



## CHAPTER 3

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# Moderation and Religion in France After the Revolution: Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant

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The French Revolution and its aftermath were hardly moderate times. In retrospect, it is tempting to picture Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) and Germaine de Staël (1766–1817) as ‘moderates’ in comparison to the Jacobins or the Ultra-royalists. There are plenty of reasons to do so: were they not calling for respecting individual liberty and implementing a balance of powers at a time of heavy political turmoil? When considered from another angle, however, their respective positions can appear quite radical in their conclusion. During the Second Restoration, Staël was adamant that aristocracy, as an intermediary power, had still a role to play in preserving liberty against centralization.<sup>1</sup> In the 1820s, Benjamin Constant came to develop a radical *laissez-faire* stance, advocating a minimal state reduced to internal and external security and harshly condemning any kind of state interventionism as a hindrance to the flourishing of individual capacities.<sup>2</sup>

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Back in the days, it seems what we now call for convenience's sake 'liberalism' was not necessarily a 'moderate' political doctrine, and was certainly not perceived as such by Constant and Staël's contemporaries. An added difficulty is that Staël and Constant's views changed quite dramatically over time—something that makes their classification as 'moderate' quite elusive. Napoleon kicked out Staël from France in 1804 because he saw her as a dangerous apologist of unbounded freedom in a time when France needed stability. During the Restoration, Staël turned increasingly to the right. When her *Considerations on the French Revolution* came out posthumously in 1818, it received a warm reception in conservative royalist circles.<sup>3</sup> Constant had a different story. After endorsing political repression during the Directorate years, he became a political exile under Napoleon's rule, before sitting at the extreme left of the Chamber when he was first elected as a representative in 1819.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, François Guizot and his fellow Doctrinaires, who strove to reconcile liberty with order after the collapse of the Empire, might appear more 'moderate'.<sup>5</sup>

Aurelian Craiuțu has recently explored some of the puzzles surrounding political moderation in post-revolutionary France.<sup>6</sup> He has presented Constant and Staël as militants of moderation, giving special attention to their attempts to balance conflicting interests through constitutional engineering.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I would like to argue that Staël and Constant's 'moderation' was not merely confined to questions of institutional arrangements, but was also prevalent in their writings on religion. In so far as there existed something like a 'discourse on moderation' in post-revolutionary France, it had a strikingly religious dimension. On religious matters, the post-1789 context had its share of extreme positions. Joseph de Maistre, in his *Considerations on France* published in 1797, emphatically declared that the French Revolution was a sin against God, and announced that his generation would witness the relentless combat between Christianity and *philosophisme*.<sup>8</sup> A few years earlier, Condorcet had predicted that, despite the schemes of manipulative priests, religious superstitions would gradually wither away under the weight of reason.<sup>9</sup> After 1789, religion could appear both as a threat and as an opportunity—a threat, for radical republicans, of a return to form for the Catholic Church; an opportunity, for royalists at heart like Chateaubriand, of bringing back morality and stability in France. It is in this polarized context that Staël and Constant's keen interest in religion took shape.

It is worth noting from the start that both Staël and Constant were born in Protestant families. The Protestant matrix of their political thinking has received significant attention in recent years.<sup>10</sup> This chapter concentrates on the moderating function they believed religion could play in politics, and what kind of religiosity they believed qualified for this role. Staël and Constant attempted to design a type of religiosity that they presented as a balance between the two pitfalls of materialism and dogmatism, which they ascribed to the radical fringes of the Idéologues and Catholics respectively. This was a religion based on individual sentiment, which drew inspiration from a specific branch of German Protestantism. Staël and Constant envisaged this type of religion as a moderating force, which could help countering what they saw as the deleterious effects of crude utilitarianism. As we shall see, what both Staël and Constant strove to present as a *juste milieu* in religious matters was not without its contradictions. Throughout her life, Staël hesitated as to what exactly should be counted as a moderate religion, and had conflicting thoughts about religion's role in post-revolutionary France. Constant, on the other hand, after celebrating for years the advent of commercial society, came to the conclusion towards the end of his career that some form of religiosity was needed to sustain his radical approach to politics.

