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# Review of Paul Lawrence Rose, *Bodin and the Great God of Nature: The Moral and Religious Universe of a Judaiser*

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At the time of this publication, Dr. Ruderman was affiliated with University of Maryland, College Park, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

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## Review of Paul Lawrence Rose, *Bodin and the Great God of Nature: The Moral and Religious Universe of a Judaiser*

### **Abstract**

Judaism's influence on Jean Bodin has long been appreciated by students of the French thinker's extraordinary career and multifaceted writing but never fully understood. Paul Lawrence Rose examines the matter again, elevating it as a critical linchpin in comprehending Bodin's intellectual universe. For Rose, "Bodin's categories [of thought] and religious vision stemmed ... from the Jewish tradition represented by the works of Philo and Maimonides." To demonstrate his thesis, Rose chooses to deemphasize the study of Bodin's thought in relation to that of his contemporaries and proposes instead a methodology based on "(1) the completeness or integrality of Bodin's thought and writings and (2) the integration of Bodin's ideas and personality." By the first method, Rose hopes to decode Bodin's remarkable treatise on comparative religion, *The Heptaplomeres*, by using Bodin's other writings 'as a control upon the ambiguities of the the *Heptaplomeres*,' establishing the extent of agreement among the various speakers of the treatise, and subsequently Bodin's own views on the subject. By the second method, Rose attempts to reconstruct the details of Bodin's supposed three-staged conversion to a prophetic religion in order to illuminate more clearly the "interplay of religion, politics, and personality" characterizing both Bodin's thought and behavior.

### **Disciplines**

History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies

### **Comments**

At the time of this publication, Dr. Ruderman was affiliated with University of Maryland, College Park, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

*schrift* (1524), the *Kirchen-Ordnung* of 1598, the liturgies printed during the century, doctrinal works of the various reformers, and their correspondence. His use of secondary sources is rather curious. Despite the fact that a good deal of work has been done in recent years by French, German, and American scholars on the Strasbourg Reformation, Bornert makes very little use of their work but has preferred to go back to older German works published in 1860 and 1887. The result is that despite the adoption of modern forms of sociological analysis, the book seems rather isolated from the mainstream of current historical research.

Finally, although Bornert asserts a strong connection between general social attitudes and ritual, he limits himself to the ideas and beliefs of the Protestant clergy who wrote the new liturgies. The response of the congregation, their beliefs and attitudes, are ignored. The clergy are in their pulpits but there are no people in the churches.

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Paul Lawrence Rose. *Bodin and the Great God of Nature: The Moral and Religious Universe of a Judaiser*. (Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 179.) Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1980. 237 pp. Fr.S.70.

Judaism's influence on Jean Bodin has long been appreciated by students of the French thinker's extraordinary career and multifaceted writings but never fully understood. Paul Lawrence Rose examines the matter again, elevating it as a critical linchpin in comprehending Bodin's intellectual universe. For Rose, "Bodin's categories [of thought] and religious vision stemmed . . . from the Jewish tradition represented by the works of Philo and Maimonides." To demonstrate his thesis, Rose chooses to deemphasize the study of Bodin's thought in relation to that of his contemporaries and proposes instead a methodology based on "(1) the completeness or integrality of Bodin's thought and writings and (2) the integration of Bodin's ideas and personality." By the first method, Rose hopes to decode Bodin's remarkable treatise on comparative religion, *The Heptaplomeres*, by using Bodin's other writings "as a control upon the ambiguities of the *Heptaplomeres*," establishing the extent of agreement among the various speakers of the treatise, and subsequently Bodin's own views

on the subject. By the second method, Rose attempts to reconstruct the details of Bodin's supposed three-staged conversion to a prophetic religion in order to illuminate more clearly the "interplay of religion, politics, and personality" characterizing Bodin's thought and behavior.

The results of this two-pronged analysis appear to me to be only partially successful. No doubt Rose offers a most coherent and comprehensive examination of Bodin's vision of Judaism as found in his writings, including his more neglected educational works. Rose correctly defines Bodin's Judaizing as an attempt not to reform Christianity, like that of Pico or Reuchlin, but to refute its claim as the true religion. In this sense, Bodin actually moved closer to Judaism than any other sixteenth-century thinker without formally adopting Jewish faith and practice. Rose's account of Bodin's gradual conversion, while admittedly conjectural, is a plausible reconstruction of Bodin's spiritual journey. And Rose's emphasis of Bodin's reading of Philo as "his main Judaizing resource" is clearly helpful in understanding the genesis of Bodin's religious vision.

