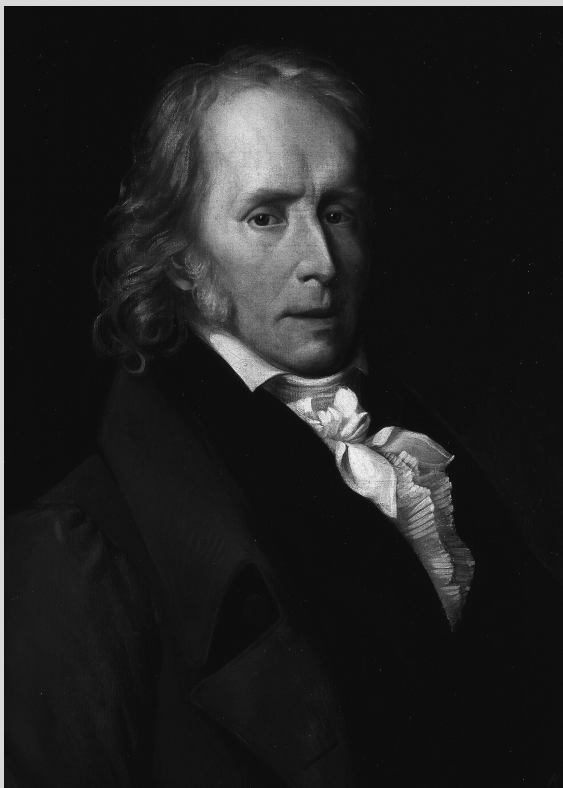


ON RELIGION



BENJAMIN CONSTANT

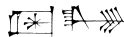
On Religion

Considered in Its Source,
Its Forms, and Its Developments



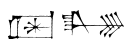
BENJAMIN CONSTANT

Translated by Peter Paul Seaton Jr.
With an Introduction by Pierre Manent



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This English translation is drawn from the integral French text of *De la religion*, by Benjamin Constant, presented by Tzvetan Todorov and Etienne Hofmann. © 1999 by Actes Sud.

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Translator's Note

The reader has here the first full-length English translation of Benjamin Constant's (1767–1830) massive *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements*, published in five volumes between 1824 and 1831 (with the last two appearing posthumously). It is drawn from the integral text presented by Tzvetan Todorov and Etienne Hofmann in *Actes sud* ("Thesaurus," 1999).

Constant's prose is rich, complex, and in places lush—in a word, it breathes the air of nineteenth-century romanticism. It thus presents translation challenges, but none that are insurmountable. My first principle of translation has been fidelity and accuracy; the reader will find no paraphrase here. He will be able to follow Constant's employment of key and even characteristic terms. Insofar as possible, his word order has been respected; and his paragraph divisions have been strictly observed. The reader of a translation of a nineteenth-century French author should feel that he is reading something from another time and place; we don't go to Constant to hear contemporary French, much less the various dialects of America. My aim has been to reproduce a distinctive nineteenth-century French voice and manner of thought speaking in comprehensible twenty-first-century English, albeit with an accent.

Constant worked on this survey and analysis of the human religious experience from fetishism to monotheism throughout his life, in wildly different circumstances. The text bears these marks. Different editions of texts are cited; spellings are not entirely consistent; there is a palpable feel of working *à batons rompus*. Constant himself acknowledged all this. I have made no effort to smooth these features. In an age like ours when individuality is extolled but often fails to be genuine, much less philosophically employed, it is good to encounter a brave mind that took on the most difficult subjects—religion and politics, the soul and its

nature—with persistence and gusto. Rather than diminish his achievement because it falls short of contemporary scholarly standards, Constant's warts are pardonable signs of a focus and capaciousness we should admire. What Pascal wrote applies to Benjamin Constant in spades: I went to a book expecting to find an author, and I found a man.

Since Pierre Manent's magisterial introduction to the man and this work is guidance enough for the prospective reader, I can dispense with that task. I only wish to express my thanks to Christine Henderson of Liberty Fund, Inc., who approached me about this project; Colleen Watson, who exercised infinite patience in awaiting its conclusion; and my primary reader and good friend, Dan Mahoney, who introduced me to the adventure of French thought and provided moral as well as translation assistance during the long *durée* of this project. To all, cordial thanks.