### GERMAINE DE STAËL, PROTESTANTISM AND THE SENTIMENT OF INFINITY

Staël was brought up in a protestant household. Her parents Suzanne Curchod (the daughter of a pastor in the Swiss canton of Vaud) and Jacques Necker instilled in her a moderate type of Calvinism that bore more on questions of morality than theology. In parallel, the young Germaine started attending at a very young age her mother's *salon*, where she could hear *philosophes* such as Guillaume-Thomas François Raynal, Jacob Ludwig Karl and Wilhelm Karl Grimm, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard and Denis Diderot discuss the merits and demerits of Christianity. The result of this dual intellectual lineage was a sort of sentimental theism that had some affinities with Rousseau's *Profession of the Savoyard Vicar*.<sup>11</sup> The connection was made explicit in the *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*, a text Staël published at the age of twenty-two. Rousseau's *Vicar*, Staël wrote, rather than opposing reason and heart, had magnificently brought them together in an

'equilibrated' way.<sup>12</sup> By leaving room to both reasoning and instinct for apprehending God's existence, this type of religion satisfied all men's needs. The *Profession of the Savoyard Vicar* constituted an appropriate middle way between two extremes: 'a chain of forceful and profound thoughts that formed an ensemble of opinions that one warmly adopted in the midst of the aberrations of the fanatics and the atheists'.<sup>13</sup>

This position would form the matrix of Staël's subsequent writings on religion. In *De l'influence des passions* (1796), she presented a reflection about the dangers of unchecked human passions in the aftermath of the Terror, and, simultaneously, a contemplation of how a good handling of these could lead to a satisfactory moral life. Amongst the nefarious passions that had contributed to sending the Revolution off the rails, Staël singled out 'party spirit'. In a striking chapter, she described party spirit as 'a sort of frenzy of the soul that has no bearing on the nature of its object. It amounts to see nothing but a single idea, relate everything to it, and perceiving only what can be combined with it'.<sup>14</sup> Men of parties were unable to concede anything: they had left behind the ability to compare arguments and nuance their position. In a nutshell, they had relinquished the use of individual judgment, Staël wrote in a distinctively Protestant fashion.<sup>15</sup> This could happen on both sides of the ideological spectrum: 'the exaltation of what one calls philosophy is a superstition just as much as the cult of prejudices; the same faults lead to the two opposite excesses'.<sup>16</sup> In the chapter of the work devoted to religion, she criticized certain religions (i.e. Catholicism) for imposing some 'dominating dogmas' that left little room for the speculations of imagination, and led some 'ardent spirits' to 'a sort of suicide of reason'.<sup>17</sup> At times, she commended religion as offering solace and a clear point of reference as to how to behave in dire circumstances. But her enthusiasm was more qualified than it had been in her youthful letters on Rousseau. In the aftermath of the Terror, Staël did not believe that religion could act as a vector of moderation. Her middle way in *De l'influence des passions* was more a kind of indifference. Since religion depended on too many unreliable factors, including the whims and fancies of religious authorities, she concluded that it did not provide a satisfactory guide to moral conduct.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, *De l'influence des passions* was conceived in tandem with a book on political institutions.<sup>19</sup> This second work never came out, but as a matter of fact, Staël did work on a book on politics from June to October 1798, together with Benjamin Constant whom by that time

had become her lover. This book, *Des Circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution française*, was designed as a roadmap for establishing a stable republic in France, in a context where the Directorate government was oscillating between political maneuvers and *coups d'état* to maintain itself in power against the resurgent royalist party and the neo-Jacobins. How could such divisions be overcome? How could royalists and republicans be brought to agree on a truce? Religion was now part of the answer. The principle of the republic, Staël recalled from Montesquieu, was virtue. Yet patriotism was not easy to keep alive in a large country like France, with such a wide diversity of local cultures. In such configuration, virtue was no longer self-sustaining: one needed ‘a motive that moralizes the greatest number’—religion.<sup>20</sup> Staël shied away from the doctrine of the double truth *philosophes* like Voltaire had recommended—prejudices for the populace and some form of refined religiosity for elites. ‘Religious ideas, it seems to me, are equally necessary to all men, at any level of instruction’.<sup>21</sup> Religion was conducive to republican virtue, because it fostered personal identification with the common good:

I believe that in all obscure and cold sacrifices of one’s interest to justice, in all the sacrifices where one must resist blood rather than being driven by it, where one must resist resentment, anger, ambition, I have often felt that one must resort to a religious idea.<sup>22</sup>

