

ON THE INTELLECTUAL SOURCES OF *LAÏCITÉ*

Rousseau, Constant, and the Debates about a National Religion

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That French Protestants gave strong support to *laïcité* is by now well established.¹ Whether this support was due to ideological dispositions within Protestantism or to Protestantism's practical relationship to history can be debated; what cannot be debated is the disproportionate role Protestants played within the Third Republic and among the early proponents of *laïcité*.² In recent work, Patrick Cabanel has even made a compelling case for the Protestant *sources* of *laïcité*, placing particular emphasis on the Protestant entourage of Jules Ferry (1832-1893) and stressing the inspiration provided by the pro-Protestant intellectual, Edgar Quinet (1803-1875).³

This article suggests that we look even earlier in time for the intellectual sources of *laïcité*. Seminal ideas can be found in the writings of two liberal Protestants, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Benjamin Constant (1767-1830). This claim might surprise people. After all, in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau stated categorically that "no state has ever been founded without religion serving as its base,"⁴ and he ended his famous treaty with a chapter advocating a "civil religion." Not surprisingly, therefore, Rousseau is usually counted among the opponents, and not the advocates, of *laïcité*. On the other hand, Benjamin Constant's copious writings on religion and church-state relations tend to be ignored altogether.⁵ In histories of *laïcité*, he is rarely more than briefly mentioned.⁶ This helps to explain why it is sometimes incorrectly suggested that Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was the first French liberal of note to believe in the separation of church and state, and that he was obliged to go to the United States to acquire this idea.⁷ As this article will show, before the Third Republic, and even before both Tocqueville and Quinet, there was Benjamin Constant, who certainly deserves a place among the founding

fathers of *laïcité*. Moreover, while existing scholarship tends to describe Constant's relationship to Rousseau as adversarial, the perspective adopted here will show that their views converged and reinforced each other in interesting ways. Indeed, it is where their thoughts converge that one can identify a certain Protestant vein of thinking that went on to inform more modern notions of *laïcité*.

Constant's Liberalism as a Response to Rousseau

If Benjamin Constant is today considered one of the founding fathers of modern liberalism—perhaps the most important thinker in that tradition between Montesquieu and Rousseau on the one hand, and Tocqueville on the other—it is in large part due to his *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*. Written in 1806, but then revised and only published in 1815, this important text is widely regarded as marking the emergence of Constant as a truly “liberal” thinker. It articulates Constant's mature political philosophy, a stance from which he would no longer deviate until the end of his life in 1830. It is in the *Principles of Politics* that Constant sets forth the fundamental liberal notion that it is not so much the *form* of government that matters, as it is the *amount* of government. It is not *to whom* you grant political authority that is important, but *how much* authority you grant. Constant argues that political power is something very dangerous and must therefore always be limited: “Entrust it to one man, to several, to all, you will still find that it is equally an evil [...]. There are weights too heavy for the hand of man.”⁸

It has been said that Constant's political philosophy is the expression of his own political experience. According to Tzvetan Todorov, Constant “cherche à théoriser le réel vécu,” and thus what you find in the *Principles of Politics* is “une pratique théorisée.”⁹ More specifically, scholars agree that the *Principles* reflect the profound impact of the French Revolution on Constant's thought. According to François Furet, Constant's “entire political thought” revolves around the problem of explaining the Terror.¹⁰ Similarly, Marcel Gauchet argues that the “tyrannical derailment of the Revolution” constitutes the center of Constant's thought.¹¹ It is therefore not surprising that Constant is also heavily engaged with the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a thinker who is so often linked with the Terror.

Indeed, at several key moments in the *Principles of Politics*, Constant deliberately uses Rousseau as a kind of foil. Constant is particularly keen to refute Rousseau's contention in the *Social Contract* that in any legitimate state, popular sovereignty is absolute and unbounded. Mentioning Rousseau several times by name, Constant denounces this idea as “false,” “dangerous,”¹² and especially important to refute. “The subtle metaphysics of the *Social Contract*,” he writes, can only serve to “supply weapons and pretexts to all kinds of tyranny.”¹³ In no uncertain terms, Constant declares, “No authority upon

earth is unlimited, neither that of the people, nor that of the men who declare themselves their representatives, nor that of the kings, by whatever title they reign, nor finally, that of the law, which, being merely the expression of the will of the people or of the prince, according to the form of government, must be circumscribed within the same limits as the authority from which it emanates."¹⁴ Constant's own concern is rather with sheltering the individual's rights from a government naturally inclined to abuse its power. Among these individual rights, Constant values particularly highly freedom of opinion and freedom of expression—and, related to these, freedom of religion.¹⁵

It is also in the *Principles of Politics* that Constant first sets forth a comprehensive vision of what he calls "the proper role of the government with regard to religion."¹⁶ Once again, he takes issue with the *Social Contract*, and, in particular, with some ideas presented in Rousseau's chapter "On Civil Religion." Constant cites the section where Rousseau writes of the sovereign's right to demand that citizens subscribe to certain religious principles; Rousseau claims that there is:

a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it belongs to the sovereign to establish, not exactly as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject. While not having the ability to obligate anyone to believe them, the sovereign can banish from the state anyone who does not believe them. It can banish him not for being impious but for being unsociable.¹⁷