Yet with all this, Rose's elaborate reconstruction is seriously deficient. In the first place, Rose inadequately studies Bodin's other Jewish sources. Some seventy-five years ago Guttman identified an impressive array of Jewish legal, homiletic, kabbalistic, exegetical, and philosophical works which Bodin had consulted. Undoubtedly, Philo and Maimonides are two of Bodin's most influential sources, but they hardly exhaust the richness and diversity of Bodin's Jewish learning. It seems highly arbitrary to me to conclude so decisively that the first-century philosopher is "the key to Bodin's religious biography" without considering more closely the potential impact of medieval Jewish thinkers, especially Neoplatonists like Abraham Ibn Ezra, on Bodin. And most surprising of all is the lack of any extended discussion of Bodin's relationship to the Cabala. The late Frances Yates recently argued that the Jewish Cabala was indeed "the sublime secret" of the *Heptaplomeres* and called for a more systematic investigation of the question. Rose is aware of the distance separating Bodin from Christian Cabalists like Pico in the former's reluctance to Christianize Jewish mystical teachings or to amalgamate them with magic. But this in no way obviates the fact that Bodin was still indebted to these thinkers, at least as much as the other ancient Jewish texts he had read. Even a casual reading of Bodin's *Heptaplomeres* re-

veals his awareness not only of the more “intellectual” writings of Christian Cabalists like Pico, but also, to a surprising degree, of the crude interpretations and forgeries of Jewish mystical and homiletic texts written by Spanish and Italian missionaries and converts themselves like Peter Galatinus, Paul of Heredia, Paul Ricchi, Paul of Burgos, Emmanuel Tremellious, and others. Surely such familiarity calls for a more careful scrutiny of Bodin’s Jewish and Christian sources on Judaism.

One might also mention in this regard another potential source of Bodin’s familiarity with Judaism. In his extended critique of Christianity in the *Heptaplomeres*, Bodin reveals beyond doubt his wide erudition in Jewish anti-Christian exegesis and polemical writing. By the sixteenth century, Jewish polemics against Christianity had become highly sophisticated in their refutation of Christian exegesis of the Old Testament and Christian religious doctrines. A careful reading of Bodin’s critique within the context of this literature might disclose additional sources of Bodin’s Jewish knowledge.

Beyond a more thorough search for Bodin’s Jewish sources, there is a further need to explore the contemporary social and religious context of Bodin’s Judaizing. In this regard, Rose’s work is not helpful. First is the most obvious question of Bodin’s Jewish and Hebrew teachers. Whether or not he was fluent in Hebrew, Bodin clearly preferred to examine Biblical passages in their original language. French Hebraists such as Cinquarbres, Mercier, or Paradis were apparently in a position to instruct Bodin in Hebrew and Jewish subjects. Would a comparison of their writings with those of Bodin prove useful? Even more decisive is the potential influence of certain Marrano circles on Bodin’s thought. The question is an old one and has usually been limited to the sole issue of his mother’s alleged Marrano ancestry. Regardless of whether Bodin was Jewish or not, there is clearly enough evidence to suggest an unmistakable similarity of views on Judaism and natural religion between Bodin and a number of Marrano thinkers in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pines’ recent study of Bodin and Spinoza strongly suggests the fruitfulness of such an investigation. Even more intriguing are the clues Bodin himself divulges: his oft-mentioned remarks on the Spanish expulsion and Jewish suffering at the end of the *Heptaplomeres* and especially his less noticed account of the Marrano massacre at Lisbon in 1506 (recently studied by Y. Yerushalmi). How might the French

Bodin have learned of such a relatively obscure event without personal contact with Marrano exiles from the Iberian peninsula?

All this might suggest that, despite Rose's useful discussion, many lingering questions about Bodin's Jewish connection are still to be answered by future researchers.

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William A. Christian, Jr. *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. 283 pp. Illus. \$18.50.

Spanish Catholicism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the years. The work of theologians, humanists, mystics, and saints has been one focus of that attention. Another has been the investigation and suppression of heterodoxy by the Spanish Inquisition and the crown. William Christian is after a more elusive subject—the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary Spanish Christians.

His main source is the response to two questions on local religion in the famous inquiry of Philip II known as the *Relaciones topográficas* and answered by over five hundred towns in central Spain in 1575–80. In addition he has used a variety of national and local archives, excluding, however, the records of the Inquisition, which he does not consider a good source for ordinary religious practices. Despite the book's title, it is quite localized in the five central provinces in New Castile covered by the *Relaciones topográficas*, all of which have been published. Given the nature of the sources, communal rather than individual religion is the focus of the study.

Much of the book analyzes the changing modes of communal devotion. Within population centers, vows to a particular saint were frequent responses to disasters such as pestilence and agricultural distress. Great care was taken to honor the appropriate saint, for it was believed that the saint's anger had been responsible for the community's affliction. Other vows of devotion arose to honor the patron of a lay pious association or a religious order. In return for regular devotion, the saint was expected to protect the devotees, and only the effective patrons could expect continued devotion from the community.

Chapels and shrines in the countryside, often founded on the spot where a miracle had occurred, honored saints viewed as powerful in-