Atheism was ‘a purely negative idea’ that could not account for all our higher emotions. How could the existence of our conscience or what Staël called ‘the love for moral beauty’ be explained on purely material grounds? The sentiments that *philosophes* had attempted to oppose to religious ideas were in fact deeply religious in their essence.<sup>23</sup> Staël then turned to the type of religion she thought was most apt to play this moralizing role. The system of the French republic was founded on reason, she argued. Accordingly, any religion that imposed dogmas, mysteries and ‘blind faith’ would be unable to play a moralizing role in the Directorate. Staël had good words for Theophilanthropy, the new deist philosophical system that the Thermidorian elite was busy setting up under the instigation of Louis Marie de la Réveillère-Lépaux. Theophilanthropy, she wrote, made room for individual judgment and was close to all the principles of natural religion.<sup>24</sup> Yet this system, because it had been introduced too recently, had only little chance to

take root amongst the French people. In that respect, Protestantism was a much more plausible candidate: not only was it close to natural religion, it also had existed in France for centuries.

*Des circonstances actuelles* offered a strange example of moderation. Staël presented religion as a moderating force, but ultimately enrolled it at the service of a republican agenda. In the end, Protestantism was turned into a civil religion that bore striking resemblances to Rousseau's *Social Contract*: 'morality bound by religious opinions provides the only complete code to life's actions, a code that bounds men through a sort of pact of the souls – an indispensable preliminary to any social contract'.<sup>25</sup> Staël recommended making Protestantism 'a religion of state'. This was the only means to 'destroy the influence of the Catholic religion'.<sup>26</sup> Quite interestingly, in 1798 Staël believed that the dire situation in which the Directorate found itself justified state intervention in matters of beliefs. The passage from a monarchy to a republic justified a change of religious policies, even through coercive measures: 'it seems to me to be absolutely within the purview of the legislator to influence by any just and hence effective means the progressive diminution of one or the other dogmatic belief that does not match the government's nature'.<sup>27</sup>

The Eighteenth Brumaire soon made the publication of *Des circonstances* obsolete. After a short spell of enthusiasm for Napoleon Bonaparte, whom she pictured in *De la littérature* (1800) as a sort of philosopher-king, Staël quickly grew disenchanted, and went on a decisive study trip to Germany, from the end of 1803 to the spring of 1804. There she collected most of the material that would form part of *De l'Allemagne*, which was eventually published in 1810. It is in this mature work that we find the culmination of Staël's reflection on moderation and religion. In *De l'Allemagne*, Staël proclaimed once again her admiration for Protestantism. This admiration had been reinforced by her recent exposure, together with Constant, to a brand of Protestantism known as the New German Theology, which favored inner sentiments over dogma and encouraged the use of individual judgment.<sup>28</sup> In Germany especially, Staël felt that Protestantism had shown that the 'spirit of inquiry' was not incompatible with a 'lively faith', but that the former could reinforce the latter.<sup>29</sup> Contrary to what she had done in *Des circonstances*, however, she no longer presented Protestantism as the only plausible religion for a modern polity. She wrote about Catholicism in less stringent terms, and explained that Catholics, both in Germany and

elsewhere, had strongly reacted against Protestantism and philosophy because they felt their status was shattered. She recognized that such a reaction was understandable, and called for reconciliation. Protestantism and Catholicism corresponded to two forces inherent to human nature: the need for belief and the need to examine. Both had to be satisfied, and it was impossible to favor one over the other:

Protestantism and Catholicism do not arise from the different characters of the Popes, and of a Luther: it is a poor way of examining history to attribute them to accidents. Protestantism and Catholicism exist in the human heart; they are moral powers that are developed in nations, because they exist in every individual.<sup>30</sup>

Symptomatically, Staël often spoke in *De l'Allemagne* about ‘the religion of the Germans’ in an inclusive way. At times, she envisaged an ultimate reconciliation between the different Christian creeds. From the New German Theology, Staël also retained the belief in progressive revelation—the idea that religious revelations were always proportionated to the degree of enlightenment that existed when these revelations happened. Her call to Catholics, both in France and Germany, was to look forward rather than trying to restore what had passed. Perhaps mankind had come close to a stage where ‘the universality of Christians’ would profess ‘the same theological, political and moral religion’. <sup>31</sup>

