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Review essay

Benjamin Constant's religious politics

H. Rosenblatt, Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2008), 275 pp., Price: US$ 99

Recent years have witnessed revival of interest in Constant's stature as a founding father of modern liberalism. It is precisely in this area that the author, perceiving an existing gap in the scholarship, hit upon the under-researched theme of this book: "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". To redress this omission she has constructed the main political and religious debates which occurred through the dramatic changes from the Enlightenment to the Revolution, through the rise and fall of Napoleon and on to the Restoration. Rosenblatt's thesis consists of two parts: in the first instance, she contends that Constant's political ideas are interrelated with his religious ideas, and as such feed on one another. In the second instance, in an attempt to provide an explanation of what Constant's Protestantism actually means in the historical context of post-Revolutionary France, she sets herself two questions: "What kind of Protestant was Constant, and how did his views on religion form his political thought?"

The organization of the book is straightforward and centres around three poles: first, history and the political–religious debates generated by the Ultra-royalists/Catholics/conservatives versus the Thermidorians/Protestants/Idéologues; second, the key actors, thinkers and writers, who in some capacity played an active part in these debates: Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Charles X, Helvétius, Chateaubriand, Louis-Philippe d'Orléans and many more. Also included in Rosenblatt's huge tapestry are many of Constant's contemporaries such as, Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, Felicité de Lamennais on the right, and on the left, the Idéologues, Industrialists, Saint-Simonians. Many of Constant's close friends also make their appearance in Rosenblatt's book for the insight they bring into Constant's intellectual development. These are, to name only a few: Mme de Staël who was Constant's lifelong intellectual partner, Isabelle de Charrière, Constant's first confidant, Charles de Villers, a convert to Kant's philosophy, Prosper de Barante and Hochet to whom Constant confided about his religious sentiment. Third, Rosenblatt analyses a great number of Constant's and de Staël's correspondence, political and religious writings, articles and books, from the Directorial pamphlets to Constant's posthumous volumes of *De la religion*. By viewing side by side the key debates of Constant's time, their protagonists and Constant's writings, Rosenblatt is in a stronger position to draw a stimulating analysis of Constant's liberal thought.

From the outset of the book, Rosenblatt concentrates on Constant's Protestantism, thus setting the tone for the rest of her book. She recounts Constant's liberal and undogmatic Protestant education reinforced by his education in Edinburgh, then a leading centre of the Scottish Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was principally the work of moderate clergymen who held exceptionally liberal views when it came to intellectual freedom and religious tolerance. 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 (p. 10). In the course of his studies, Constant joined the speculative Society, one of Edinburgh's many debating clubs. Surviving records from 1784 attest to Constant's early predilection for debating questions which approached religion from the social and political point of view. The impression left by the 17-year-old Constant on his peers is that of a rebel, who, as an irreverent "atheist", liked to defend the relative virtues of paganism over Christianity.

After contracting gambling debts, Constant left Edinburgh abruptly and went to Paris. Rosenblatt argues that he could not have failed to notice on his arrival the stark contrast between the two cities. In Paris, the French enlightenment had taken a virulently anti-Christian turn and was distinguished by its profoundly anticlerical character. The atmosphere was polarized between *philosophes* and *anti-philosophes* or the Enlightenment and the Christian religion. In Paris, Constant stayed with Suard, a moderate *philosophe*, who welcomed *philosophes* of very different views, such as Condorcet, Mirabeau, the abbé Morellet, and de la Harpe, to mention only a few. While Suard favoured the beliefs of English Protestants like Clarke and Newton, he was also on cordial terms with both Holback and Helvétius. Not only was he a great admirer of Scottish thought, but a close personal friend of David Hume too. Rosenblatt deduces that Constant's exposure to Suard's circle of French *philosophes* reinforced a greater appreciation of the Protestants of Edinburgh, and added nuance and complexity to his views on religion. In fact, most French *philosophes* including Helvétius were deists and favoured Protestantism despite their

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anticlericalism because they viewed it as a more enlightened, more reasonable, and more useful religion than Catholicism. Of Constant's religious thought at the time, little is known until the summer of 1785 when he conceived the idea of writing a book. He later reported that his aim then had been to contribute firstly to Helvétius' refutation of prejudices and secondly to his claim that the pagan religion was superior to Christianity.

