

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

2005

Two Liberals on Religion: Constant and Tocqueville Compared

Helena Rosenblatt
CUNY Graduate Center

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/220

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

HELENA ROSENBLATT

Two Liberals on Religion : Tocqueville and Constant Compared¹

As founding fathers of modern liberalism, Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville shared a common sensibility as well as a number of key concerns. Of central importance to both men was the need to protect individual rights and freedoms against what they saw as an encroaching social power. Having learned the lessons of the French Revolution, they knew that power, whether concentrated in the hands of one man, or executed in the name of the « people », was a dangerous thing. Thus they worked throughout their lives to establish and defend a representative system with constitutional guarantees that would protect fundamental rights such as freedom of the press, the safety of private property, and religious toleration. Both men felt that such guarantees were essential to shield individuals from despotic government.

But both Constant and Tocqueville also agreed that, in the end, laws and constitutions were not enough. Indeed, this was another important lesson they drew from the Revolution. After all, a succession of constitutions had come and gone without ever successfully bringing the Revolution to a close. On the contrary, France had experienced successively more violent upheavals and excesses. Evidently, liberal political structures needed something more than laws and constitutions to survive. The success of liberal regimes depended on the social, intellectual and moral capital of the society that they governed.

However, to many people in the nineteenth century, things seemed to be getting worse, not better. Judging by the egoism, materialism and social fragmentation that they observed all around them, society was heading in the wrong direction. Frenchmen on the left as well as the right worried that their country was in the midst of a spiritual and moral crisis. In intellectual elites and governing circles, the moral education of France became a high priority. Some argued for a return to the Catholic Church ;

¹ This paper was delivered at the Society for French Historical Studies conference in Paris, 17-20 June, 2004.

others placed their hopes in a « new Christianity »² that might save France ; still others attempted to find a secular or nondenominational morality that would serve the stabilizing and moralizing function of religion. But everyone agreed that successful political systems needed to be undergirded by the appropriate moral values. On all sides there were calls for a « unifying doctrine » that would put an end to the spiritual and intellectual « anarchy » that was thought to be corrosive to social order³.

That Tocqueville was deeply interested in such questions is of course well known⁴. « Je suis bien convaincu », he wrote in 1853, « que les sociétés politiques sont, non ce que les font leurs lois, mais ce que les préparent d'avance à être les sentiments, les croyances, les idées, les habitudes de cœur et d'esprit des hommes qui les composent [...] »⁵. In his masterpiece, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Tocqueville wrote at length about the religious and moral values he thought were needed to educate, moderate and ultimately sustain democracy.

That Benjamin Constant was also interested in such questions is less well known. Indeed, as Biancamaria Fontana notes in her introduction to Constant's *Political Writings*, Constant's thought « is currently associated with the very opposite of the promotion of moral values »⁶. He is most famous for his often-cited defense of modern liberty, in which he stressed man's right to the unobstructed enjoyment of « private pleasures » and « private independence »⁷. Again and again in his writings, Constant condemned any interference by political or ecclesiastical authorities in the private feelings, tastes and beliefs of citizens. Indeed, his stern denuncia-

² Edward Berenson, « A New Religion of the Left : Christianity and Social Radicalism in France, 1815-1848 », in *The French Revolution and the Transformation of Modern Political Culture*, vol III, François and Mona Ozouf (eds), New York, Pergamon Press, 1989.

³ I explore this question further in my « Re-evaluating Benjamin Constant's liberalism : industrialism, Saint-Simonianism and the Restoration years », *History of European Ideas*, 30, 1, 2004, p. 23-37.

⁴ For Tocqueville's views on religion, see in particular Doris Goldstein, *Trial of Faith. Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought*, New York, Elsevier, 1975 ; Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom. Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy and the American Future*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1995 ; Agnès Antoine, *L'impensé de la démocratie. Tocqueville, la citoyenneté et la religion*, Fayard, 2003.

⁵ Tocqueville to Corcelle, 17 September 1853, in *Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Francisque de Corcelle, Œuvres complètes*, vol. XV, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p. 80.

⁶ « Introduction », in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, Biancamaria Fontana (transl. and ed.), New York, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 26.

⁷ *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*, *ibid.*, p. 316-317.

tion of the Jacobin regime focused precisely upon the violence it had exercised on individual rights in the name of allegedly desirable moral and social goals. Moreover, in the scholarship on Constant, we are frequently reminded of his incurable gambling problems, his womani-zing, his supposed flip-flopping on important issues ; he was not a man, it would seem, very concerned about moral values.

