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978-0-521-89825-6 - Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion

Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

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Recent years have witnessed a remarkable revival of interest in the thought of Benjamin Constant. Long recognized for his literary masterpiece *Adolphe*, it is now his political writings that are attracting attention. A steady stream of paperback editions are appearing on the market, college textbooks increasingly include references to him, and, recently, a US Supreme Court judge drew inspiration from him in a book on the US constitution.¹ Along with a rapidly growing body of scholarship, this Constant renaissance is reaffirming Constant's stature as a founding father of modern liberalism. In fact, many people today regard Constant as *the* most important liberal thinker between Montesquieu and Tocqueville.

Oddly, however, Constant's present fame rests on a partial and skewed reading of his philosophy, since it ignores his lifelong interest in, and copious writings on, religion. Today, few people even know that Constant began doing research for a book on religion at the age of eighteen and that he pursued this endeavor throughout his life until he finally published it as the five-volume *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements* (1824–1831). But Constant wrote much more on religion than that; he wrote newspaper articles and essays on religion; he wrote chapters on religion for his other books; he made speeches about it and gave lectures on it – and yet all of this is somehow missing from the accounts that we have of his liberalism.

This book is an attempt to redress this omission. It tells the story of Constant's transformation into an original political thinker. It recounts his education in Scotland and Germany, his introduction to French politics under the Directory, his battles under Napoleon, and his apotheosis as a liberal leader during the Restoration. But this book also

¹ S. Breyer, *Active Liberty: Interpreting Our Democratic Constitution* (New York, 2005), pp. 3–6.

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tells the story of Constant's evolution from a somewhat flippant admirer of the materialist *philosophe*, Helvétius, into a sincere and mature defender of religion, and a self-described Protestant. I argue that these two things, Constant's political evolution and his religious evolution, are inextricably connected. One cannot understand or properly evaluate Constant's mature liberalism without understanding his views on religion.

The stress on Protestantism may surprise modern readers, but it certainly would not have surprised Constant's contemporaries. Whether they were on the right, like Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, or Felicité de Lamennais, or on the left, like the Idéologues, Industrialists, and Saint-Simonians, Constant's political adversaries and allies understood him to be a *Protestant* thinker. They would not have needed to be reminded about his major book on religion, or about his many speeches, articles, and essays on the topic. Not being constrained by the disciplinary boundaries of modern scholars, Constant's contemporaries understood that his Protestantism was integral to his liberalism.

Constant himself would have been surprised, and disappointed, to know that his posthumous reputation rests more on his novel *Adolphe* than it does on his writings on religion. Personally, he regarded *De la religion* as his most important undertaking and achievement. Over a period of several years, he called this book "the only interest, the only consolation of my life"² and "the book that I was destined by nature to produce."³ At times it seems that his whole persona was wrapped up in his book. To his friend, Prosper de Barante, Constant once wrote, "The only thing remaining of me is my book."⁴

Over the past two centuries, however, Constant's interest in religion and the importance he accorded to it have been obscured, leaving a seriously distorted view of his liberalism. The erasing of the religious dimension of Constant's liberalism has much to do with Marxism, and its grip on twentieth-century scholarship. In his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx famously dismissed Constant as a mere "mouthpiece" of "bourgeois society,"⁵ and somehow, this derogatory and simplistic depiction stuck. In fact, however, the distortion of Constant's views began much earlier and is more complicated. It is the result of his opponents, on both the left and the right, who belittled or ignored his

² JI, April 8, 1804, p. 102. ³ JI, December 6, 1806, p. 480. ⁴ PB, p. 557.

⁵ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (New York, 1978), p. 595.

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writings on religion.⁶ This is in large part why, to this day, he is often caricatured as an enthusiastic celebrant of *laissez-faire* capitalism, or as a great defender of the individual's right to private "pleasures," and thus serves as convenient foil for community and value-minded republicans.⁷ Recent theorists, whether political, literary, or feminist, who continue to ignore his religious writings, have done little to overturn the image of Constant that has been handed down over the years. Failing to address his religious concerns, they have perpetuated a distorted and truncated picture of this founding father of modern liberalism.⁸

As the French historian Maurice Agulhon once remarked, "Having concentrated too much on the struggle between classes, we have managed to forget that the life of our country a century ago was – or, at least, was also – characterized by a 'war of religions'."⁹ This book is an effort to return Constant to a historical context in which religious affiliations and religious commitments were at least as important as class.

PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP ON CONSTANT AND RELIGION

I do not wish to suggest that Constant's writings on religion have been neglected altogether. Several older studies do exist, but they are rather poor in quality and also outdated. Early treatments tend to be preoccupied with describing Constant's character, often with the aim of rehabilitating the reputation he had acquired for cynicism and immorality.¹⁰ By proving that Constant had an interest in religion, the authors hoped to prove that he had morals. Moreover, those scholars interested in the religious side of Constant's *œuvre* have tended to focus on just one narrow issue: did he undergo a religious conversion?¹¹ Stated another

⁶ On this, see my "Why Constant? A Critical Overview of the Constant Revival," *Modern Intellectual History*, 1, 3 (2004), pp. 439–453 and also my forthcoming essay "Eclipses and Revivals: The Reception of Constant in France and America" in the *Cambridge Companion to Constant*.

⁷ See, for example, A. Boyer, "De l'actualité des anciens républicains," in S. Chauvier (ed.), *Libéralisme et républicanisme* (Caen, 2000), pp. 37–8; Ph. Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 17–18; Q. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 60, 117; and R. Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy* (Oxford, 2000), pp. xiii, 5, 199.

⁸ A. Laurent defends and admires Constant as a *laissez-faire* liberal in his *La philosophie libérale: Histoire et actualité d'une tradition intellectuelle* (Paris, 2002).

⁹ From M. Agulhon's preface to J. Lalouette, *La Libre Pensée en France, 1848–1940* (Paris, 1997), p. 12.

¹⁰ H. Evans, "Les idées et les sentiments religieux de Benjamin Constant," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Bordeaux Faculté des lettres, 1958; M. Saltet, *Benjamin Constant historien de la religion* (Geneva, 1905); D. Berthoud, *Constance et grandeur de Benjamin Constant* (Lausanne, 1944).

¹¹ H. Hogue, *Of Changes in Benjamin Constant's Books on Religion* (Geneva, 1964).

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way: between his juvenile infatuation with Helvétius and his later, more favorable comments about Christianity, did Constant find God?

Among such studies, aimed at evaluating the exact nature of Constant's personal religious beliefs, the most scholarly and thorough is certainly Pierre Deguise's *Benjamin Constant méconnu*.¹² Deguise argues convincingly that Constant was never a militant atheist; rather, he was a lifelong agnostic, whose various experimentations with religion on the personal plane never amounted to a full-blown religious conversion. Henri Gouhier makes a similar argument in his *Benjamin Constant: devant la religion*.¹³ Other important work has focused on the sources for Constant's *De la religion*, highlighting his indebtedness to German theology, philosophy, and historiography. Kurt Kloocke is a pioneer in this domain and James Lee has shed additional light on the matter.¹⁴ My footnotes bear witness to how much my own work has benefited from theirs.

Nor do I wish to suggest that Constant's Protestantism has been entirely overlooked. Scattered references to his Protestant "tendencies" can be found sprinkled in the scholarship. Bianca-Maria Fontana, for example, refers to the "Protestant matrix" of Constant's ideas, and even his "strong Protestant bias" and "deep Calvinist instinct."¹⁵ George Armstrong Kelly points to the importance of Constant's "Protestant descent and culture."¹⁶ However, what is still missing from the scholarship is an explanation of what this actually means in the historical context of post-Revolutionary France. What kind of Protestant was Constant, and how did his views on religion inform his political thought?

It is striking what a different image of Constant emerges when one pays attention to his writings on religion. According to Pierre Deguise, Constant's religious writings show him to have been "above all a moralist."¹⁷ More recently, James Lee has also stressed Constant's

¹² (Geneva, 1966); see also Frank Paul Bowman, "La révélation selon Benjamin Constant," *Europe*, 46, 467 (March, 1968), pp. 115–125.

¹³ (Paris, 1967).

¹⁴ K. Kloocke, *Benjamin Constant: Une biographie intellectuelle* (Geneva, 1984), and J. Lee, "The Moralization of Modern Liberty," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2003. Mention should also be made of P. Thompson, *La religion de Benjamin Constant: Les pouvoirs de l'image: essai de mise en perspective d'une situation* (Pisa, 1978), which is, however, virtually impenetrable.

¹⁵ B.-M. Fontana, *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind* (New Haven, CT, 1991), pp. 109, 103, 7.

¹⁶ G. A. Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville, and French Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1992) p. 72.

