Scriptures as a beacon leading the Dutch nation to its historical destiny. Thus, Political Theory—or its forefather at least—worked alongside Hebraist scholarship, Batavian myth, and Calvinist theology[26] to produce a Dutch national identity.

The unifying character of the identification between the Netherlands and ancient Israel was also due to the decisive role played by the ruling class, which was able to accentuate the notably political and national nature of Israelite religious identification. This occurred thanks to an accurate political project developed in the Calvinist circles of academic Hebraists, through which this narration was consciously transformed into a republican Calvinist political model, based on a deep knowledge of Jewish scholarship.[27]

During the period between the Revolt and the affirmation of the state, the nationalist discourse of the Dutch as a chosen people retaining a special destiny was oriented towards a reinterpretation of Old Testament politics. The political use of the Bible began when biblical pages were presented as sources to examine and reassess the central themes for the construction of Dutch political identity. This was brought into being not only by theologians and scholars, but also by the Republic's new generation of politicians. Essentially, civil authorities were also interested in creating and legitimising their own identity agenda through a "secular" reading of the Old Testament.

It is no coincidence then that some Calvinist scholars stressed the centrality of the notion of alliance (*berith*) for the nation. According to them, the book of Deuteronomy warned the Israelites not to embrace foreign idols, since Israel was born as a nation and acquired its national freedom thanks to the political-religious alliance stipulated by Moses. In the same way, all Dutch people were collectively called to defend their Republic as the Israelites did, in its dual form of political affiliation and religious faith.[28]

A divine secularisation

Despite the scholarly definitions of secularism, Dutch theologians generally claimed that religious semantic contents could have an intrinsic value for the public discourse. This reading, built on the Old Testament as brokered by the Reformation, believed that the Dutch were the chosen people, bound to God—and to themselves—by a sacred covenant, and associated the Low

Countries with a Netherlandish Israel. Through the use of these semantic tools, Dutch thinkers justified the revolt against King Philip II, as well as against Catholic rule over their Reformed land. As mentioned above, during the Eighty Years' War there was an abiding comparison between the institutions of the regime of the biblical Hebrews and the structures of the Dutch state, as an outcome of its full identification as the "new Israel."[29] The Bible was read as a source of inspiration for a new political project, as well as a good compendium of ethical-political patterns, and it was a privileged conceptual provider for the development of political thought in early modern Holland.[30] Within the newborn country, this political Hebraism was not limited to the religious realm but was even diffused into popular strata. In this context, the divine view of the nation was a crucial political and cultural theme, capable of calling into question some historiographical beliefs concerning European political thought, such as those concerning progressive secularisation, which is often overly backdated.[31] Large parts of Dutch society were aware of this ideological overlap between divine history and their secular reality, whereas secular just meant "civic affairs" for them.

Lectures and sermons preached by pastors or scholarly theologians illustrated how civil life was to be a mirror of religious existence. This did not entail that one's public life had to be identical to one's spiritual vigour, but rather that the rules that ordered and defined religion were a *starting point* for public affairs. In fact, during the Dutch Revolt, and in its governmental outcome, we can actually observe a sacred, divine secularism. The Dutch case showed that the nationalisation of society and the affirmation of a political or civic language could have a double relationship on two different levels, in which daily affairs, as well as the affairs of the state itself, were subject to very little "secular" reading.

Since God and Moses had politically ordered ancient Israel through a mix of the civic and the religious, from which it would be wise to draw inspiration, the separation between these two spheres lost any solid foundation. Civic politics, war politics, and even identity politics then appeared as an aspect of an all-embracing *national* religious culture. In the eyes of Dutch Calvinist scholars, the biblical paradigm was so rich in ethical and civil significance that it could teach one how to be at the same time a citizen (a good *burger*) and a subject (*onderdaan*) of the Dutch nation.

As Michael Walzer demonstrated almost forty years ago, the paradigm of the Jewish Exodus served as a point of reference not only for the rebellious Dutchmen, but also in the English Civil War.[32] It is an extremely tangible and dynamic paradigm that could even appear dangerously subversive to the most traditionalist theologians. For this reason, the Dutch ruling class intended to elaborate the national idea of freedom in parallel with Mosaic liberation, but in a less seditious way, not just through the use of classical models, but also by employing more institutionalising biblical paradigms. References to the Bible therefore take care to not exalt too much the libertarian thrust of the Israelites fleeing Egypt, focusing instead on the perfect and prudential nature of Mosaic law, at the same time civil and cultic. The conception of the state became a reflection of both morality (religion) and nation (civil affairs). These three elements—state, nation, and ethics—were merged together, without sharp boundaries.

In seventeenth-century Dutch mentality, secularisation, intended as the absence of religion in civil affairs, was disarmed by the profound interconnection between nation-centred and civil elements. Civil authorities administered the state in the interests of the Dutch people and of

29
Miriam Bodian, "The Biblic Jewish Republic and the Dutch New Israel in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Thought," *Hebraic Political Studies* 2 (2006): 186–202.

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See Jetze Touber, *Spinoza and Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1660–1710* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 177–226.