Recently, however, a small but growing number of scholars have been focusing attention on a much-neglected, but important, aspect of Constant's liberalism : precisely the part of his thinking that concerns morals and values. Like Tocqueville, Constant was in fact a keen social observer, and very interested in the psychological and moral mechanisms underpinning society. Also like Tocqueville, Constant was convinced that a liberal polity needed moral citizens to survive. It is an aspect of Constant's thought that comes to light very quickly if one pays attention to his writings on religion. He wrote essays, chapters and books on religion, most notably a five-volume scholarly treatise entitled *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements* (1824-1831), upon which he worked his entire adult life. It is worth noting that Constant himself regarded this book as his most important undertaking and achievement.

This essay will briefly compare and contrast the views of Tocqueville and Constant on the right role of religion in modern society. I have two main reasons for doing this. One is to generate interest in this still neglected side of Constant's thinking. The other is to contribute in a small way to a more nuanced and historically sensitive appreciation of Tocqueville. In America, Tocqueville is very popular. At present, he is especially admired by those (and they are many) who see a crisis in American democracy and attribute it to a decline in religion and moral values. To them Tocqueville offers profound reflections on « the excesses of the democratic soul »⁸. It is my opinion that despite the valiant efforts of a handful of scholars much of this scholarship is lacking in historical perspective. For example, it often treats Tocqueville as if he alone among liberals understood and appreciated the importance of religion, and the significance of values. Moreover, it seems to forget that Tocqueville wrote with a mainly *French* audience in mind – and this perspective necessarily colored his observations and judgments in ways we should not ignore. This paper is a modest attempt to help resituate Tocqueville's ideas on religion in their proper nineteenth century French context by contrasting them to those of Benjamin Constant. Comparing the views of Constant

⁸ Joshua Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. x.

and Tocqueville allows us to see more clearly their distinctiveness. It also enables us to appreciate the richness and complexity of early liberalism's engagement with the question of religion. Even just a quick glance at the ideas of these seminal thinkers reminds us that classical liberalism is a far richer and complex body of thought than its current critics – and even some of its admirers – will allow.

First, some important similarities. Both Constant and Tocqueville approached religion from the social and political point of view – which is to say that they were disciples of Montesquieu. They agreed that the usefulness of religion had little if anything to do with its truth; their primary concern in writing was not salvation, but life right here on earth. Moreover, both men wrote about the importance of religion despite the fact that their own faith was somewhat problematic and insecure. Constant was born into a Swiss Calvinist family, but had an unconventional upbringing to say the least. He seems to have started his adult life as a convinced atheist only gradually to become, partly through his own research into religion, a questioning and unsettled agnostic⁹, who felt a growing respect for religion and a need to believe that was, however, never entirely satisfied. Tocqueville, on the other hand, grew up in a pious Catholic milieu and was educated by a Jansenist-leaning abbé for whom he expressed considerable affection and respect. At the age of 16, he suffered a painful loss of faith through exposure to irreligious literature at the *lycée*. Apparently, he never quite recovered from this crisis, to his own great disappointment. Both Constant and Tocqueville thus struggled with their own religiosity, at times seeming to wish that they were more religious than they really were. To his friend, Tocqueville confessed « Je ne suis pas croyant » but he quickly added « ce que je suis loin de dire pour me vanter »¹⁰. Constant could very well have said the same thing.

Neither man, it should be noted, expressed adherence to any of the specifically theological doctrines of Christianity; they both appreciated religion for essentially social, political and moral reasons. Constant, a thinker of Protestant descent and culture, examined the politico-religious conditions in Catholic France; whereas Tocqueville, a scion of the Catholic nobility, meditated on the manners and morals of a Protestant country. There was a similar practical edge to both men's work since both men were politicians as well as theorists. As such they were keenly interested in what was politically necessary to preserve liberty in post-

⁹ Henri Gouhier, *Benjamin Constant devant la religion*. Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1989, coll. « Les écrivains devant Dieu », p. 41.

¹⁰ Tocqueville to Gobineau, 2 octobre 1843, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, vol. IX, 1959, p. 57.

Revolutionary France. Keeping liberty alive and civilization on the right track was a shared concern – and for this religion was essential.