The ‘universal religion’ Staël depicted was a mild, pure feeling. It was elusive in its definition, but could be strongly felt through the ways of the heart. This feeling, she added, had an uplifting effect: when experienced, the ‘sentiment of infinity’ brought us beyond terrestrial matters, and triggered in us what she called ‘enthusiasm’:

We feel ourselves, as it were, disengaged by admiration from the shackles of human destiny; and it seems as if some wondrous secret was revealed to us, to free the soul forever from languor and decline. When we contemplate the starry heaven, where the sparks of light are universes like our own, where the brilliant dust of the milky way traces, with its worlds, a circle in the firmament, our thoughts are lost in the infinite, our hearts beat for the unknown, for the immense, and we feel that it is only on the other side of earthly experience that our real life will commence.<sup>32</sup>

This type of religiosity, Staël believed, could act as a counterweight to the ethics of self-interest that Jeremy Bentham and the Idéologues were

propagating in France in the wake of Claude Adrien Helvétius.<sup>33</sup> After the outburst of passions of the Revolution, the Idéologues, in their quest to find ways of stabilizing French society, had endorsed the idea that the maximization of happiness was the exclusive goal of modern society, and self-interest the only reliable human motive.<sup>34</sup> This type of system, Staël thought, had paved the way for Napoleon's despotism. In a chapter entitled 'Of the moral system founded upon personal interest', she took explicit issue with those who reduced justice to a matter of calculation. Utility, Staël pointed out, made room for countless exceptions based on the advantages one could gain from a given situation. This is why tyrants could thrive on that sort of philosophy, where the boundary between what is just and unjust was blurred.<sup>35</sup>

Self-interest, Staël acknowledged, was part of human nature. But she believed that left on its own, it made for a disastrous moral system, from which the best part of human nature was excluded. Religious enthusiasm was a helpful resource to put self-interest into perspective and encourage individuals to sacrifice personal gain if justice required it. The question, therefore, was not so much whether individual interest should be ruled out, but what place it should be granted in a moral system. At bottom, the question was one of getting priorities right. Interest was a 'servant', but should never become the 'master'. Religion as a moderating force in *De l'Allemagne* was not simply understood as a way of repressing individual interest, but of directing it and lifting it up:

Calculation, in the conduct of life, ought always to be admitted as the guide, but never as the motive of our actions. It is a good instrument of execution; but the source of the will ought to be of a more elevated nature, and to contain in itself an internal sentiment that compels us to the sacrifice of our personal interests.<sup>36</sup>

### BENJAMIN CONSTANT AND THE RELIGION OF SENTIMENT<sup>37</sup>

Constant did not have the same confident faith as Staël, even if he also came from a Protestant family.<sup>38</sup> In a short autobiographical text, he recalled how as a child he had been 'nurtured with the principles of the philosophy of the eighteenth century, and especially with the works of Helvétius'. This early exposure to materialist philosophy had even induced him to start writing a short treatise on the destruction of 'prejudices'. Constant would gradually move away from this uncompromising

position, but there are still traces of Constant's anti-religious stance in his republican pamphlets, published under the Directorate. In 1796, he chastised those authors who, in his view, were rehabilitating 'the triple edifice of royalty, nobility and clergy'.<sup>39</sup> From then on, his religious itinerary would be one of hesitations and doubts. Despite some occasionally strong religious experiences, scholars seem to agree that Constant never underwent a full religious conversion, but rather came to develop an anti-theological and individualistic religious attitude.<sup>40</sup>

