Secularisation is a phenomenon usually identified with secularism and mostly connected to the centuries following the Enlightenment. Only rarely have scholars studied secularisation as a process distinct from secularism, as a program that, although not necessarily motivated by anti-Christian or anti-religious positions, finally resulted in the rise of new worldviews more and more detached from Christianity or from religion as such.

Mark Somos, in his recent study, traces back secularisation to a small circle of Leiden scholars blossoming in the first decades of the seventeenth century and coming to an abrupt end with the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) and the counter-remonstrant repression in its aftermath. As these scholars were directly influenced by some of the most important sixteenth-century French politiques and as they in turn influenced English secularising circles of the later seventeenth century, Somos suggests that his model of secularisation should be understood as a ‘relay race from one isolated pocket of transitory toleration and intellectual experimentation to the next’ (59) and his book as the presentation of ‘one of the few intellectual workshops where today’s secular values were developed’ (143). His aims are twofold. On the one hand, he intends to contribute to a better understanding of outstanding Leiden scholars such as Joseph Justus Scaliger, Daniel Heinsius, Petrus Cunaeus and Hugo Grotius by placing them in a broader European context of secularising colleagues united through their search for peace and their openness to new solutions in a period of religious conflict, violence and war. On the other hand, he wishes to illuminate what was a short-lived, but important episode in the history of secularisation (439). This episode, according to Somos ‘is now less remembered, but for Western intellectual history it is no less significant, than the progressive turn of the enduring Enlightenment. In Leiden, as in a microcosm, we see all the components of the Enlightenment present and prefigured.’ (90).

To develop his argument, Somos uses sources from different genres and fields of knowledge which have been rather neglected by scholars until now. Most of these sources are neither explicitly anti-religious nor directly political, and they don’t correspond to what one would expect given the content and purpose of Somos’ book. However, as Somos convincingly shows, even seemingly apolitical sources contributed to their authors’ program to promote peace, and precisely because their secularising message was implicit rather than explicit, they were subtle enough to be widely read and accepted in their own times.

Somos’ book is divided into six huge chapters, the longest of which comprises more than 180 pages: In his introduction, Somos largely deals with the historical background of the interconnection between politics and religion as the presumed source of violence and the stumbling block for all secularising circles in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. After that, in his second chapter, he comes to speak about Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), presenting the well known Leiden professor as the ‘founding figure of secularising Leiden historiography’ (49) and as go-between between some of the most eminent French New
Historians and *politiques* and his Dutch pupils. According to Somos, Scaliger’s most important contributions to the Leiden secularising program were the introduction of the methods of the French New Historians into the Dutch Republic and the ‘conceptual reinvention of history as the master discipline’ (59), i.e. the primacy Scaliger attributed to history as an epistemic tool similar to the primacy Renaissance humanists had attributed to philology or the primacy the ‘New Scientists’ would attribute to geometry and observation (73). After Scaliger, some of his pupils adopted his program and introduced history into new fields of knowledge such as literary criticism, law, politics and theology (51).

Daniel Heinsius (1580-1655), the first of these pupils with whom Somos deals in great extent, not only continued Scaliger’s attempt to introduce comparative methods into mythology. He also used his *De tragoediae constitutione* (1611) to re-arrange and reinterpret Aristotle by de-emphasizing the importance of character and emphasizing the importance of action. A direct consequence of this new interpretation of classical tragedy was the deconstruction of contemporary Christian and especially Jesuit educational theatre and – in a more general sense – the use of *exempla*: ‘Collapsing character eliminates the need to take a position in the debate about exemplars, and this helps to avoid closely connected doctrinal issues like free will or the nature of divine intervention in the form of this-and/or other-worldly rewards and punishments.’ (199) Further contributions of Heinsius’s to the Leiden secularising Circle Somos mentions are his redefinition of immortality qua historical memory and his reinterpretation of the ‘classical’ universal-particular distinction in *De praestantia ac dignitate historiae oratio* (1613/14). As well known, after the Synod of Dordt, Heinsius changed sides, reduced his secularising statements and made desperate efforts to counterbalance some of his earlier works. However, as Somos emphasizes, his ‘commitment to the Leiden programme was more genuine than he is sometimes given credit for’ (194), and after political pressure ceased, Heinsius returned to some of his earlier secularising positions and statements.

Another important pupil of Scaliger is Petrus Cunaeus (1586-1638), Hebraist and lawyer at Leiden University and mostly known for his *De Republica Hebraeorum libri tres* (1617). According to Somos, Cunaeus’ book – one of the most important early modern contributions to political Hebraism and biblical politics – was ‘a masterstroke’ (202) against Dutch and European chosen nation theorists: ‘Cunaeus did to Israel what Scaliger did to the Hebrew language: he put it beyond the reach of those who mixed religion with politics.’ (202) However, in his chapter on Cunaeus, Somos doesn’t concentrate on *De Republica Hebraeorum*, but on Cunaeus’ less studied Menippean satire, *Sardi venales* (1612), another ‘milestone of epistemic humility on the road to secularism’ (287). Somos depicts three secularising elements in this book: first an early modern variety of cynicism differing from its ‘classical’ model by its distinct social character and its clear political message; second a Christian minimalism aiming at the deconstruction of the idea that the essence of Christianity can be comprehended by human nature or reason; third ‘Rabbinism,’ to be understood as an amalgam between medieval Jewish Anti-Aristotelism, Anti-Karaism and Kabbalah, used by Cunaeus to promote epistemic humility and a new understanding of *sophia*.

The fifth – and surely most convincing – chapter of Somos’ book is dedicated to Hugo Grotius and the prehistory of his concept of secularised international law. Somos’ sources in this chapter are some of Grotius’s early writings: the third and only extant part of *Parallelon rerumpublicarum* (1601-1602), *De iure praedae commentarius* (1604-1606) with its famous chapter *Mare liberum*, *Commentarius in Theses XI* (around 1610), and *Meletius* (1611). By meticulously comparing Grotius’s exegesis of important biblical passages with sources Grotius might have used as his model, Somos shows how the Dutch lawyer discussed biblical