Fundamental to both men was the idea that religion was a force against despotism. This may surprise modern readers. Constant and Tocqueville agreed that it was a *lack* of religion that prepared people for servitude. Constant expressed himself unambiguously on this question : « L'absence du sentiment religieux favorise [...] toutes les prétentions de la tyrannie »¹¹, while the presence of religious sentiment favors liberty. « Des peuples religieux ont pu être esclaves », he wrote, but « aucun peuple irréligieux n'est demeuré libre »¹². Only a few years later, Tocqueville expressed himself similarly : « C'est le despotisme qui peut se passer de la foi, mais non la liberté. [...] s'il n'a pas de foi, il faut qu'il serve, et, s'il est libre, qu'il croie. »¹³

Religion was needed in liberal and democratic polities because it combated egoism and destructive individualism. The two men agreed on this as well. Regretfully, Constant noted that modern men tended to be « dominated by egoism and softened by luxury »¹⁴. Religion countered this egoism ; it pulled self-interested and often apathetic men out of themselves, teaching them « la puissance du sacrifice »¹⁵. Religion, along with all the other noble passions « font sortir l'homme du cercle étroit de ses intérêts »¹⁶. « La liberté », Constant insisted, « se nourrit de sacrifices [...] [elle] ne peut s'établir, ne peut se conserver, que par le désintéressement. »¹⁷

Likewise, Tocqueville wrote that, through the injunction of brotherly love, Christianity drew men out of themselves, thus counteracting the isolating effects of individualism. But he believed that this was in fact an effect of *all* religions :

Il n'y a point de religion qui ne place l'objet des désirs de l'homme au-delà et au-dessus des biens de la terre, et qui n'élève naturellement son âme vers des régions fort supérieures à celles des sens¹⁸.

¹¹ Benjamin Constant, *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements*, Etienne Hofmann and Tzvetan Todorov (eds.), Arles, Actes Sud, 1999, p. 62.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Eduardo Nolla (ed.), Paris, Vrin, 1990, vol. I, p. 229 ; vol. II, p. 34.

¹⁴ *De la religion, op. cit.*, p. 245.

¹⁵ *Principes de politique*, in B. Constant *Ecrits politiques*, Marcel Gauchet (ed.), Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 466.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 465.

¹⁷ B. Constant, *De la religion, op. cit.*, p. 34, 62.

¹⁸ *De la démocratie en Amérique, op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 34.

Very much like Constant, Tocqueville worried that without religion, people would succumb to « le goût du bien-être »¹⁹, an exaggerated « amour des jouissances matérielles »²⁰ and an « indifférence complète et brutale de l'avenir »²¹. To Tocqueville, religion encouraged the longterm thinking essential to making moral decisions. All this is why Tocqueville believed religion to be « beaucoup plus nécessaire dans [...] les républiques démocratiques que dans toutes les autres »²².

Both men also shared the belief that religion was « natural » to man. To Constant, religion was an indestructible « emotion », « un sentiment inhérent à l'homme »²³. Similarly, Tocqueville called religion a natural human « instinct. » To him it was the lack of religion that was unnatural : « L'incrédulité », he wrote, « est un accident ; la foi seule est l'état permanent de l'humanité. »²⁴

Why, then, had religious belief visibly declined over the course of the eighteenth century ? Both men responded similarly. According to Constant, it had to do with the illiberal and intolerant policies of both ecclesiastical and political authorities :

[O]n a dénaturé la religion. L'on a poursuivi l'homme dans ce dernier asyle, dans ce sanctuaire intime de son existence. La persécution provoque la révolte²⁵.

According to Tocqueville as well, church and state attempts to enforce religious compliance were counterproductive. Such policies drove people away from religion. But religion would naturally reassert itself once such ill-conceived policies were rescinded.

This brings us to another important point on which Constant and Tocqueville agreed. Both men were strong advocates of church/state separation – and this in the interest of both religion and the state. In their minds, a fruitful collaboration between politics and religion was only possible under the conditions of legal disestablishment and religious toleration such as was found in America. Indeed, both referred to America as a place where the separation of church and state was having favorable effects.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²² *De la démocratie en Amérique*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 229.

²³ *Du développement progressif des idées religieuses*, in *Ecrits politiques*, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

²⁴ *De la démocratie en Amérique*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 231.

²⁵ *Principes de politique*, in B. Constant, *op. cit.*, p. 468.