One fact remains certain: Constant had a thorough scholarly interest in religion, and, from very early onward, he envisaged writing a treatise on the topic. Throughout his life, he kept on reading and writing about ancient religions and polytheism, accumulating thousands of pages of notes that he carried with him around France, Switzerland and Germany. The result of this painstaking research was a big book entitled *De la religion*, whose five volumes were published at the very end of Constant's life, from 1824 to 1831.<sup>41</sup> In many regards, this book can be read as an attempt to propose a third way amidst the extreme positions that characterized the debate around religion at the time. The several volumes of *De la religion* came out in a context where heirs of the Enlightenment were still crossing swords with ultraconservative Catholics. In 1825, Charles X, in his willingness to re-catholicize France, had passed a law on sacrilege to rehabilitate the prestige of the church. This move proved deeply counterproductive, only reinforcing the anticlerical sentiment of the population. On the other hand, since the 1790s the most radical amongst the Idéologues had been pouring out pamphlets and articles that rejected the existence of the soul, denounced the noxious power of religious authorities and, more generally, denied that religion could have any positive role in fostering moral values.<sup>42</sup> In the first chapters of *De la religion*, Constant deplored the deeply polarized turn the debate around religion had taken. He took issue both with 'religious fanaticism' and what he called the 'fanaticism of incredulity' that, in his analysis, the *philosophes* had popularized.<sup>43</sup> Extremism on both sides had fostered indifference, if not hostility towards religion: 'the result of this absurd alliance between two opposite fanaticisms has been a general prejudice [against religion], that still holds upon the best minds'.<sup>44</sup>

To attack both parties at once, Constant built on the New German Theology he had discovered during his 1803–1804 trip to Germany with Staël.<sup>45</sup> A distinction needed to be made, Constant insisted, between what he called 'the religious sentiment', which inhered in human nature,

and the various ‘forms’ that this sentiment gradually took on throughout history. By mistakenly attributing religion to fear or ignorance, Constant argued, the anti-religious party had failed to recognize that the religious sentiment was simply a ‘universal fact’ that ‘had its source in the human heart’.<sup>46</sup> Catholics were equally mistaken, Constant continued, because they refused to recognize that religion, rather than being fixed once and for all by a primitive revelation, gradually adopted purer forms that better reflect mankind’s growing body of knowledge and its increasingly more complex religious sensibility. Like Staël, Constant believed in ‘progressive revelation’.<sup>47</sup> Priests, Constant claimed in *De la religion*, had relentlessly prevented religion from moving with the times. In order to secure their grip on believers, they had imprisoned religion in a set of unquestionable dogmas. ‘Free religions’ should be preferred to ‘sacerdotal religions’, because they left individuals free to cultivate their religious feelings, without intermediaries, by making use of their private judgment.<sup>48</sup>

Tzvetan Todorov has contended that the originality of Constant’s approach to religion lies in his decision ‘not to be for or against religion, but simply to study it’.<sup>49</sup> Constant’s *proclaimed* neutrality, however, went together with a clear agenda. He did not limit himself to criticizing what he saw as extreme positions: he explained why religion was important, and what kind of religion was now needed. Amid the crossfire of atheists and Catholics, Constant wanted to offer nothing short than an alternative type of religiosity—a religiosity that would at last, according to him, satisfy the longings of the human heart: ‘neither dogma, nor incredulity speak to the soul, and the essence of religion lies neither in the subtleties of the one, nor in the other’s abstractions’.<sup>50</sup> What the French were now looking for, he suggested, was a religion of sentiment. Constant pictured it in a Romantic way as an impetus towards the infinite and the unknown, a feeling that ‘relates closely to all noble, delicate, and profound passions’, very much like Staël’s ‘sentiment of infinity’ in *De l’Allemagne*.<sup>51</sup> Because it avoided the rigidity of imposed dogmas while contending man’s deepest spiritual aspirations, Constant thought this type of religiosity would reconcile post-revolutionary France with belief.

Interestingly, Constant repeatedly stressed that his religion of sentiment was not a simple middle-way akin to deism. He criticized deists as a ‘third party’ that, ‘adopting what it saw as a *juste milieu* between two extremes’—atheism and religious fanaticism—had only admitted a doctrine that it called natural religion.<sup>52</sup> According to Constant, deists had

misunderstood what a genuine middle way in religion involved. First, deists failed to acknowledge the perfectibility of religion, by sticking to the idea that there existed a true, stationary, trans-historical creed.<sup>53</sup> Second, they disregarded the fact that religious forms, despite their transient character, were indispensable for the cultivation of religious feelings. Man, Constant argued, was a sociable being that longed for shared habits and rituals.<sup>54</sup> Third, they did not realize that, amongst those forms, (Protestant) Christianity was the one best adapted to the present situation of mankind.<sup>55</sup> Both ‘inalterable’ in its core principles and ‘flexible’ enough to welcome the continuous change of opinions, Christianity

is now presented as a doctrine contemporaneous with every age, because it keeps pace with every age; open to every access of light, because it accepts it from every quarter; [...] placing itself on the level of any every epoch, and thus laying aside every notion which is against the progress that is daily made by the human mind.<sup>56</sup>