31
See Debora Spini, "Il calvinismo alle radici della modernità," in *Calvino e calvinismo politico*, ed. C. Maladrino and L. Savarino (Torino: Claudiana, 2011), 310–16.

32
Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

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Huizinga, *La civiltà olandese del Seicento*, 54–55.

34

See for example Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 88–136.

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Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*, 134–37.

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See Eco O. G. Haitsma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980), 170–212.

37

See Arthur Weststeijn, *Commercial republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age: The Political Thought of Johan & Pieter de la Court* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

their religion. Just as Moses ordered an alliance between Israel and God via the establishment of a religious and civil corpus, the divine secularisation of the Netherlands introduced a hybrid alliance between sacredness and politics in the civil sphere. Civil authorities understood that Calvinist sentiment had public significance for the Dutch national community and thus incorporated some religious directives, while at the same time they did not bow blindly to the theologians' will.[33]

From this perspective, secular politics was neither the means nor the aim of religion but participated in the fabrication of an unprecedented national and state entity. Calvinism was not a civic religion—certainly not in Enlightenment or Jacobin terms—but it represented the public ethics of a new nation, and the reason for its existence on the stage of human history. The Calvinist creed acted as glue and justification for the national struggles of the entire Dutch state. From a nationalistic point of view, Calvinism and its two ramifications—the biblical and the Batavian—created an "us" opposed to a "them."

It is remarkable that there were also signs of a relative convergence in terms of a dialogical standpoint that moved away both from Medieval political theology and present-day, clear-cut notions of secularism. As a matter of fact, the Dutch example highlights a narrow transition in the definition of political legitimacy, which does not rest on divine will as in the Middle Ages, but on the *religious* will of people who recognised themselves as a nation. In the Netherlands the famous motto *cuius regio, eius religio*—"whose realm, their religion"—was overturned. It was not the sovereign imposing their belief on the people, but the people who, through the majority religion, built their own identification with the state. Civic institutions were therefore ordered and inspired by this majority rather than absolutist principles. This under-studied aspect of seventeenth-century Dutch society cannot be ignored when studying how secularism eventually became embedded with concepts such as democracy, liberalism, and the rule of law.[34] It is also worth noting that the first theorist of natural law was moderate Calvinist Hugo Grotius, the same person who had written the first apologetic treatise on the Batavi. Some authors have argued that many of the central ideas we unwittingly associate with the birth of modern political thought, or the birth of so-called secularisation, developed in this religious context.[35] While historical studies seem to trace the tendency of seventeenth-century political thought to claim absolute autonomy, in the Dutch case, things went in a different and clear direction. Between the 1620s and the 1660s, the Dutch political debate had increasingly been dominated by a concern with the ideas of Niccolò Machiavelli. The Italian theorist had been the first writer to offer a vision of politics in which theology did not play a part in providing political legitimacy and stability.[36] His essentially secular vision of history influenced the works of some Dutch thinkers of the time, such as Pieter de la Court (1618–1685)[37] and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). Without getting into the specifics of these Dutch authors, we can still say that Machiavelli's vision could thrive in a wartime context—as Holland was experiencing in that period—since the pursuit of theological disputes felt devoid of any real political and social relevance. The previous 1617–1618 crisis had brought the Republic to the brink of civil war. That had encouraged civil authorities, albeit more or less linked to religious circles, to take matters into their own hands and curb the internal strife by using the Batavian narrative and, to a slightly lesser extent, biblical identification. Taking control of religious institutions

did not imply a process of secularisation intended as the exclusion of the religious from the political, but rather the maintenance of state stability and public order through the fusion of the two. Civil magistracies, more concerned with the collapse of the Dutch Republic under the disruptive power of sectarian diatribes, mediated and negotiated between the two fields. Hugo Grotius explained this well. He started the Batavian myth, while also being a theologian, a politician, and a jurist. In addition to his profound interest in the mythical past of the Batavi, Grotius believed that the divine constitution preserved in the Bible was the political cynosure towards which Holland should navigate.[38] Ethnic political semantics and religious political semantics thus merged into an intellectual product that saw the Dutch Republic as both a civil and God-inspired political expression. In a certain sense, both visions sacralised the political sphere, reframing in the present the ultimate goal of religion: salvation. But if Calvinism aimed at the salvation of the soul—which in some cases was also predestined for salvation—the nationalist claim aimed at the salvation of the Dutch citizens, who had to be self-aware and fight for the defense of their hard-gained freedom.

In seventeenth-century Holland, it was not only the theologians who interpreted the Scriptures, just like political jurists did not simply theorise the workings of civil authority. Moreover, as noted by Jonathan I. Israel, political stability in the Republic of the United Provinces was a crucial necessity after the Twelve Years' Truce, which had been "secular"—or civic—in character, even though constantly sporting theological themes. The urgent need for peace tended to give less importance to theological claims and arguments.[39]

For this reason, divine secularisation was not a *subordination* of religion to politics, but rather their fusion or juxtaposition, for the sake of the state and national unity. While it might be believed that modern states and their administrative apparatus have come to be the way they are due to the religious sphere, which is partly true in some cases, the imposition of a religious peace and the intervention of a mixed authority, as occurred in the Netherlands, was the peculiar compromise between religion and politics in which the civic realm was sacralised and the religious context was politicised.