Having considered some of their main areas of agreement, we can now turn to their differences. Let us begin by considering the definition of religion. To Constant, the essence of religion is religious *sentiment*, which, as we have seen, he describes as an intuitive and indestructible « emotion » inherent in all human beings. In the course of history, this inner sentiment has taken on outward « forms », that is, the dogmas and ceremonies of established religions. These forms are necessarily transient – good for only a time. In his scholarly treatise *De la religion*, Constant describes the dynamic between form and sentiment in some detail, arguing that it causes the gradual improvement of religion by a natural process motored by the liberating force of sentiment. The point is that for Constant, it is religious *sentiment* – something that inheres in all varieties of religion – that does the good work of moralizing individuals. It is religious sentiment that pulls individuals out of themselves, causing them to give of themselves and improve themselves²⁶.

Tocqueville, on the other hand, occasionally speaks of religious « sentiments » or « instincts » – normally using the plural – but he differs dramatically from Constant when he asserts that it is *dogma* that is « la substance des religions »²⁷. Indeed, for Tocqueville, not only is it dogma that does the beneficial work of religion for society, but it is the fact that dogma is *fixed* that appeals to him. He believes that « [d]es idées arrêtées sur Dieu et la nature humaine sont indispensables à la pratique journalière de [la] vie »²⁸. This is true for individuals as well as societies. Unsettled ideas prepare men for servitude and lead only to « [le] désordre et l'impuissance »²⁹.

For Tocqueville, doubts and questions about religion are profoundly disturbing to people : « Cette perpétuelle agitation de toutes choses les inquiète et les fatigue. »³⁰ Such intellectual restlessness is dangerous because it leads to a type of despair that is conducive to political apathy and thus to despotism. Men are simply not strong enough to cope with religious and political freedom simultaneously. « Pour moi », Tocqueville wrote, « je doute que l'homme puisse jamais supporter à la fois une complète indépendance religieuse et une entière liberté politique. »³¹ In order for citizens to remain politically alert and engaged, their imagina-

²⁶ I explain this further in my « Commerce et religion dans le libéralisme de Benjamin Constant », *Commentaire*, vol. 102 (été 2003), p. 415-426.

²⁷ *De la démocratie en Amérique*, op. cit., vol. II, p. 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

tions in matters of religion must be quelled. They need settled answers to unsettling questions. What is good in America is that you have a religion « qu'on croit *sans la discuter* [...], les Américains, ayant admis *sans examen* les principaux dogmes de la religion chrétienne [...] »³². Joshua Mitchell has recently called this « the cornerstone » of Tocqueville's liberalism. The « paradox of freedom [...] is that it requires an obedience, a passivity before God »³³. Indeed, it is with considerable admiration that Tocqueville describes the subduing action of religion on the human mind :

L'esprit humain [...] s'arrête de lui-même ; il dépose en tremblant l'usage de ses plus redoutables facultés [...] ; il s'abstient même de soulever le voile du sanctuaire ; il s'incline avec respect devant des vérités qu'il admet sans les discuter³⁴.

Elsewhere, Tocqueville refers to this voluntary submission to religious dogma as « un joug salutaire »³⁵.

This is about as far from Constant's point of view as you can get. According to Constant, no social good can come from inflicting an intellectual or spiritual straight-jacket on human beings. Taking what seems to be the opposite stance to Tocqueville's, Constant argued not only that spiritual submission would be counter-productive, leading to « apathy » and « numbness »³⁶ in the citizenry, but that it would be profoundly immoral as well. Religious questioning and striving is always a good thing for Constant, who speaks with evident pride and awe of « cette noble inquiétude qui nous poursuit et qui nous tourmente, cette ardeur d'étendre nos lumières et de développer nos facultés »³⁷. « L'homme a été créé pour s'instruire, pour s'éclairer, et par là même, pour s'adoucir et s'améliorer. »³⁸ It is for this reason that God endowed man with « un penchant invincible à l'investigation et à l'examen »³⁹. To obstruct this penchant would be to go against God ; it would be to favor both superstition in religion and despotism in politics. In fact, an

³² *Ibid.*, p. 17, emphasis added.

³³ J. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

³⁴ *De la démocratie en Amérique*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 35. A. Antoine (*op. cit.*, p. 148-154) is insightful on this.

³⁵ *De la démocratie en Amérique*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 33.

³⁶ *De M. Dunoyer et de quelques-uns de ses ouvrages*, in B. Constant, *Ecrits politiques*, *op. cit.*, p. 676.