The genuine middle way in religious matters, Constant argued, consisted in a religion of sentiment that would continue to flourish within a loosely defined Christian frame. This religion of sentiment was a moderating force, in a specific way. From his *Principles of Politics* (1806–1810) onwards, Constant was enthusiastic about the rise of commercial society. Like Montesquieu, he believed that commerce fostered peace and well-being. At the same time, during the Second Restoration, he expressed concerns about the degrading effects a morality exclusively based on self-interest could have. During the 1820s, another group of young liberals, known as the Industrialists, decided to turn their back on problems of political and constitutional engineering to concentrate on the moral, material and intellectual benefits of human productivity.<sup>57</sup> Constant was not hostile to this agenda. Much of his liberalism was geared towards the preservation of individual liberty understood as a means for developing individual faculties. He expressed this conviction forcefully during the second restoration in his *Commentary on Filangieri’s Work* (1822–1824). The motto of the *Commentary*—‘laissez-faire, laissez-passer’—was a celebration of the virtues of non-interventionism and a call for individual responsibility.

Constant, however, feared that an exclusive focus on material satisfactions might have debasing effects. Mankind’s goal, he had insisted in his famous 1818 lecture, was not simply wellbeing, but the development of

mankind's noblest faculties.<sup>58</sup> On this point, there was in fact no genuine disagreement with Industrialists like Charles Dunoyer, who repeatedly stressed that what he meant by 'industry' was not the mere acquisition of wealth, but also progress in sciences, arts, mores and justice. Constant, however, thought that the Industrialists had failed to notice the crucial role the religious sentiment had in encouraging individuals to develop higher faculties. The religious sentiment, Constant explained in *De la religion* (whose first volume was published concomitantly with the *Commentary*) was the most powerful vector of improvement heaven had given us. This sentiment was the only one forceful enough to enable individuals to break the circle of their egoistical interests, and 'sacrifice' them to higher ideas.<sup>59</sup> In the preface to *De la religion*, Constant insisted that should self-interest be recognized as the sole valuable type of human motivation, France would soon become 'a nation of industrious beavers or well-organized bees'.<sup>60</sup> To thrive and continue to develop their faculties, Constant urged that individuals retrieve a sense of religiosity. Like Staël, Constant saw religion as a counterweight to self-interest. But rather than seeing it as a rampart against injustice—a moral compass against Machiavellism and political opportunism—Constant made of the religious sentiment the *deus ex machina* of his *laissez-faire* liberalism. It was this sentiment, he believed, that would force citizens to continue to cultivate their noblest faculties rather than accumulating material gratifications—a scenario he feared might be the logical consequence of the advent of commercial society, despite all the opportunities it offered in terms of independence.

## CONCLUSION

When the first volume of *De la religion* came out in 1824, it left many commentators puzzled. Writers on both sides of the political spectrum were sceptical. Catholics saw the book as a not-so-thinly-veiled charge against their creed. Partisans of utilitarianism were displeased with the way Constant had described their doctrine.<sup>61</sup> In his review, the Doctrinaire philosopher Jean-Philibert Damiron gave a good summary of the general mood in which Constant's book had left the French public. Constant wanted opposite parties to rally around the religious sentiment. But it was highly doubtful that this would happen, he wrote:

Who will rally to this appeal? Mr Constant's proselytes? I doubt there will be many of them. His book is not popular enough; it is no gospel. Politicians? No hope; industrialists? No hope either. Materialist metaphysicians, spiritualists or skeptics? Do not count on them, they only see in the religious sentiment M. Benjamin Constant tells them about nothing more than a vague and powerless sentiment. His flag will thus be deserted.<sup>62</sup>

Constant's middle way in religion was met with incomprehension. To his contemporaries, it offered nothing more than a watered-down sort of religiosity. What might have further displeased some of the readers of *De la religion* was the not totally unfounded impression that his author, under the veil of neutrality, was promoting a Protestant agenda.