Such statements struck Constant as nothing less than preposterous. "What good is it to me," he asked, "that the sovereign may not force me to believe, when he punishes me if I fail to do so? What is the advantage of not being punished as impious, if I am to be punished as unsociable?"¹⁸ According to Constant, the state should not be in the business of dictating any sentiments at all; civil intolerance, he insists, "is just as dangerous" and even "more absurd" and "more unjust" than religious intolerance.¹⁹

In contrast, Constant showcased the ideas of the liberal nobleman and deputy to the Constituent Assembly, Stanislas Clermont-Tonnerre (1757-1792), a moderate royalist who served as president of the Assembly for a while before being murdered by a mob on 10 August 1792. Quoting this early advocate of religious toleration and separation of church and state at some length, Constant set forth the basic principles that both men shared. Religion and the state, they believed, were "two perfectly distinct, perfectly separate things, the union of which can only denature both of them." Each person's religion being merely "the opinion that everyone has of his relationship to God"²⁰—this opinion must be freely chosen by him. And what is true of "opinions" must also be true of "cults," which are simply a way of expressing one's opinions. Thus, "the social body must never impose any cult; [and] it must never reject any."²¹ Whenever a government meddles with religion, an otherwise beneficent force becomes "transformed into a menacing institution."²²

These statements on religious freedom get at the very crux of Constant's liberalism: there must be a zone of privacy protecting each and every citizen, within which the government may not intrude. What an individual thinks or believes about religion is beyond the competence of political authority, as long as it does not disturb the social order. In the background of Constant's thinking about these matters looms Rousseau. Constant regrets that, as he is writing, Rousseau's theories on civil religion are still revered in some quarters; they are "still [being] cited." To Constant, Rousseau's theories on civil religion furnish "pretexts for all the claims of tyranny." He writes, "I know of no system of servitude which has sanctified more fatal errors than the eternal metaphysics of the *Social Contract*."²³

Rousseau, the Totalitarian?

One might therefore be inclined to speculate that Constant would have agreed with those modern commentators who assail Rousseau for his chapter on civil religion. This chapter is the main reason why Rousseau is so often regarded as a protototalitarian thinker. According to Lester Crocker, the effect of Rousseau's civil religion "can only be imagined from the worst excesses of the Terror, or Stalinism, or of Chinese communism."²⁴ Similarly, Charles Vaughan believes it "grievous to think that a man like Rousseau should have done his utmost to fight against the light, to drive the world back into the darkness from which it was at last struggling to escape."²⁵ The principal reason for Rousseau's intellectual aberration, Crocker thinks, is his "character disorder," Rousseau being the typical example of the "authoritarian personality."²⁶ To Jacob Talmon, Rousseau was "a motherless vagabond starved of warmth and affection," a "tormented paranoiac" whose views on religion were "representative of the totalitarian Messianic temperament."²⁷

But it is unlikely that Constant regarded Rousseau as an advocate of state despotism. Being much closer to both Rousseau and the French Revolution than any twentieth-century commentator could possibly be, Constant had a much more nuanced understanding of Rousseau. In fact, in his writings, Constant repeatedly mingles his criticism of Rousseau with warm praise. According to Constant, Rousseau should be counted among "the greatest friends of freedom."²⁸ In the *Principles of Politics*, Constant states categorically: "I do not side at all with [Rousseau's] detractors." Calling Rousseau's critics "a rabble of inferior minds," who wish to "take away his greatness" for self-serving reasons, Constant finds such critics "just one more reason to render [Rousseau] our homage." Rousseau was "the first writer to popularize the sense of our rights; [...] his was a voice to stir generous hearts and independent spirits." The problem with Rousseau was not so much what he himself believed, but that "he did not know how to define precisely"²⁹ what he believed in so passionately. This lack of clarity made him prey to terrible misinterpretations and danger-

ous misappropriations. It should be noted that when Constant refutes Rousseau, he most often regrets that Rousseau's ideas supply a "banal pretext"³⁰ for despotic policies. Rousseauian ideas are being "cited" in favor of intolerant or tyrannical policies.³¹ They "supply weapons" to despots.³² The suggestion is that they are being misused. Constant was well aware that the intended meaning of Rousseau's works and their use or application by French theorists and politicians during the Revolution were two very different things.

What Constant writes about Rousseau in fact confirms what we now have come to understand about the thorny question of his "influence" on the French Revolution—a topic that has recently become fashionable again. For many years it was thought that French men and women had little exposure to the *Social Contract* prior to the Revolution and that Rousseau's fame and popularity were almost entirely based on his novels, *Julie or the New Heloise* and *Émile*. A literary cult of Rousseau grew up that had little basis in his political thought—or, more accurately, that made no attempt to grapple seriously with the complexity of his political thought.³³ Rousseau was admired not as a political theorist but as the greatest eighteenth-century exponent of *sensibilité*, an eloquent advocate of human emotions, of romantic love, of virtue, and of the religion of nature. Thanks to more recent work, however, we now know that the *Social Contract* was, in fact, widely available before the Revolution, and that it became increasingly available during the Revolution itself.³⁴ So, rare indeed were those among the French reading public who were not at least somewhat familiar with both the *Social Contract* and *Émile* during the Revolutionary years.³⁵