Paul Seaton

Introduction to *On Religion*

PIERRE MANENT

In France, Benjamin Constant's fame today is principally due to his literary work, which is largely autobiographical in character.¹ In his own day, he was above all famous for his political activity: across the dizzying succession of regimes that France knew starting in 1789, this man of Swiss origin was constantly at the head of the battle for all the liberties. One could say that when he died shortly after the July Revolution, in which he had fully participated and which had placed the "bourgeois king," Louis-Philippe, on the throne, Constant had embodied the most systematic and combative version of French liberalism. Only recently, however, have people begun to take the measure of the amplitude and complexity of his political and philosophical thought. With Tocqueville, although not quite at the same level, he is the most eminent representative of the "troubled liberalism" that is so characteristic of the French political philosophy of the nineteenth century.

What characterizes the spiritual physiognomy of Constant is that he was a man who was profoundly divided between his mind and his soul, or his heart. On one hand, he adhered without reservation to the doctrine of Enlightenment liberalism, which he defended with as much constancy as trenchancy. According to him, the wellspring of modern history is the struggle between the hereditary principle and the elective principle. The French Revolution marked the definitive victory of the latter over the former, a victory that manifested the perfectibility of the human race, a perfectibility equivalent to a tendency toward equality.² On the other hand,

Translated from the French by Peter Paul Seaton Jr.

1. One should primarily mention *Adolphe*, an "anecdote" that appeared in 1816, a first-person account of an unhappy amorous relationship.

2. "*Perfectibilité*" is a key term in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French thought. Employed by Condorcet before him, Rousseau made it central to the anthropology he developed in the *Second Discourse*. Tocqueville later employed it to understand democratic Americans. Constant, in impor-

his soul suffered from, and therefore was troubled by, certain moral effects of the improved civilization of perfectibility that was in the process of triumphing. The reign of utility and self-interest narrows and weakens souls. They leave idle certain of their highest faculties, and end by putting liberty itself in danger. How to make up for this deficiency in strength and vitality? In order to resolve the problem introduced by the triumph of enlightenment for which he had worked so zealously, Constant's solution was one that would have surprised Voltaire, and even Montesquieu: religion, or a certain version of religion.

Constant's thought on religion is contained in the immense work that the reader of English now has, thanks to this translation. For a long time little appreciated and read in France itself, where it was out of print, this work merits serious study because it is rare that the religious phenomenon is addressed with so much candor and amplitude. The outdated character of Constant's erudition—immense as it was—does not warrant us to treat his enterprise with condescension. It was motivated and borne along by a *sincerity* whose high quality and constancy are always quite rare, but especially so today.

Benjamin Constant was one of the first authors to give voice to a sentiment that has become quite familiar to us, one without which we could not live, so much has it become constitutive of our self-consciousness: the sentiment of living in history, that is to say, in a movement of *irreversible progress*. To be sure, certain disappointments prevent us from formulating this sentiment and conviction with the self-assurance of the first modern generations. It is therefore instructive for us to see how this axiom organized both the form and the content of Constant's thought.

Constant starts with the observation that the reign of religious intolerance is over in Europe. The form of life that gave plausibility, and for a long time its evidence and legitimacy, to the constraint brought to bear on actions, words, and even thoughts in the name of "the true religion," this form of life has been definitively discredited by certain intellectual, political, social, and moral changes—by "progress." The main danger to fear from now on is found less in what remains of barbarism than in the excess of civilization. By giving itself the goal of well-being, and self-interest as its guide, civilization tends to produce a "system of egoism" that confines the individual to himself and makes him the slave of his needs. It is there-

tant ways a follower of Rousseau, employs the term and its cognates, such as "*perfectionnement*" and "*perfectionnée*." It is the combination of "perfection" and "ability" in which the exact meaning of both terms is intrinsically indeterminate. "Human perfection" in this optic is rather open-ended and might more precisely (if awkwardly) be translated as "human perfecting" (translator's note).

fore important to bring another perspective to bear on the human world, by giving man the goal of constant self-perfecting and interior sentiment for his guide.