¹⁷ Deguise, *Benjamin Constant méconnu*, p. 265.

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preoccupation with the “moral destiny” of mankind,¹⁸ while Catherine Carpenter has referred to Constant’s veritable “*obsession* with morality.”¹⁹ Having read *De la religion*, Jean Starobinski has also noticed Constant’s deep moral concerns and even his “desire for re-Christianization.”²⁰ Indeed, taking Constant’s religious views seriously forces one to jettison the notion that he wished above all to protect the material interests of the rising bourgeoisie, or the individual’s right to unobstructed “private pleasures.” It reminds us that liberal support for state neutrality in the realm of religion should not be equated with moral indifference or a lack of concern for morals. As we shall see, in Constant’s case, the very opposite was true.

As of yet, however, there has been little sustained attempt to integrate Constant’s ideas on religion and his ideas on politics so as to show how they interrelate and in fact feed on each other.²¹ This is what my own study seeks to do. To do it properly requires paying attention to his evolving historical context, because Constant’s ideas did not take shape just as a result of his readings and his studies, but were equally a response to his changing religious and political environment. Constant was not only a political theorist; he was also a political actor thoroughly immersed in the battles of his day. For this reason, I reconstruct the main political-religious debates of his time, using them to clarify Constant’s positions and to shed light on his distinctive brand of liberalism. From the Enlightenment to the Revolution, through the reign of Napoleon, and on to the Restoration, the context changed dramatically, but religion was always a main focus for Benjamin Constant.

¹⁸ Lee, “Moralization,” p. 21.

¹⁹ C. Carpenter, “Ethics and Polytheism in Constant’s Early Writings: The Influence of Hume, Smith and Gillies,” *ABC*, 29 (2005), p. 73, my emphasis.

²⁰ J. Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1993), p. 25.

²¹ Exceptions to the rule are G. Dodge, *Benjamin Constant’s Philosophy of Liberalism: A Study in Politics and Religion* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980); Fontana, *Benjamin Constant*; E. Hofmann, “Histoire politique et religion: essai d’articulation de trois composantes de l’oeuvre et de la pensée de Benjamin Constant,” *Historical Reflections*, 28, 3 (Fall, 2002), pp. 397–418; and Kelly, *Humane Comedy*. While valuable, these works only scratch the surface.

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CHAPTER I

Constant's education: the French, Scottish, and German Enlightenments

CHILDHOOD

Unfortunately, very little evidence about Constant's early childhood and religious education remains. We know that he was born in Lausanne on October 25, 1767 and was baptized in the Calvinist church of Saint-François about two weeks later; but thereafter information is scarce. Benjamin's mother, who died in childbirth, came from a French Protestant family who had emigrated to the Pays de Vaud for religious reasons. Benjamin's father, Juste de Constant, was a Swiss army captain attached to a regiment in the service of the United Provinces. During his early childhood, Constant was placed in the care of various female relatives and his father's young housekeeper and mistress, Marianne Magnin. A prayer dating from these years, which Benjamin probably wrote himself, suggests at least a rudimentary exposure to religion.¹ In any case, the Protestantism prevalent in Lausanne during his childhood was of a liberal and undogmatic variety similar to the rational theology being preached in Geneva.² And Juste seems not to have been very concerned about this part of his son's education. A letter written to Marianne in 1772, when Benjamin was six years old, suggests a "reasonable," almost Deist attitude towards religion and church attendance. "You are a bit too difficult," writes Juste,

You want that one preaches to you as one would in the city. Sermons should be proportioned to the intelligence of those who are listening. Anyway, one goes to church only to offer one's homage to the Supreme Being and this homage should be in the heart and independent of the exterior cult.³

¹ "Prière au créateur du monde," in OCBC *Oeuvres* I, p. 56.

² J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. vol. I, chs. 2–3; on Calvinism in eighteenth-century Geneva, see H. Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749–1762* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. pp. 10–29, 34–37.

³ As quoted by G. Rudler, *La jeunesse de Benjamin Constant (1767–1794): Le disciple du XVIII^e siècle, utilitarisme et pessimisme, Mme de Charrière d'après de nombreux documents inédits* (Paris, 1908), p. 73.