But this does not mean that they read these books closely and carefully, or that they understood them, or that they agreed about what they meant. As Roger Chartier has written, Rousseau's work "inspired different and even contradictory interpretations, just as it prompted contradictory allegiances." Rousseau was admired by "plebeians" and "aristocrats" and the "commercial middle class" alike.³⁶ Obviously, not all of these people became revolutionaries.³⁷ On the contrary, individuals on diametrically opposed positions of the political spectrum revered Rousseau and cited him for their own political purposes. Robespierre cited Rousseau; so did Gracchus Babeuf, but so did a number of counterrevolutionary noblemen in exile, and Madame de Staël began her career by defending him. Each person cited chapter and verse in support of his own position and accused his adversaries of distorting Rousseau's thought. Each person intentionally or unintentionally warped Rousseau's thought in the hope of giving support to ideas and principles that he likely would never have accepted and to problems he could not possibly have foreseen.³⁸

Above all, however—and on this everyone could agree—Rousseau was venerated as the author of *Émile*. He was treasured as a great moral teacher and a model of virtue and sincerity. Thus he became associated with the great project of morally regenerating France, a goal with which both revolutionaries

and counterrevolutionaries could agree. And whenever people during the Revolutionary period thought about morals, they also thought about religion.

One thing is abundantly clear: in writing the *Social Contract*, with its controversial chapter on civil religion, Rousseau's purpose was not to provide a constitutional blueprint for France. In fact, the main principles enunciated in that text hardly apply to France at all, which is why so many French *philosophes* reacted to it with incomprehension and even some disdain. When it comes to the revolutionaries, François Furet puts it starkly: despite their deep admiration for Rousseau, they did not adopt his political program; his "political program was not in the Revolution."³⁹ The point is, once again, that the Revolutionary appropriation of Rousseau had little to do with any serious engagement with his political thought. Rather, admirers of the "bon Jean-Jacques" created their own Rousseauian philosophy out of a conglomeration of aphorisms, principles, and sentiments more or less associated with the thinker. They took sentences and ideas out of context, then merged them with other sentences and ideas taken out of context to create an original blend. In the process, they downplayed, ignored, or simply removed many of the tensions, contradictions, and difficulties that Rousseau placed in his writings on purpose and wished, precisely, to highlight. In other words, they distorted Rousseau's thought beyond recognition, all the while claiming fidelity to his essential principles. This is precisely what happened with Rousseau's ideas on religion, and Constant knew it.

Rousseau's "Profession of Faith" and His Chapter on Civil Religion

An in-depth investigation of Rousseau's immensely rich, complex, and copious pronouncements on the topic of religion is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, I will confine myself to making a few comments about two particularly important and influential texts: the section of *Émile* entitled the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" and the last chapter of the *Social Contract*, entitled "On Civil Religion." What I wish to suggest is that the same thing that happened with Rousseau's politics happened with his views on religion. People took bits and pieces from different writings and thus joined together what was meant to stay apart. They smoothed over problems and answered questions posed by Rousseau but deliberately left unresolved by him.

It is in the "Profession of Faith" that we get the fullest elaboration of Rousseau's own religious principles. It is an extraordinarily innovative, indeed revolutionary, defense of religion, mainly because of how Rousseau redefines and revalorizes religion. Through the voice of his Savoyard vicar, he offers a devastating critique of both *philosophe* materialism on the one hand, and dogmatic Christianity on the other. The one degrades man, while the other demeans God.

To construct his apology, Rousseau adopts the perspective of a humble vicar, a solitary individual honestly striving to understand the truth, using only the natural faculties given to him by his Maker. Listening to his own senses, and observing the natural world around him, the vicar rediscovers religion through the testimony of what he refers to as man's "inner sentiment."⁴⁰ The vicar "feels"⁴¹ God within himself and comes to experience his own conscience as a "divine instinct" and "immortal voice from heaven."⁴² Like the vicar, Rousseau bids people to "consult [their] own heart[s]" and do the "labor"⁴³ necessary to arrive at religious truths by themselves.

Indeed, the "Profession of Faith" is very much about defending each and every man's right—and even duty—to strive to understand religious truths for himself. "How many men between God and me!" exclaims the Savoyard vicar in exasperation. "Let us [...] seek honestly after truth; let us yield nothing to the claims of birth, to the authority of parents and pastors, but let us summon to the bar of conscience and of reason all that they have taught us from our childhood."⁴⁴ Rousseau urges people not just to passively accept truths, but to "judge," "examine," "compare," and "verify" them for themselves.⁴⁵ From the point of view of French authorities and the Catholic Church, this was of course the most provocative and disturbing aspect of the vicar's "Profession." In his *Third Walk*, composed at the end of his life, Rousseau wrote that "the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar [...] may one day make a revolution among men, if good sense and good faith are ever reborn among them."⁴⁶

But what kind of revolution could Rousseau possibly have meant? In the "Profession of Faith," he characteristically combines theoretical audacity with practical caution. It ends in an almost shockingly conservative conclusion. After all his striving and questioning, and after dismissing key dogmas of the Catholic Church, the vicar nevertheless decides to remain within his Church, happily resigned to celebrating all of its rites and rituals. He recommends to everyone that they should "respect all religions, and each [...] live peaceably in his own [religion]."⁴⁷ Under no circumstances should people change the "exterior cult" to which they belong:

To ask any one to abandon the religion in which he was born is, I consider, to ask him to do wrong, and therefore to do wrong oneself. While we await further knowledge, let us respect public order; in every country let us respect the laws, let us not disturb the form of worship prescribed by law; let us not lead its citizens into disobedience; for we have no certain knowledge that it is good for them to abandon their own opinions for others, and on the other hand we are quite certain that it is a bad thing to disobey the law.⁴⁸

In the chapter on civil religion, Rousseau adopts a very different perspective. He does not approach religion from the perspective of a solitary, striving individual, but from the point of view of an ideal republic at its founding. Considering the question theoretically, Rousseau asks what, if any, political relationship there can be between Christianity and republicanism. What is the right constitutional relationship between religion and politics?