³⁷ *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes*, in *Ecrits politiques*, *op. cit.*, p. 617.

³⁸ *De M. Dunoyer [...]*, *op. cit.*, p. 662.

³⁹ *Du développement progressif des idées religieuses*, *ibid.*, p. 635.

individual's use of private judgment is not just recommended ; it is required – and it is *this* which will save civilization from its own materialistic, depoliticizing and de-spiritualizing tendencies.

To try to foster and/or defend a unity of doctrine is equally unnatural and harmful. To Constant, the proliferation of sects is a good thing. Repeatedly, Constant insists that societies have nothing to fear from intellectual and spiritual pluralism. « Cette multitude des sectes dont on s'épouvante », he wrote, « est ce qu'il y a pour la religion de plus salutaire »⁴⁰. If authorities would just let religion be, « les sectes se multiplieraient à l'infini », causing a healthy competition between them which would have both favorable intellectual and moral repercussions⁴¹. Freedom of conscience is the motor of human progress ; it is what allows Christianity to be « perfectible » and to stay forever relevant – in other words to improve over time. Constant added that this was a process that one could see at work in the United States. George Armstrong Kelly was right, I think, when he several years ago called Constant's point of view broadly « Protestant » – for such was its tendencies and sources⁴².

Tocqueville, on the other hand, adopts a point of view that is quite critical of Protestantism. Indeed, in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, he suggests that it is Catholicism and not Protestantism that would be most effective in democratic regimes. Modern men have a profound need for the certainty that only Catholicism provides. When it comes to religion, Tocqueville insists that « l'esprit d'indépendance individuelle [...] est le plus dangereux de tous »⁴³. Not surprisingly, then, he shows considerable contempt for the revival movement that he had the opportunity to observe in America. He refers to the new sects as « fanatical spiritualism » and « religious insanity » – « folies religieuses »⁴⁴ – and laments « l'horrible portrait » of men « se livrant à des transports qui les font descendre au-dessous des brutes »⁴⁵. Luckily, Tocqueville adds, this bizarre phenomenon is just a momentary aberration

⁴⁰ *Principes de politique, ibid.*, p. 476.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁴² George Armstrong Kelly, *The Humane Comedy : Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 76. Kurt Kloocke is the expert on Constant's connections with German Protestant thought. Start with « Benjamin Constant et l'Allemagne : Individualité – Religion – Politique », *Annales Benjamin Constant*, vol. 27, 2003 ; on this, see also James Lee, « Benjamin Constant : The Moralization of Modern Liberty », Ph. D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003

⁴³ *De la démocratie en Amérique, op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, appendix, p. 320.

tion, which assuredly will not last. As the American example proves, modern men are endowed with « un instinct caché qui les pousse à leur insu vers le catholicisme »⁴⁶. It is this that accounts for the fact that « [l']Amérique est [...] le pays où [...] la religion catholique fait le plus de progrès »⁴⁷.

Agnès Antoine has recently argued that, in its main lines, Tocqueville's point of view echoed that of the French Catholic Church, while Joshua Mitchell has made a strong case for its Augustinian and Pascalian sources. It is quite surprising to observe this seminal liberal thinker consistently associating religion with the salutary submission to authority. Manifestly, religion serves for Tocqueville as a kind of mind-police⁴⁸. While Constant believed that religion supported free governments because the Protestant spirit of examination contributed directly to democratic culture, for Tocqueville, religion played the role of a « palliative », a « remedy » and an « antidote » to what he held to be democracy's harmful tendencies⁴⁹. One could say that both men in fact adopted older arguments already current during the Enlightenment ; however, Tocqueville viewed religion mainly as a bridle, while Constant saw it more as a spur⁵⁰.

I could end the story here, but I think it would be misleading, with regard to Tocqueville. It would be to neglect what appears to have been a significant shift in his thinking several years after he wrote *De la démocratie en Amérique*. There is indeed evidence that Tocqueville underwent a change in outlook about religion. It is something briefly noted by Doris Goldstein some years ago, but curiously neglected by scholarship since⁵¹.