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In 1774 Juste decided to take personal control of his son's education, and to bring him along on a series of military assignments in Belgium and Holland. Over the next few years, Benjamin was supervised by a succession of exceptionally inappropriate and badly chosen private tutors. One of these, according to Constant's own recollections, was a self-proclaimed atheist with whom he shared lodging in a brothel. To say the least, this was a rather unconventional education, and not especially conducive to piety. In all likelihood, the young boy received no formal religious training at all. Instead, he was left very much to his own devices and, to a considerable extent, was self-taught in most subjects. According to his autobiography, he learned Greek by himself at the age of five. Thus Henri Gouhier is undoubtedly right to speculate that whatever religious education Constant might have received as a young boy, it "surely did not rekindle in him the faith of his ancestors."⁴ On the contrary, Constant later recounted that at the tender age of nine, he was spending eight to nine hours a day alone, reading not only novels but "all the irreligious books that were then in fashion . . . from the works of La Mettrie to the novels of Crébillon."⁵

A precursor to the Marquis de Sade, Claude Prosper de Crébillon (1707–1777) was the author of erotic novels depicting the libertine values of the French aristocracy, while Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751) was a radical materialist and the author of a book provocatively entitled *Man a Machine* (1748). To refer to these two authors was thus to conjure up the most extreme and scandalous side of the French Enlightenment. And the "irreligious books" that Constant devoured as a young boy apparently made a profound impression on him. Constant later recalled that during his youth he had thoroughly "imbibed the philosophy of the eighteenth century and especially the works of Helvétius."⁶ Helvétius was, of course, another "bad boy" of the French Enlightenment. Widely reputed to have been an atheist, he was the author of virulently anti-clerical and materialist books. Constant's own recollections thus suggest that, while still a youth, he had been won over to what he would later derogatorily refer to as the "dogmatic incredulity"⁷ of the French Enlightenment.

At the age of fourteen, as Benjamin began to show unmistakable signs of intellectual promise, his father decided that a more serious and

⁴ H. Gouhier, *Benjamin Constant: devant la religion*, (Paris, 1967) p. 31.

⁵ *Ma vie*, in OCBC Œuvres III, I, p. 304. ⁶ *Ma vie*, in OCBC Œuvres III, I, p. 314.

⁷ DLR, pp. xv, I, 566.

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systematic course of study should be chosen. Although he had been astonishingly lax in his parental supervision and careless in his choice of tutors, Juste did make sure to choose a Protestant environment for his son's studies. Several Protestant universities were considered. Oxford University was deemed a possibility, but Benjamin was too young. Eventually, it was decided that he attend the University of Erlangen in Bavaria. There, he apparently "studied fervently"⁸ for about a year, although we do not know exactly which subjects he pursued. What we do know is that he got into trouble for something that he would later refer to as "extravagances" and that invariably involved women, gambling, and/or duelling. Thus, his father quickly removed him and soon the decision was taken to send him off to the University of Edinburgh, where he arrived on July 8, 1783, still only sixteen years old.

EDINBURGH

For a brilliant young man with budding literary talents, Edinburgh was an excellent choice. The city and its university had a well-deserved and European-wide reputation as a dynamic center of learning. Thanks in part to figures of great renown, such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and William Robertson, Edinburgh was widely regarded as a "hotbed of genius."⁹ The faculty of the university was excellent and the students diligent. In his journal, Constant wrote that "working was in fashion among the young men in Edinburgh,"¹⁰ and that it was there that he first acquired "a real taste for study."¹¹ That the environment was conducive to serious learning is confirmed by the memoirs of his friend and fellow-student, James Macintosh, who claimed that "it is not easy to conceive a university where industry was more general, where reading was more fashionable, [and] where indolence and ignorance were more disreputable."¹²

Scholars investigating Constant's early years have tended to focus on his psychological make-up. The temptation to psychoanalyze the man who would write one of the best psychological novels of all time, *Adolphe*, has all too often proved to be irresistible. Meanwhile, considerably less attention has been paid to the intellectual work Constant might have

⁸ *Ma vie*, in OCBC *Oeuvres* III, 1, p. 310.

⁹ A good introduction to eighteenth-century Scotland and Edinburgh is D. Daiches, P. Jones, and J. Jones, (eds.), *The Scottish Enlightenment 1730–1790: A Hotbed of Genius* (Edinburgh, 1996).

¹⁰ *Ma vie*, in OCBC *Oeuvres* III, 1, p. 310. ¹¹ *Jl*, p. 238.

¹² J. Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Sir James Mackintosh*, ed. R. J. Mackintosh (London, 1835), vol. II, p. 29.