Elsewhere I have tried to show that what was happening in Geneva can help us to comprehend what Rousseau was trying to do in the *Social Contract*.⁴⁹ The political confrontations in Rousseau's city of birth had made him particularly sensitive to the political uses of religion by an elite of magistrates intent on subverting the democratic principles of the city's constitution. Rousseau was deeply disturbed by how easily certain key Christian tenets could be enlisted in support of this enterprise, by seemingly promoting political submission and obedience. Above all, Rousseau meant to call attention to this problem and to proffer the outlines of a solution.

Rousseau's argument in his chapter on civil religion was thus much more about *laicizing* the state than it was about coercing belief. Rousseau tried, somewhat awkwardly perhaps, to set Christian dogma apart from republican politics. Surely, this is what he meant when he claimed that there could be no such thing as a "Christian republic," since "these terms are mutually exclusive."⁵⁰ What Rousseau was really saying was that Christianity's tenets could not provide the legitimate and viable foundations of a republic.

The idea that Christianity was a "useful" religion was a common one in the eighteenth century, widely propagated by its defenders. It was useful, they said, because it inspired all the "sociable" virtues—it made people gentle, law-abiding, and obedient. Without it, morals would disappear, families would fall apart, and society would dissolve. Authority and justice would be overturned, and chaos and anarchy would reign. In his chapter on civil religion, Rousseau called this argument into question. If, indeed, it was true that Christianity preaches only gentleness, obedience, and submission to political authorities, then how could it be "useful" in a republic, where citizens must be brave, vigilant, and politically active?

The solution was for religious dogmas to have their own sphere of operation and not be mixed up with politics. It is important to stress, however, given the accusations levied against Rousseau by later commentators, that nowhere in the chapter does Rousseau suggest that a government should forcibly dechristianize its population, or that it should replace Christianity with another religion. Clarifying his intended meaning, Rousseau later explained that the Christian religion was to him "by the purity of its moral teachings always good and healthy in the State [...] as long as one does not make it part of its constitution, as long as it is admitted only as religion, sentiment, opinion, belief; but as a political law, dogmatic Christianity is a bad establishment."⁵¹ Rousseau singled out for rebuke "those who have wanted to make Christianity into a national religion and introduce it as a constitutive part of the system of legislation," and have thereby made it "the weapon of tyrants and the instrument of persecutors."⁵²

Nevertheless, Rousseau did believe that a few key religious beliefs were necessary for the survival of any community. Without them he thought it "impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject."⁵³ The tenets he identified were relatively few and straightforward: "The existence of a powerful,

intelligent, beneficent divinity that foresees and provides; the life to come; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and the laws.”⁵⁴ What individuals believed beyond these principles was not the business of the state, as long as it did not upset the social order. In conclusion, then, what Rousseau’s chapter on civil religion was really all about was fixing a minimum core of belief necessary for a community to exist, while excluding any antisocial—by which Rousseau meant intolerant or fanatical—beliefs. Rousseau was certainly *not* suggesting that elected governments should design new religions replete with dogmas and ceremonies with which better to control their populations. This was precisely the sort of thing Rousseau was against.

The problem was, however, that Rousseau did not leave it at this. Elsewhere in his writings he said other things that lent themselves to creative appropriation. Taken out of context, and blended with other statements made in other places, this could all become a volatile compound. Consider, for example, Rousseau’s statements in another section of the *Social Contract* about the so-called “great legislator”—the Moses-like individual needed to found a just constitution. Rousseau writes, “He who dares to undertake the establishment of a people should feel that he is, so to speak, in a position to change human nature, to transform each individual (who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole), into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being; to alter man’s constitution in order to strengthen it.”⁵⁵ Consider also statements made in his *Discourse on Political Economy* where Rousseau speaks of the need to “make virtue reign.” The “greatest support for public authority,” he writes, “lies in the hearts of the citizens.” A just government must know how to “train men if [it wants] to command them.” Speaking about the need for public education, Rousseau writes that it is important for governments to “turn [citizens] into what one needs them to be.”⁵⁶ Here, then, are statements seemingly advocating a very activist role for legislation in the moral education—indeed moral transformation—of citizens. One can see how easy it would be to knit together disparate statements from Rousseau’s different works to make him sound like a protototalitarian monster.

One more element of Rousseau’s religious thought should be addressed before proceeding to his “disciples’” creative reading of him, and that is the personal preference for Protestantism that Rousseau expressed several times. In the *Letter to Christophe Beaumont* (March 1763), for example, in which Rousseau defended his writings from charges that they were threatening to religion, he insisted: “I am Christian and sincerely Christian, according to the doctrine of the Gospel.” Adding that he was “happy to be born into the most reasonable and most holy religion which exists on earth,” he remained “inviolably attached to the religion of my forefathers.”⁵⁷ In his *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau further clarified that he thought Protestantism “of all religions on the earth the one whose morals are the purest” and insisted that his writings proved his “excessive” preference for Protestantism over Catholi-

cism.⁵⁸ In the chapter on civil religion he had already denounced Roman Catholicism as being a “bizarre” sort of religion because “in giving men two sets of legislation, two leaders, and two homelands, it subjects them to contradictory duties and prevents them from being simultaneously devout men and citizens.”⁵⁹ In contrast, Rousseau thought Protestantism “the most peaceful and social” religion. It was “the only one in which the laws can maintain their dominion and the leaders their authority.”⁶⁰