Tocqueville's deep frustration with, and contempt for, the oppressive imperial regime installed by Louis Napoleon after his coup d'Etat in 1851 is well known. Others before me have argued that witnessing the political

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ A. Antoine, *op. cit.*, p. 152. Stephen Holmes has gone further, claiming that Tocqueville in fact viewed religion « more or less in the counter-Enlightenment tradition, as a salutary opium of the people. » S. Holmes, « Constant and Tocqueville : An Unexplored Relationship », *Annales Benjamin Constant*, vol. 12, 1991, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Words repeatedly used (rightly, I think) by Joshua Mitchell to describe Tocqueville's view of religion.

⁵⁰ On religion as a « bridle » and/or « spur », see Helena Rosenblatt, « The Christian Enlightenment », *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol VII : *Enlightenment, Revolution and Reawakening (1660-1815)*, Timothy Tackett and Stewart Brown (eds), forthcoming 2005.

⁵¹ D. Goldstein, *op. cit.*, p. 90-97.

deterioration of France led Tocqueville to emphasize more than ever the importance of political participation in sustaining liberal and democratic regimes⁵². But what is generally overlooked is that he seems not only to have begun to reconceptualize his notion of democracy, but that he also seems to have reconsidered the relationship between Christianity and citizenship.

By the 1850s, and along with other liberal Catholics, Tocqueville became increasingly frustrated by the transformation of Catholicism into what Montalembert referred to as a « school of servitude ». The ease with which French Catholics accepted Napoleon's imperial rule was distressing proof of Christianity's basic failure to encourage citizenship. According to Tocqueville, this had to change. Evidence of his new perspective appears in the *Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Moreover, in a series of letters to his friend, Sophie Swetchine, Tocqueville clarified his altered view of the role of the Church. He now argued that the Catholic clergy should assume responsibility for reanimating public spirit in France. Since 1789, he explained, French priests had been shirking their duty. Their role, Tocqueville argued, was not just to teach « private » virtues, but also « public » ones ; thus would they help restore a desperately needed sense of citizenship in an apathetic population. Priests should teach their parishioners that they belong not only to a heavenly community, but to a « patrie » as well :

Je désirerais qu'ils fissent pénétrer plus avant dans les âmes que chacun se doit à cet être collectif [la patrie] avant de s'appartenir à soi-même ; qu'à l'égard de cet être-là, il n'est pas permis de tomber dans l'indifférence, bien moins encore de faire de cette indifférence une sorte de molle vertu [...] tous sont responsables [...] de veiller à ce qu'il ne soit soumis qu'à des autorités bienfaisantes, respectables et légitime [...] Voilà ce que je voudrais qu'on inculquât aux hommes [...]⁵³

In conclusion I would say that Constant's and Tocqueville's perspectives – though both liberal – were quite different, reflecting their different temperaments, backgrounds and immediate historical contexts. According

⁵² François Furet and Françoise Melonio were the first to argue for a late change in Tocqueville's thought by which he reversed his concept of democracy. I have learned much about this from the work of Mel Richter. See in particular his « Tocqueville and Guizot on democracy : from a type of society to a political regime », in *History of European Ideas*, 30, 1, 2004, p. 61-82. But see also Cheryl Welch's piece in the same journal.

⁵³ Tocqueville to M^{me} Swetchine, 20 October 1856, in *Lettres inédites de Madame Swetchine publiées par le comte de Falloux*, Paris, Didier & Cie, 1866, p. 467.

to Tocqueville – and although his position evolved over time – religion's express role was to enable political liberty, and hence to prevent the degeneration of democracy into despotism. In *Democracy in America*, where he viewed democracy mainly as a « social condition » and not as a political form, he saw religion as an antidote to democracy's dangerous social side-effects. Later in life, when he viewed democracy more politically, he hoped that religion would directly encourage political life.

In contrast, I think that Constant focused more on the individual and his intellectual and moral progress. He saw religious and political liberty as together contributing to the improvement of man – « le triomphe de l'individualité », as he called it⁵⁴. Indeed, there is a sense that for Constant this is what both liberal political regimes and religion are for : they are there to enable human beings to develop their moral and intellectual faculties. I believe it is this that Constant was referring to when he wrote that « ce n'est pas au bonheur seul, c'est au perfectionnement que notre destin nous appelle » ;

ce n'est point l'absence de la religion, mais sa présence avec la liberté politique et religieuse qu'il faut invoquer comme la source unique de tous les progrès intellectuels, aussi bien que de toutes les vertus⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ Preface to *Mélanges de littérature et de politique*, in B. Constant, *Ecrits politiques*, op. cit., p. 623.

⁵⁵ *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes*, op. cit., p. 617.