‘Lieutenants’ of the Commonwealth
A Political Reading of De jure ecclesiasticorum

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In 1665 the treatise De jure ecclesiasticorum was published under the pseudonym Lucius Antistius Constans in Amsterdam by the fictitious publisher Cajus Valerius Pennatus. The book focuses on the question of who should be entrusted with the care of religion, a question which is already answered in the treatise's title. Rights can only be bestowed to ecclesiastical officials by the government of the republic in which the ecclesiastical offices are instituted. Ecclesiastical officials that bestow rights upon themselves do so without justification. What prompted the anonymous author to write this treatise was the ecclesiastical dignitaries' excessive ambition, their fraudulent abuses that destroyed all public-religious cults. Because of his intended audience and opponents, the author expected to be defamed after the book's publication. Still, this is not the principal reason why he or she decided to distribute De jure under a fictitious name. "It is almost always unjustified when people ask questions about the author of a book", which will certainly happen when power abuse is being unmasked. One detracts the attention from the unmasking, from the actual theme, from people's thoughts which, of course, can only be learned through their works and through asking questions like: what motive and what authority have led the author to write this work? De jure ecclesiasticorum is a political, critical text that covers topics such as the use and abuse of power, law and power, church and state, motives and judgments. The book's

1 Lucius Antistius Constans De jure ecclesiasticorum. Liber singularis. Quo docetur: quodcunque divini humanique iuris ecclesiasticius tribuitur, vel ipsi sibi tribuunt, hoc, aut falso impieque illis tribui, aut non aliiunde, quam a suis, hoc est, eius reipublicae sive civitatis prodiiis, in qua sunt constituti, accepisse: "Lucius Antistius Constans on the right of ecclesiastical officials. One book that teaches that all divine and human rights that are assigned to ecclesiastical officials, or that they assign themselves, are either assigned to them wrongly and in an impious way, or are assigned to them exclusively by political lieutenants of the republic where they are appointed." After the original 1665 publication the treatise appeared in an 1843 (incomplete) collection of works by Descartes and Spinoza, edited by Carl Riedel: Renati des Cartes et Benedicti de Spinoza. Praecipua opera philosophica, 228–290. There is a French translation of De jure available by V. Butori, J. Lagrée and P.-F. Moreau: Du droit des ecclésiastiques, 1991. The English translations used henceforth are my own and references given are to the original Latin text of 1665. The French translation maintains the original Latin pagination.

2 De jure ecclesiasticorum, A2v–A3r.
motive is the pernicious ambition of ecclesiastical officials; the author’s indignation thereof lends it its authority.

Some 350 years later, and devoid of its contemporary political context, the question ‘who hides behind the name Lucius Antistius Constans?’ has regained some importance. The most famous author to whom it has been attributed is Spinoza, but nowadays the consensus is that this is a myth.\(^3\) For quite some time the most plausible candidate seemed to be one of the brothers De la Court, and accordingly, in many libraries the treatise is still located next to the *Consideratien van staat* and the *Politike Discoursen*.\(^4\) Another convincing candidate is Lodewijk Meyer, although there are no other works by this doctor-philosopher, playwright, and friend of Spinoza that explicitly deal with politics.\(^5\) Nevertheless, this is no conclusive argument against his authorship. His other works cover the most diverse domains and they do so in constantly adjusted style. Alongside a philosophical dissertation on matter and a discourse on the passions he wrote and rewrote dictionaries, translated plays, published—anonymously—the *Italiaansche spraakkonst* and, in the middle of all this, the infamous *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* in 1666, followed by its translation—allegedly from his own hand—*Philosophie d’Uytleghster der h. Schrifture* in 1667.\(^6\) Like Lucius Antistius Constans, Meyer believes that the theologians he criticizes “will even be stirred to anger”.\(^7\)

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4 See Baumgarten, *Nachrichten von einer Hallischen Bibliothek*, Band 3, 25–35, who writes that the author of this “ungodly work” (gottlose Schrift) is most likely “Van den Hooft”, viz. one of the brothers De la Court. Lucas suggests the same in his *La vie de monsieur Benoît de Spinoza*, in Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza’s*, 25.

5 This is suggested by, for instance, Colerus, see n. 3 above. Thijsse-Schoute departs from Colerus’ lines, which she sees as an indication that the authors mentioned, Spinoza, De la Court, and Meyer, did *not* write the treatise. See Thijsse-Schoute, *Nederlands Cartesianisme*, 393–394. Riedel argues that either Spinoza or one of his friends, for instance Meyer, is the author. See *Renati des Cartes et Benedicti de Spinoza*, vol. II, IX–X.


7 Meyer, *Philosophy as the Interpreter*, 21; *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres*, *2r*: “Theologos, simulatque oculos suos conecerint in hujus titulum, nomenque Libelli, non