Rousseau’s Disciples

Turning to Rousseau’s so-called disciples during the Revolutionary period, one can better see how they appropriated elements of his religious thought only to deform it quite beyond recognition. What most of Rousseau’s admirers did was to simplify his thought, merging *some* of the lessons of the Savoyard vicar with *some* of the lessons of the chapter on civil religion in order to justify the particular religious policy that they themselves favored, which often meant the promotion of a national religion of their own design. Rousseauian language was used to legitimize everything from the abbé Claude Fauchet’s national religion of democratized Catholicism, to Robespierre’s Cult of the Supreme Being, to Louis-Marie Reveillière-Lépeaux’s religion of Theophilanthropy, and even a return to the Roman Catholicism of the Old Regime. Finally, some used Rousseauian language and concepts to promote the unification of all Christian churches into a Protestant-like national religion under Napoléon’s leadership. All of these plans agreed on one thing: that the government, whether it be the National Assembly, the Committee of Public Safety, the Directory, or Napoléon, should actively promote the religion in question and impose it (more or less subtly) on the population in order to govern more effectively. Thus they shed the conservative prudence of Rousseau’s Savoyard vicar, who, as we recall, wished to “respect public order” “while we await further knowledge.” Thus also they ignored the individualist kernel of his “Profession of Faith”—the vicar’s stress on the right, indeed the duty, of each man to search for religious truth for himself. Finally, they rejected the stern warnings about the political uses of religion found in the *Social Contract* as well as that work’s profoundly democratic thrust. The idea that a governmental elite should use religion to impose its own idea of order on the rest of the population was exactly what Rousseau was against.

Robespierre was perhaps Rousseau’s most famous disciple. His speeches are full of references to the man he reverentially referred to as the “précepteur du genre humain.” It is therefore not surprising that Robespierre’s Cult of the Supreme Being is widely regarded as Rousseauian in inspiration. Based on the belief that “the unique foundation of society is morals,”⁶¹ and that morals require religion, Robespierre’s new religion was designed to cultivate people’s religious “sentiments”⁶² in a way that would stabilize and strengthen the

republic. His state-sponsored cult would both wean the population off of Catholicism—a religion irreparably compromised by its association with the Old Regime and counterrevolution—while also saving France from the corrosive moral effects of atheism. The Cult of the Supreme Being would bind, moralize, and subdue the population. In his famous speech of 18 floréal (7 May 1794) inaugurating the cult, Robespierre included a prominent eulogy of Rousseau. Tellingly, however, he did not point to any specific Rousseauian text or saying, nor did he quote Rousseau directly. Rather, Robespierre appealed to the *aura* of Rousseau as “the preceptor of humankind.”

Like Robespierre, and despite the differences of their politics, the Director La Reveillère-Lépeaux (1753-1824) was also a great admirer of Rousseau. In an important speech on behalf of the new state-sponsored cult of Theophilanthropy, La Reveillère approached religion not from the perspective of the individual, but from that of the requirements of the state. For La Reveillère as for Robespierre, sound morals were what the republic needed to survive and, in order to establish sound morals, you needed religion. The dismal failure of the dechristianization campaign, combined with disturbing evidence that a Catholic revival was gaining steam in France, seemed like incontrovertible proof that Rousseau’s fundamental intuition was right: the religious impulse was an inextirpable human *emotion*. Religion was not so much a matter of intellect or reason, but rather of the heart and human “sentiments.” Hence the need to stimulate such “sentiments” and to channel them in the right directions.⁶³ In morals, La Reveillère agreed, it was necessary to “strike at the heart.”⁶⁴ A new religion—the Cult of Theophilanthropy—combined with a number of “republican institutions” expressly designed to cultivate the right “sentiments,” would turn the French population into the morally upright and orderly citizens the Directory so desperately needed.

It often seems as though what politicians like Robespierre and La Reveillère took from Rousseau was not so much his complex moral, political, and religious philosophy, but rather something quite different. Put starkly, what they learned was a technique of indoctrination. Rousseau alerted them to the power of human sentiments and emotions. He did this not only by what he said about human nature and religion in his various writings, but also by the tremendous success of his own writing style. As Protestant deputy to the National Assembly François-Antoine Boissy d’Anglas (1756-1826) noted in a speech before the Assembly, Rousseau, “whom one cannot cite too often,” understood that people need to be moved. To his fellow deputies, Boissy d’Anglas explained, “the people are, like women, inclined to submit only to those who move them, and who please them. [...] It is through emotion and pleasure that one governs them most efficiently, *and these two levers are in your hands.*”⁶⁵ What these admirers of Rousseau took from Rousseau was thus a technique with which a ruling elite might better indoctrinate, and thus more efficiently govern, the people at large.

Catholic apologists were quick to argue that if you were looking for a religion that “struck at the heart” and exalted the “sentiments,” then you could

do no better than Roman Catholicism. Indeed, evidence suggests that large numbers of French men and women were reconverted to Catholicism after reading the "Profession of Faith."⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, then, the Catholic Church soon started using Rousseauian sentimentalism to defend and propagate their religion.⁶⁷ One of the most important apologetic works of the century, *Le Comte de Valmont*, by the abbé Gérard, was written in the form of a sentimental and epistolary novel obviously inspired by Rousseau. "Man," explained another Catholic apologist, "is always guided by his senses." Therefore, he has a natural need for an "exterior cult" or church ceremonies.⁶⁸ Replete with mysterious dogmas and elaborate rituals, Catholicism was the religion most perfectly adapted to human nature and most "useful" to society. As this church spokesman further explained, "You need spectacles to retain the attention of the people [*attacher le peuple*]." A deistic religion deprived of "all ceremonial [*appareil*]," such as some politicians were promoting, would never work. Catholicism was better at binding, moralizing, and subduing the population.