Perhaps this bias is inherent to any attempts to find a via *media* in religious matters. In any case, the project of establishing such a third way did not stop with Constant, nor did it remain restricted to Protestant circles. A few months after Constant passed away in December 1830, the young Alexis de Tocqueville embarked on his nine-month journey across the United States. A few years later, he would explain in *Democracy in America* how the French should draw inspiration from the complementarity Americans had established between religious beliefs and political freedom, rather than remaining stuck in a timeworn trench warfare between believers and non-believers. A mainly Protestant country, Tocqueville thought, could give lessons of moderation to a mainly Catholic one. And Catholicism itself, he contended, was a benefit to democracy: it could act as a counterweight against individualism, materialism and scepticism—some of the most striking problems triggered by the advent of democracy. Tocqueville was born and raised a Catholic, but had lost faith at a young age. These are only some of the many ambiguities that underpinned the project of finding moderation in religion, a project that, from Madame de Staël to the author of *Democracy of America*, remained a constant preoccupation of the authors we now associate with the French liberal tradition.

## NOTES

1. Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, ed. Aurelian Craiuțu (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008).
2. Benjamin Constant, *Commentary on Filangieri's Work*, trans. A. Kahan (Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2015).

3. See Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
4. Constant's most comprehensive biography remains Denis Wood, *Benjamin Constant: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
5. On Constant's hardheaded approach to politics during the Directorate years, see Henri Grange, *Benjamin Constant, amoureux et républicain. 1795–1799* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004). On the Doctrinaires, see Aurelian Craiuțu, *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003); Lucien Jaume, *L'individu effacé, ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).
6. Aurelian Craiuțu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
7. See Chapter 5 and 6 of *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*, respectively 'Moderation After the Terror, Mme de Staël's Elusive Center' and 'Moderation and Neutral Power: Benjamin Constant's *Pouvoir Modérateur*'.
8. Joseph de Maistre, 'Considérations sur la France', in *Oeuvres*, ed. Pierre Glaudes (Paris: Laffont, 2007), 211, 229.
9. See 'The Sketch', in *Condorcet: Political Writings*, ed. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
10. See, amongst others, Helena Rosenblatt, 'Madame de Staël, the Protestant Reformation, and the History of 'Private Judgement'', *Annales Benjamin Constant* 31–32 (2007), 143–154; Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values. Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64–67; Giovanni Paoletti, *Benjamin Constant et les anciens: politique, religion, histoire* (Paris: Honore Champion Editeur, 2006); Laurence Dickey, 'Constant and Religion: "Theism Descents from Heaven to Earth"', in Helena Rosenblatt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Constant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 313–350.
11. For an introduction to Staël's religious beliefs, see Pierre Grosclaude's 'La religion de Mme de Staël: des exigences de la raison à l'appel de la foi', *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 113 (1967), 23–34.
12. Germaine de Staël, 'Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.J. Rousseau' (1789), 51. Unless otherwise stated, translations from the French are mine.
13. Staël, 'Lettres Rousseau'.
14. Staël, 'De l'influence des passions', in *Mme de Staël. La passion de la liberté*, ed. Michel Winock (Paris: Bouquins, 2017), 76.

15. On this point, see Rosenblatt, ‘Madame de Staël, the Protestant Reformation’, 143–154.
16. Staël, ‘De l’influence des passions’, 53.
17. Staël, ‘De l’influence des passions’, 104.
18. Staël, ‘De l’influence des passions’.
19. See Staël’s comments on her publication intentions in the introduction to *De l'influence des passions*, 12.
20. Germaine de Staël, ‘Des Circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution française’, in *Mme de Staël. La passion de la liberté*, 230.
21. Staël, ‘Circonstances’, 231.
22. Staël, ‘Circonstances’, 231.
23. Staël, ‘Circonstances’, 232.
24. On Staël and Constant’s stance on Théophilanthropy, see Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 64–67.
25. Staël, ‘Circonstances’, 231
26. Staël, ‘Circonstances’, 235.
27. Staël, ‘Circonstances’, 232.
28. On Staël, Constant and the new German theology, see Kurt Kloocke, ‘Le concept de la liberté religieuse chez Benjamin Constant’, *Annales Benjamin Constant* 10 (1989), 25–39; James Mitchell Lee, ‘An Answer to the Question: What Is Liberalism? Benjamin Constant and Germany’, *Annales Benjamin Constant* 29 (2005), 127–141; Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 26–29.
29. Germaine de Staël, “Germany,” vol. III (London: John Murray, 1813), 278.
30. Staël, ‘Germany’, 257.
31. Staël, ‘Germany’, 315.
32. Staël, ‘Germany’, 270.
33. On utilitarianism in France, see Pierre Rosanvallon, ‘L’utilitarisme français et les ambiguïtés de la culture politique prérévolutionnaire’, in Keith M. Baker, François Furet, and Collin Lucas (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 3 vol., I (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), 435–440 and, more recently, Emmanuelle de Champs, *Enlightenment and Utility: Bentham in French, Bentham in France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
34. On the *Idéologues*, see Cheryl Welch, *Liberty and Utility: The French Idéologues and the Transformation of Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
35. Stael, ‘Germany’, 187.
36. Staël, ‘Germany’, 180.
37. I take the expression ‘religion of sentiment’ from Bryan Garsten’s ‘Constant and the Religious Spirit of Liberalism’, in Helena Rosenblatt