In Germany, Constant met and became friendly with Jakob Mauvillon, a political radical who shared Constant's sentiments about the Revolution. Mauvillon's friendship was of great benefit to Constant. It contributed to alleviate Constant's boredom and depression from his job as chamberlain at the court of the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. Furthermore, it introduced Constant to key thinkers of the German Enlightenment and more specifically to their liberal Protestant theology. Constant soon came to realise that while the Neologists, Lessing and Semler did not agree on everything, they all shared a strong interest in history and were believers in progress. Moreover, they were proponents of a non-dogmatic, tolerant, and humanistic form of Protestantism for whom moral improvement was man's ultimate and God-given goal. Lastly, they all subscribed to the notion of "progressive revelation" (p. 28). These ideas, Rosenblatt argues, led to the transformation of Constant's thought, a fact evidenced by his earliest surviving manuscript. In "The Spirit of religions" (1790s), Constant expresses his admiration for the moral doctrine of those new German theologians and avows that he prefers it to other systems encountered so far. On the personal plane, it is clear from his manuscript that even the Neologists' system did not dispel his own doubts regarding the wisdom and kindness of God, and the superiority of Christianity over other religions. On Constant's comments, Rosenblatt makes two claims: that Constant displays a tendency to think about religion and politics simultaneously, and to consider their parallels and interconnections; and that Constant's ideas were inextricably connected with the Revolution, government, and politics. Judging the overall effect produced by the German Aufklärer on Constant, Rosenblatt is of the opinion that it fundamentally reoriented Constant's thinking about religion.

In chapter II, Rosenblatt examines Constant's transition from "the democrat by common sense" which he claimed to be in a letter he wrote to Isabelle de Charrière in 1794, to the first-rate political thinker he was to become who denounced the failure of the Government interventionist policies. In May 1795, Constant put aside his book on religion, by which time he had completed over 600 pages, and went to Paris with Mme de Staël. Once there, they immediately immersed themselves in a whirlwind of political events. In a bitterly polarized political climate between die-hard royalists and neo-Jacobins, Constant supported a centrist and moderate republican position and shared the Thermidorians' desire to end the Revolution, while safeguarding its principal reforms (pp. 38–39). Adding to its political predicaments, France was witnessing a religious revival. Legions of Catholics transferred their allegiance from the Constitutional Church to the clergy who had refused to take the oath while Catholic churches across France were reopening. This ongoing movement created uneasiness within the government as it was allied to political reaction. The majority of Thermidorians viewed the Revolution as fundamentally incompatible with Catholicism. Their aim was to transform French mores by a national regeneration without religion. Their tools were civic instruction and moral indoctrination. In their goal to regenerate and republicanize the nation, the Thermidorians received valuable support from the Idéologues, a group of intellectuals sympathetic to the new regime. Despite their good intentions, the Thermidorians' moral dirigisme led them to resort to political and religious policies which proved highly ineffective and even counter-productive.

In this divided context, Constant wrote his first major Directorial pamphlet *De la force du gouvernement* with the objective to support the Directory at a time of growing disaffection. In it, Constant displayed an early predilection for liberal principles and the rule of law. Constant's first publication was followed by two more pamphlets *Des réactions politiques* and *Des effets de la Terreur*. In the former, he deplored the belligerent politico-religious atmosphere and criticised what he saw as unfair attacks made on the government. In the latter, he asserted that the terror had served no positive purpose and was inexcusable from any point of view. Contrary to his stand on moderation, Constant later supported the coup on 18 Fructidor (4 September 1797) and, as president of Luzarches, applied to the letter the anti-Catholic measures inaugurated during the "Second Directory". Constant's approval of the coup and his activities during the renewed campaign for republican institutions elicited criticism from scholars. He was accused of inconsistency in his liberal doctrines. In Constant's apology, Rosenblatt refers to Etienne Hofmann who claimed that Constant's political principles were "germinating" during the Directory, and that, like many of his intellectual allies, he was deeply worried about counter-revolution. Regarding the Directorial impact on Constant, Rosenblatt contends that "the failure of the Directory's see-saw politics marked Constant deeply, as did its inability to foster a republican culture and a new religion" (p. 67). Thus, Constant turned against the arbitrary and coercive rule of the Directory, and remained convinced that the main problem in France was a moral one: France lacked republican values. On Constant's religious preoccupation by 1799, Rosenblatt infers that he would have altered neither his anti-Catholic views, nor his wish for his native Protestantism, to somehow replace Catholicism as the majority religion of France. Constant's question would have switched from whether France needed to be cleansed of Catholicism and reformed, to how this could be effectively accomplished.

When Bonaparte ascended to power in the early Consulate, Catholicism was deeply divided between Abbé Grégoire's declining constitutional church and the fast-growing refractory church. In these circumstances, Napoleon was aware that, for political and pragmatic reasons, it was in his interest to heal the schism between both churches and take conciliatory steps towards the pope. The Concordat was eventually signed in 1802, and this, according to Rosenblatt, despite evidence that a large group of the political intellectual elite wanted France to be "Protestantized" rather than "re-Catholicized". Thus, a huge polemic followed between the supporters and opponents of the Catholic restoration, of which Rosenblatt gives a stimulating account in chapter III. In its very centre stood Constant and de Staël; they immediately joined the fray and used their literary talent to publicize their disapproval of Napoleon's pro-Catholic stand. The first blow was delivered with the