Now, precisely because intolerance has been irrevocably discredited, and the aggressive unbelief that responded to it has lost its *raison d'être*, today it is possible to consider the religious phenomenon impartially. What does that mean? With religion no longer having to be regarded as either a truth that has to be defended by all means or as an error and imposture to attack with the same force, one can and should consider it as a *fact*, that is to say, as a reality that is inseparable from the human heart, as it manifests itself at all times and places. Here Constant calls into question what one could call the genealogism of the Enlightenment, which sought to base its arguments on the hypothesis of a natural man who would have lived without religion, as well as without society and language. In this optic, if religion had a beginning—being born from the fear of thunder, for example—then it is reasonable to anticipate that it will have an end—precisely, when men no longer fear thunder. But according to Constant these are untenable conjectures. Religion, like society, like language, belongs to the very constitution of man; and it is as impossible to imagine man without religion as it is to imagine him without society or language.

At this point, one can see a tension between the two aspects of Constant's thought that we just developed. How can religion be the universal and unchanging fact that Constant wishes to place before us while humanity obeys the law of progress; that is, of continuous and irresistible change, an axiom to which he attributes absolute validity? It would seem that, according to Constant, one must say that in human history everything changes and nothing changes.

As it happens, this is the case! With the candor I already mentioned, Constant simultaneously affirms that everything changes and nothing changes in the human phenomenon during the course of history. He escapes from contradiction by having recourse to the distinction between form and substance: the substance is unchanging while the form obeys the law of progressive change, the law of progress. The substance, the substance of man, is therefore the religious sentiment, which is always the same, immutable and eternal. The form is the ensemble of ideas and institutions in which, at each period, the religious sentiment formulates itself and takes form. In the same way as Marx, according to whom the principle of historical change resides in the contradiction between productive forces and the relations of production, according to Constant the wellspring resides principally in the contradiction between the religious sentiment and the forms in which it successively

expresses itself. More precisely, change occurs when the sentiment separates itself from the form, and this happens when the latter no longer suits the human spirit. Thus, it is “the human spirit” that ensures the connection between the religious sentiment that does not change and the religious forms that constantly change. One has to acknowledge, however, that Constant hardly explains how this delicate and decisive operation takes place. Historical examples, both numerous and varied, are deemed to furnish the verification of a process, or a mechanism, that is presupposed or postulated rather than described or explained. In fact, the way in which Constant comprehends the religious sentiment makes it difficult to conceive of its relationship with “the human spirit.” We should pause on this point.

What is the religious sentiment, according to Constant? It is very much a *sentiment*, which is to say, an involuntary disposition that we do not have the power to govern, much less to suppress at will. In other words, it is a disposition that cannot be translated into strictly rational terms; it necessarily possesses a vague and mysterious character, but one that allows us to glimpse a domain where interest does not reign. Instead of dissimulating this vagueness or obscurity, Constant underscores these characteristics of the religious sentiment: it is in this type of emotion resistant to clear and distinct ideas that, according to him, human life above all experiences its disinterested desire for something better. If one has to give the word “sentiment” its most exact equivalent, it would be “revery.” It cannot escape the reader, however, that revery excludes judgment, and first of all, the judgment of real existence. The religious sentiment neither affirms nor denies the existence of the object of its desire or revery. The most that one can say, it seems, is that the religious sentiment does not positively rule out the actual existence of God or a divine object.

One would be wrong to call Constant’s sincerity into question. To be sure, he positively affirms nothing apropos to the existence of God, and one can see that even if he invokes certain Christian teachings with respect, his reticence is equal to his respect. His sincerity demands this reserve. To his eyes, the mystery that surrounds human life is so profound and encompassing that one cannot claim to dispel it by any judgment of the mind. The three great parties that claim to judge with certainty—the orthodox, the unbelievers, and the partisans of natural religion—all suppose that man can come into possession of an absolute truth, one that is always the same. On this point, says Constant, they all are equally mistaken. This does not mean that one must renounce every idea of truth. But it does mean, as the Germans were the first to recognize, and it is the sole general truth available

to the human mind, that “everything is progressive in man,” or as we would say today, “everything in man is historical.”