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done as a young man, and particularly to the exciting new ideas that he encountered in Edinburgh. This is unfortunate because, whatever his emotional or psychological state at the time, it is likely that he fully imbibed the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of Edinburgh during the almost two years that he would later describe as “the happiest of my life.”¹³

Someone raised on the “irreligious” books of the French Enlightenment, and smitten by the radical anticlericalism of Helvétius, certainly would have reacted to the very special intellectual and religious climate that reigned in Edinburgh, which was then a leading center of the Scottish Enlightenment. While in France the relationship between key *philosophes*, like Helvétius, and the established Catholic Church was deeply hostile, the situation in Scotland was quite different. There, the Enlightenment was principally the work of moderate Protestant clergymen and took place *within* the churches themselves. Many key thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, men like William Robertson (1721–1793), Hugh Blair (1718–1800), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), and John Home (1722–1808), had been educated for careers in the church and thereafter rose to positions of prominence within the church and/or the university. “In no other country,” writes Richard Sher, “were the principles of the Enlightenment . . . so openly and enthusiastically espoused by the leaders of the established church.”¹⁴

The friendly relations between the Enlightenment and religion in Edinburgh meant that a special kind of Protestantism pervaded the city’s intellectual environment. The Moderates, who controlled both the church and the university when Constant was there, held exceptionally liberal views when it came to intellectual freedom and religious tolerance. Convinced of the benefits brought to society by learning, polite sociability, and moderation, they had abandoned the austere Calvinism of their forefathers and espoused a more tolerant and self-consciously enlightened religion. They turned away from traditional questions of dogma, such as sin, election, and predestination, and focused more on issues of practical morality. This, they thought, would be more effective in helping men and women lead virtuous and happy lives.

The most famous preacher in Edinburgh at the time, Hugh Blair, was also Professor of *Belles Lettres* and Rhetoric. His fame extended far beyond Scotland, and his five-volume collection of sermons were among

¹³ *Ma vie*, in OCBC *Oeuvres* III, 1, p. 310.

¹⁴ R. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ, 1985).

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the most popular English-language works of his time. A great admirer of both the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson and the polite sociability of the *Spectator*, Blair's lectures and sermons extolled the "sense of humanity" that he took to be the "distinguishing virtue" of his age. "For what purpose," asked Blair, "did God place thee in this world, in the midst of human society, but that as a man among men thou mightest cultivate humanity; that each in his place might contribute to the general welfare."¹⁵

As one scholar puts it, the enlightened Protestants of Edinburgh were "world-affirming" by nature and espoused a culture of improvement.¹⁶ Perhaps most importantly, they were firm believers in progress and were personally committed to furthering it. Such an attitude led them to develop a strong interest in history and to focus more on the social and political effects of religion than on its intrinsic truth. It was to history that they turned in order to decipher God's plan for the continuing improvement of mankind. In fact, it has been said that the Scots were "obsessed with history," so that the concepts of progress, development, and change are ever-present in their writings.¹⁷ To them, history illustrated the many advantages brought to mankind by religion. In his sermon "The Importance of Religious Knowledge to the Happiness of Mankind," Blair described Christianity as essentially a socializing and humanizing force: it "forms [men] for Society. It civilizes Mankind. It takes the Fierceness of their Passions, and wears off the Barbarity of their Manners."¹⁸

Perhaps the most representative of these Enlightenment trends within Scottish Calvinism was William Robertson. Like Blair, Robertson was at the height of his prestige and influence while Constant was in Edinburgh. Robertson was not only a clergyman and leader of the Moderate faction within the Scottish church; he was also University principal. Moreover, he was an internationally renowned historian, whose *History of Scotland* (1759), *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, (1769), and *History*

¹⁵ Quoted by D. Daiches, "The Scottish Enlightenment," in Daiches, Jones and Jones (eds.), *The Scottish Enlightenment 1730–1790*.

¹⁶ I. Clarke, "From Protest to Reaction: The Moderate Regime in the Church of Scotland, 1752–1805," in N. T. Phillipson and R. Mitchison (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 205; see also S. Brown, "William Robertson (1721–1793) and the Scottish Enlightenment," in S. Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 9.

¹⁷ Daiches, "The Scottish Enlightenment," p. 9.

¹⁸ H. Blair, "The Importance of Religious Knowledge to the Happiness of Mankind" (Edinburgh, 1750), quoted by Sher, *Church and University*, p. 63.