Napoléon's minister of cults, Jean-Étienne-Marie Portalis (1746-1804), used such arguments to defend the Concordat of 1801. An early admirer of Rousseau, Portalis had written *Observations sur un ouvrage intitulé: Émile ou de l'éducation* (1763) at the age of seventeen, and sections of his *De l'usage et de l'abus de l'Esprit philosophique durant le dix-huitième siècle* (written in 1799 but only published posthumously in 1820) sound very much like lengthy paraphrases of the Savoyard vicar's "Profession of Faith." Napoléon himself had, as a young man, written a defense of Rousseau's critique of Christianity,⁶⁹ which did not prevent him from restoring Catholicism to France in 1801. The Catholicism that Napoléon restored, however, was very much an instrument of state—his own version of a civil religion. As Portalis put it in a speech defending the Concordat, religion was a matter of "haute police d'état."⁷⁰ When it came to governing the masses, it was obvious that mere laws could never be enough; religion was needed as well. How else was one to rule "une population immense [...] que l'on ne peut éclairer, qui est plus susceptible d'impressions que de principes, et qui, sans les secours et *sans le frein* de la religion, ne connaîtrait que le malheur et le crime"⁷¹ It was therefore in the interest of governments to protect religious institutions.⁷²

Which religion did Portalis think was best, given the situation in which France found itself in 1800? A purely intellectual or abstract religion would never work, he thought. After all, human beings are not *pur esprit*; they are also ruled by their emotions or *sensibilité*.⁷³ For this reason, Portalis argued that Catholicism was the best religion for France, and in any case, it was already the religion of the majority of the population. He noted that Catholicism had the additional advantage of effectively "fixing"⁷⁴ the people's intelligence—in other words, stopping their religious imaginations from getting the better of them.

The great Chateaubriand also used the Rousseauian language of sentimentalism to great effect in his *Génie du christianisme*, whose publication was

perfectly timed to coincide with celebrations of Napoléon's Concordat. In Chateaubriand's apology of Catholicism, he deliberately chose not to use a rational language designed to persuade or convince his readers through argumentation. Instead, he appealed to his readers' senses and sentiments. Human beings did not need rational proofs of religion, he contended; all they needed was to trust their own instincts and intuitions. Nor were people obliged to understand Catholicism; they only had to appreciate its beauty and poetic power. Any sincere person who opened his eyes, ears, and hearts to Catholicism would immediately intuit that nothing was better suited to human nature. Perfectly designed to appeal to the sentimental side of man, Catholicism was also the most "useful" religion available. It was useful in the way that it maintained social and political order, a fact no doubt appreciated by Napoléon: "In the present state of society, could you repress an enormous mass of peasants—free and far away from the eye of the magistrate; could you, in the *faubourgs* of a large capital, prevent the crimes of an independent populace without a religion that preaches duties and virtue?"⁷⁵

Finally, one might also consider the rather unlikely plan concocted by a group of liberal Protestants in 1806. It aimed to convince Napoléon to reunite the Christian Churches into one state religion under his leadership. One of the participants in these discussions was Paul-Henri Marron (1754-1832), a prominent leader of the French Protestant community and a pastor in Paris. In a publication that drew many heated responses from angry Catholics, Marron suggested that Lutherans, Calvinists, and Roman Catholics might be united into one Church—not on the basis of agreed-upon dogmas or ceremonies (since that would be impossible)—but on the foundation of shared *sentiments* and "affection."⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that Marron's preferred catechism,⁷⁷ the one used by the Protestant community in Paris, was an only slightly watered-down version of the catechism of Jacob Vernes, a Genevan minister and former friend and disciple of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁷⁸ Another Protestant participant in these discussions put the matter plainly: a "second concordat" was needed—one that would establish religious unity and free France from the pernicious influence of that "foreign sovereign," the "criminal pontiff," in other words, the pope. Addressing Napoléon directly, this Protestant advocate explained, "Le seul obstacle à cette heureuse réunion est la séparation des puissances temporelle et spirituelle. Sire, que Votre Majesté réunisse ces puissances, elle obtiendra aussitôt la réunion des Églises chrétiennes."⁷⁹ To his credit, Napoléon seems to have been relatively uninterested in these plans.