This is not the place to comment on what one could call Constant’s “historicism.” One can, however, point out a consequence of this “historicism.” In his eyes, the period in which one lives determines, or in any case circumscribes, the possible religious attitudes. There are epochs when it is impossible to cast doubt on the established religion; there are others when it is impossible to shore up religious conviction, that is, to escape from doubt. As Constant never tires of underscoring in all his works, the time in which he lives is of the second sort. The moderns cannot escape from doubt, from the fear of being mistaken. Their habit of constant reflection weakens and hampers the movement of the soul necessary to affirm anything of importance with certainty. This being his diagnosis, one can understand why Constant brings the religious quest for the divine object back to the human subject. There is always a truth to grasp and to cherish concerning religion, but it is not a truth concerning God, it is a truth concerning man. At the core of man there is always and everywhere this indestructible but mysterious sentiment by which man experiences, paradoxically, that he is greater than himself, and that his destiny is not measured in terms of his pleasures and his pains but according to a perfection that is found in the way he approaches the joys and challenges of life. According to Constant, it is only in these terms that one can understand the idea of divine Providence. Understood in these terms—the joys and pains are the means of perfecting man—divine Providence equates with human self-perfecting, and vice versa.

Constant’s immense investigation, which, we should note, essentially leaves Christianity and Islam to the side, is organized by a determinate polarity—that between priestly religions and the religions free of the priesthood. In his presentation, the difference that one could call “political” between the sacerdotal religions and the others is more determinative than the properly religious differences between fetishism, polytheism, and theism (this last notion approximately covers what we call monotheism). To be sure, Constant shows religion progressing along with society from the fetishism of savages to the polytheism of barbarians, with the latter tending with the progress of civilization to theism. However, this vector of religious progress is subject to a decisive influence, according to whether the religion is priestly or independent of the priesthood. The priesthood, whatever the religion might be, by claiming the monopoly of all the human goods, or at least the most precious (for these are at the root of all priestly powers), installs a system of castes that, even when they are not institutionalized as they are in India,

hampers the natural movement of human faculties and gives, as it were, a vicious form to human life. Even if he takes the precaution to concede that all the ills and evils of men do not flow from the priesthood, there is no doubt that for Constant the priesthood as such is simultaneously the great inhibitor of human progress and the great corrupter of human life. After having sequestered and protected what religion has of properly religious in the religious sentiment that the Enlightenment had ignored, Constant takes up again its aggressivity (against which he was otherwise very severe) in a political analysis that absolutely condemns a social and political form: the priesthood.

Constant's argument therefore combines the idea of a continuous progress of civilization and the idea of an alternative between priestly religions and those without priesthoods. The first are essentially enemies of progress; or, as he regularly says, they are "stationary." The second are open to the progress of the human spirit. Now, and this is the decisive juncture of the investigation, in human history there has been only one religion independent of the priesthood, that of the Greeks. At least since heroic times, that is, barbaric times, the Greeks were free from priestly power. He finds the proof of this in the subordinate place in which Homer places them in his poem. Hence, too, the importance that he accords to the dating of the Homeric poems in order to understand human history: the *Iliad* furnishes the authentic portrait of the religion of heroic times. To be sure, the Greeks welcomed many divinities brought by foreign colonies, in particular Egyptian and Thracian ones, but they nationalized these imports, purifying the divinities that had become Greek of what they contained that was originally bizarre, somber, abstract—in short, priestly. In particular, the Greeks never adopted astrolatry, which is the decisive element in priestly religion. Thus Constant celebrates the "national sovereignty" of Greece, without which the human race would have remained in a petrified state and would have everywhere been what it once was in Egypt. It is "a hundred times fortunate," he says, that the Greeks won the victory over the priestly corporations that oppressed the rest of the earth. By keeping themselves free from the priesthood, the Greeks made themselves available to the natural development of religious ideas. Under their independent polytheism, all the aspects of the social state developed in a spontaneous and measured way. Far from crushing men, the qualities attributed to the gods were human qualities on a larger scale. In short, while everything in the priestly religions is obscure, enigmatic, abstract, and contradictory, with the Greeks nothing shocks reason at the time, that is, nothing hampered the progress of human faculties that had already begun.