In early modern absolute monarchies, the king had a divine right: his *potestas* was not mediated by the people, and his authority could only be limited by divine laws. In a sense, loyalty to the monarch is prone to be transformed into a political religion. The greatness of God is reflected in the majesty of the sovereign, to whom the people must swear eternal fidelity as the highest religious manifestation. However, the Dutch case demonstrates how loyalty can be directed towards the nation itself. State apparatus, the Batavian nation, Israelite identification, and Calvinist confession were the archetypes to which Dutch citizens had to turn to assert their loyalty. Thus, divine secularisation can be defined as a hybrid form, in which both Calvinist theological readings and national awareness of the Dutch state coexisted. The relationship between these two perspectives was not in conflict but rather in perennial osmosis, through the political reification of updated and re-functionalised biblical suggestions and of a mythical past. Historiography has sometimes offered a schematic picture that does not correspond to the reality of all the contexts, especially when it comes to the Netherlands, which were actually robustly penetrated by religiosity and mysticism.

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Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*, 98–99.

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Jonathan I. Israel, "The Uses of Myth and History in the Ideological Politics of the Dutch Golden Age," in *Narratives of Low Countries History and Culture: Reframing the Past*, ed. J. Fenoulhet and L. Gilbert (London: UCL Press, 2016), 10.

If we eliminate the religious and mystical dimension, the idea of an absolute secular language of civic Humanism would imply refusing a whole world of meaning connected to the pervasive influence of theology, biblical exegesis, and prophecy. Accordingly, the biblical-political themes of the Exodus, of the liberation from tyranny, and of political resistance based on religious obedience were crucial during the Dutch Revolt and in the political and nationalistic creation of the United Provinces. That is why the union between Batavi and Israelites influenced the Dutch art of the Golden Age, repurposing visual representations centred on the "national" hero Moses, on Batavian ancestors and on the antagonist, the Pharaoh.

For this reason, my definition of divine secularisation concerns the periodisation and the relationship between theology and politics, and this led me to question why the Jewish Commonwealth model became, for example, a republican political model that enjoyed great popularity in seventeenth-century Europe. The Dutch case led to one of the first instances of nationalism, but also a nationalism resulting from a process of divine secularisation, within which Calvinist theology, with its attachment to Jewish scholarship, served a basic function in the distinctive formation of Dutch civic identity.

Seventeenth-century divine secularisation of Dutch politics marked a moment in history in which Christianity had partly lost its social structuring function, typical of the Middle Ages, but at the same time could still use its narrative force to build a new active political reality. Ethnic claims and the civil government participated on the same level in the aspirations of religious belief. Religion did not disappear, but at the same time the Dutch state was not confessional either, nor was faith an exclusively private phenomenon.

The Batavian narrative allowed the Dutch Republic's thinkers and ruling class to shape the mythopoeia of their nation by providing a mythical past. This was a compelling narrative of the Netherlands as a political and cultural community united not only against a foreign tyranny, but also in achieving a religious pacification and a collective destiny. In this sense, King Philip II, as a Spaniard and Catholic, could be, all in all, the only enemy capable of compacting and uniting the mottled fringes of Dutch Calvinism against a common threat.

Conclusions

In conclusion, at the beginning of the modern age, when ethnic constructions became part of a broader process of identity awakening, some political myths certainly served to legitimise new or existing institutions, to galvanise public opinion, and to strengthen collective identification. This is why I believe that we should address the question of whether nationalism is an exclusive product of the processes of popular political participation and industrialisation after the eighteenth century. We should overturn this perspective and rethink the history of nationalisms as preceding the ideological constructions of the Enlightenment and of the Liberal and Romantic eras.

As for the Dutch case, Calvinists did not ask Dutch society for a clear separation between religious faith and public life, nor for a total penetration of the cult within the civic sphere. The Republic was not an end in itself, just as religion was not an end in itself. The reality that their juncture created was instead an end in itself. The solution civil and religious authorities found was pragmatic, and it aimed at the hybridisation of the

two realms, occurring with the inclusion of the preachers in the government of communities and a state that took the moral constructions of religion into account. The Calvinist approach, along with civil authorities, promoted a nationalist cooperation that did not separate one sphere from another. In a sense, it was rather aimed at incorporating dissident religious groups in the fabric of the political body in order to contain centrifugal forces and to stabilise the Netherlands on its path to full independence.

Additionally, thanks to the incessant work of Dutch Reformed theologians, it became common in the Netherlands to think that religion could mould customs and shape the intimate beliefs of the political community of citizens, while mitigating the excesses of a society that prospered greatly during its seventeenth-century Golden Age.[40] Only through this interpretation is it possible to grasp the key role of the Dutch foundational myth and its relationship with biblical identification, tied as both elements are to the phenomenon of divine secularisation.

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Maurizio Viroli, *Come se Dio ci fosse: Religione e libertà nella storia d'Italia* (Torino: Einaudi 2009), 150; Martin H. Prozersky, "The Emergence of Dutch Pietism," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 2 (1977): 29–30.