Benjamin Constant and the Proliferation of Sects

To all of these projects, more or less inspired by Rousseau, Constant responded emphatically in the negative: there should be no government involvement in religion and certainly no national or civil religion promoted by the state. Yes,

religion is something inherent to man; yes, it is above all an “intimate sentiment,” or “the most natural of all our emotions.”⁸⁰ It is not something primarily intellectual or rational. And yes, religion is good and necessary for morals and critical to the moral health of any society. However—and here is the crux of Constant’s liberalism—for religion to have its favorable effects, for it to be truly “useful” to society, it is essential that it be left “perfectly independent”⁸¹ from government interference. Constant denounced all governmental efforts to control religion, protect religion, encourage it or channel it in ways supposedly “useful” to society. In speeches, lectures, articles as well as in the big book on religion that he regarded as his magnum opus,⁸² Constant consistently advised all politicians and intellectuals to just “let religion be.”⁸³

Governments should not meddle in religion at all, or they risked turning something otherwise benign into “a menacing institution,” “an aggressive and persecuting force.”⁸⁴ They should not concern themselves with binding the citizenry by favoring one unifying religion. Variations in beliefs, differences of opinion, and even the proliferation of religious sects were nothing for anyone to worry about. On the contrary, “the multitude of sects, of which so many are so frightened,” Constant insisted, “is precisely what is most healthy.”⁸⁵ It encourages competition between the sects, which leads to both moral improvement and intellectual progress. If anybody needed proof of this, he added, they should only have a look at what was going on in America.⁸⁶

Finally, and in some ways most importantly, Constant objected to the view that religion was “useful” mainly as an instrument of social and political control. “I place religion higher,” he wrote, “I do not see it at all as a supplement to the gallows or the wheel.”⁸⁷ Rather, religion was part of that “better part of our nature, that noble disquiet which pursues and torments us, that desire to broaden our knowledge and develop our faculties.”⁸⁸ Complete freedom of conscience, and noninterference by the government in religion was needed because in any just and liberal society, each individual should strive to find his own religious truths. “Truth is not just good to know,” he wrote, “it is good to search for.”⁸⁹ Constant believed that “man was created to educate himself, to enlighten himself and [...] thereby to improve himself.”⁹⁰ Interfering with this goal was not only politically unacceptable but also counterproductive and even morally unjust. Constant was simply not so worried about “binding” the population, or about “subduing” it—“moralizing” it, perhaps—, but this, to him, was a profoundly personal and private enterprise with which the government should not interfere. Elsewhere I have argued that such claims, based as they were on the individual’s right to examine and judge for oneself, were recognizably Protestant ones.⁹¹

In conclusion, Constant took from Rousseau what he liked and rejected what he did not like, just as Rousseau’s other disciples had done previously. But to end our story here would not do justice to the two men’s deeper intellectual relationship. It could be argued that by democratizing “religious sentiment,” as Constant did, and by freeing it from governmental control—in

other words, by trying to ensure that political elites did not use religious sentiment to subdue the people politically, but rather that individuals be encouraged to “judge,” “examine,” “compare,” and “verify” religious truths by themselves—Constant was being more faithful to Rousseau’s intended message than we might at first be inclined think. This, then, would be one last Rousseauian paradox. It may very well be that in denouncing the “eternal metaphysics of the *Social Contract*,” Constant was, in fact, acting as Rousseau’s truest disciple.

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Notes

1. On this, see the work of Jean Baubérot, for example, *Le Retour des Huguenots: La vitalité protestante XIX^e-XX^e siècle* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1985) and Patrick Cabanel, *Le Dieu de la République: Aux sources protestantes de la laïcité (1860-1900)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003.) See also George Chase, “Ferdinand Buisson and Salvation by National Education,” in *L’Offre d’école*, ed. Willem Frijhoff (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1983), 263-75.
2. André Encrevé and Michel Richard, eds., *Les Protestants dans les débuts de la Troisième République (1871-1885)* (Paris: Société de l’histoire du protestantisme français, 1979); see also André Encrevé, “La III^e République, fille du protestantisme?” *L’Histoire* 21 (March 1980): 30-38.
3. Besides the works cited in notes 1 and 2, see also Patrick Cabanel, “Catholicisme, protestantisme et laïcité: réflexion sur la trace religieuse dans l’histoire contemporaine de la France,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 10, 1 (2002): 89-103.
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 223.
5. On the recent Constant revival, and its neglect of his writings on religion, see my “Why Constant? A Critical Overview of the Constant Revival,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1, 3 (2004): 439-53.
6. Jean Baubérot, *La Laïcité, quel héritage? De 1789 à nos jours* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1990) and Charles Weill, *Histoire de l’idée laïque en France au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Librairie F. Alcan, 1925.)
7. Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville et les Français* (Paris: Aubier, 1993), 118.

8. Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*, ed. Etienne Hofmann, trans. Dennis O’Keeffe (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), 20.
9. Tzvetan Todorov, “Benjamin Constant, penseur de la démocratie,” preface to Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politiques*, ed. Etienne Hofmann (Paris: Hachette, 1997), 6.
10. Francois Furet, “La Révolution sans la Terreur? Le débat des historiens du XIX^e siècle,” *Le Débat* 13 (June 1981), 41. Translations not otherwise attributed are my own.
11. Marcel Gauchet, “Benjamin Constant: L’illusion lucide du libéralisme,” in Benjamin Constant, *Écrits politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 28.
12. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 13.
13. Benjamin Constant, “The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and Their Relation to European Civilization,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 106.
14. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 180.
15. *Ibid.*, 179-80.
16. *Ibid.*, 131.
17. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 226.
18. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 136.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 146.
21. *Ibid.*,
22. *Ibid.*, 134.
23. *Ibid.*, 136.
24. Lester Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1968-73), 184.
25. Charles Vaughan, *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 90.
26. Crocker, *Rousseau*, 184.
27. Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), 38-39.
28. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 21.
29. *Ibid.*, 25.
30. *Ibid.*, 26, my emphasis.
31. *Ibid.*, 135.
32. Constant, “The Spirit of Conquest,” 106.
33. This case is put most forcibly by Joan McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution 1762-1791* (London: Athlone Press, 1965), but there are many others.
34. Carla Hesse, “Revolutionary Rousseaus: The Story of His Editions After 1789,” in *Media and Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Marie-Christine Skuncke (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historia och Antikvitets Akademien, 2005), 105-28.
35. Annie Jourdan, “Le culte de Rousseau sous la Révolution: la statue et la panthéonisation du Citoyen de Genève,” in *Politique et révolution chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Tanguy L’Aminot (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), 58.
36. Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 84.
37. See, for example, Gordon McNeil, “The Anti-Revolutionary Rousseau,” in *American Historical Review* 58, 4 (July 1953): 808-23.
38. As Norman Hampson writes, “Works of political theory are not intended to be practical guidebooks for the unsophisticated traveler,” but this, in a nutshell, is what happened to Rousseau (“Mably and the Montagnards,” in *French History* 16, 4 [2002], 403).
39. François Furet, “Rousseau and the French Revolution,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997),