- (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Constant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 286–312.
38. Constant descended from a French Huguenot family that had emigrated to Switzerland in 1685.
  39. Constant, ‘Des réactions politiques’, in Philippe Raynault (ed.), *De la force du gouvernement actuel, et de la nécessité de s'y rallier* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 126.
  40. On Constant’s own beliefs and his religious itinerary see Pierre Deguise, *Benjamin Constant méconnu: le livre “De la religion” avec des documents inédits* (Geneva: Droz, 1966). On religion and politics in Constant, see George Armstrong Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*; Bryan Garsten, ‘Constant and the Religious Spirit’; Bryan Garsten, ‘Religion and the Case Against Ancient Liberty: Benjamin Constant’s Other Lectures’, *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 (2010), 4–33.
  41. Benjamin de Constant, *De la religion considérée dans son principe, ses formes et son développement*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov and Etienne Hofmann (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999). The last volume was published posthumously in 1831. Constant died in 1830.
  42. In 1804, for instance, Destutt de Tracy, one of the spearheads of *Idéologie* and a follower of Helvétius and Condillac, had republished Charles-François Dupuis’s notoriously anti-religious work, *Analyse raisonnée de l’origine de tous les cultes*. See Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 118.
  43. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 54.
  44. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 246.
  45. On Constant and the New German Theology, see the references in Footnote 22.
  46. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 43, 67.
  47. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 76.
  48. For a succinct exposition of Constant’s ideas on sacerdotal religions and free religions, see his ‘Lectures sur la religion à l’Athénée royal’ (1818), in *Textes de 1818. Œuvres complètes de Benjamin Constant/Œuvres*, XI, ed. Etienne Hofmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).
  49. Tzvetan Todorov, ‘Religion According to Constant’, in *Cambridge Companion to Constant*, 276.
  50. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 74.
  51. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 50.
  52. Constant, ‘De la religion’, 68. My italics. (“prenant ce qu’il regardait comme un juste milieu entre deux extrêmes, a cru devoir n’admettre qu’une doctrine qu’il nommait religion naturelle.”) Deism had for long been perceived as a “middle-way” *par excellence*. On the one hand,

- deism is committed to toleration: it authorizes all beliefs that recognize the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and a form of retributive justice after death. On the other, it dispels the frightening specter of Bayle's society of atheists. On this, see Bertrand Binoche, *Religion privée, opinion publique* (Paris: Vrin, 2012), 59–62.
53. Constant, 'De la religion', 68.
  54. Constant, 'De la religion', 52–53.
  55. Remember Voltaire: 'Je ne suis pas chrétien, mais c'est pour mieux t'aimer'. *Epître à Uranie*, v. 95–96, *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire I. Oeuvres poétiques* (Paris: Didon Ainé, 1827), 941.
  56. Constant, 'De la religion', 247.
  57. On Constant and the Industrialists, see Helena Rosenblatt, 'Re-evaluating Benjamin Constant's Liberalism: Industrialism, Saint-Simonianism and the Restoration Years', *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004), 23–37.
  58. Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients', 327.
  59. Constant, 'De la religion', 34.
  60. Constant, 'De la religion', 33.
  61. On the reception of *De la religion* in Restoration France, see Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 198–201, 214–216.
  62. Jean-Philibert Damiron, 'Review of *De la religion* (volume II)', in *Le Globe*, 186 (19 November 1825), 967.