178. On this see also Bernard Manin, "Rousseau," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 829-41.
40. "Sentiment intérieur" is translated as "inner voice of feeling" in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Everyman, 2000), 285 and as "inner sentiment" in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 275.
 41. Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Foxley, 286-87.
 42. *Ibid.*, 304.
 43. *Ibid.*, 313.
 44. *Ibid.*, 312.
 45. *Ibid.*, 313.
 46. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 34.
 47. Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Foxley, 328.
 48. *Ibid.*
 49. Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract 1749-1762* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
 50. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 225.
 51. Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 706.
 52. *Ibid.*, 704.
 53. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 226.
 54. *Ibid.*
 55. *Ibid.*, 163.
 56. Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, in *Basic Political Writings*, 119.
 57. Rousseau, "Lettre à C. de Beaumont," in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 960.
 58. Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, 720-21.
 59. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 223.
 60. "Geneva Manuscript," in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy*, ed. Roger Masters, trans. Judith Masters (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1978), 201.
 61. Maximilien Robespierre, "Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains, et sur les fêtes nationales," in *Œuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre* vol. 10 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1910-1967), 446.
 62. *Ibid.*, 451-52.
 63. Louis-Marie Reveillière-Lépeaux, *Réflexions sur le culte, sur les cérémonies civiles et sur les fêtes nationales* (Paris: Jansen, Year V), 14.
 64. *Ibid.*
 65. François-Antoine Boissy d'Anglas, *Essai sur les fêtes nationales*, Gallica BNF (The French Revolution Research Collection), 13, my emphasis.
 66. P.-M. Masson, *La Religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), esp. chap. 2, "Rousseau directeur et chef d'Église."
 67. For more on this see Helena Rosenblatt, "The Christian Enlightenment," in *Enlightenment, Revolution and Reawakening (1660-1815)*, ed. Timothy Tackett and Stewart Brown, vol. 7 of the *Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.)
 68. Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier, *Apologie de la religion chrétienne contre l'auteur du Christianisme dévoilé et contre quelques autres critiques*, vol. 1 (Paris: Humbolt, 1770), 410.
 69. Napoléon Bonaparte, "Défense de Rousseau," in *Œuvres littéraires et écrites militaires*, vol. 1, ed. Jean Tulard (Paris: C. Tchou, 2001), 49-60.

70. *Discours prononcé par le cen Portalis [...] dans la séance du Corps législatif du 15 germinal an X, sur l'organisation des cultes* (Paris: Impr. de la République, Year X), 33.
71. *Ibid.*, 17.
72. *Ibid.*, 8.
73. *Ibid.*, 7.
74. *Ibid.*, 5.
75. François-René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme*, ed. Maurice Regard (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 1089.
76. "P.-H. Marron, Ministre du saint Evangile, l'un des Pasteurs de l'Église Réformée consistoriale du département de la Seine, et Président de son Consistoire, à Monsieur Lecoz, Archevêque de Besançon," Paris, 18 brumaire, an 13 (1804), reprinted in *Détails historiques et recueil de pièces sur les divers projets de réunion de toutes les communions chrétiennes, qui ont été conçus depuis la Réformation jusqu'à ce jour*, ed. M. Rabaut le jeune (Paris: Imprimerie de Brasseur Ainé, 1806), 170.
77. *Catéchisme à l'usage des jeunes gens de toutes les communions chrétiennes* (Paris: Crapelet, 1806).
78. On Vernes' catechism, see Maria-Cristina Pitassi, "Le catéchisme de Jacob Vernes ou comment enseigner aux fidèles un 'christianisme sage et raisonnable,'" in *Dix-huitième siècle* 34 (2002): 213-23.
79. M. de Beaufort, *Projet de réunion de toutes les communions chrétiennes* (Paris: M. de Beaufort, 1806), 28, 22, 7.
80. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 131.
81. *Ibid.*, 135.
82. Benjamin Constant, *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements*.
83. Constant, "Du développement progressif des idées religieuses," in *Écrits politiques*, 653.
84. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 134.
85. *Ibid.*, 137.
86. *Ibid.*, 140.
87. *Ibid.*, 141.
88. Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," in *Political Writings*, 327.
89. Constant, *Principles of Politics*, 301.
90. "De M. Dunoyer et de quelques-uns de ses ouvrages," in *Écrits politiques*, 662, my emphasis.
91. Helena Rosenblatt, "Madame de Staël, the Protestant Reformation, and the History of 'Private Judgment,'" *Annales Benjamin Constant*, forthcoming.