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Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge: University Press, 2008). 275 pp. \$ 99.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN 978-0-521-89825-6.

Review by Robert Alexander, University of Victoria.

Partly due to his reputation as an opportunist in politics and unprincipled *roué* in private life (which led contemporary liberals to distance themselves from him), and partly because Karl Marx misrepresented him as a mediocre spokesman for bourgeois economic interests, Benjamin Constant has generally been placed in the lesser ranks of foundational liberal thinkers—a link, perhaps, between Montesquieu and Tocqueville, but by no means as profound or influential. Moreover, the frequent association of Constant with Germaine de Staël has tended to reduce the originality attributed to either. Constant's intellectual stock has been rising, however, since the resurgence of interest in liberalism that began in the 1970s. Helena Rosenblatt's admirable study will further this trend. At a time when scholars increasingly focus on cultural, rather than social, issues, Rosenblatt's emphasis upon the centrality of religion to Constant's political liberalism reflects current trends, but more important it provides a highly instructive perspective on the character of early nineteenth-century liberalism.

*Liberal Values* is published by Cambridge University Press as part of a series entitled "Ideas in Context" and it would be difficult to cite a work that more scrupulously charts "the development of ideas in their concrete contexts." Constant's career spanned the late Enlightenment, the Revolution, the Napoleonic era, the Restoration, and the commencement of the July Monarchy and he either closely followed, or engaged in, most of the principal debates of the various periods. Thus there is a great deal of ground for Rosenblatt to cover as she introduces a wide range of political and intellectual developments, discusses the milieu that influenced Constant, traces his political and personal experiences (in so much as they relate to the book's particular themes), and systematically relates his private and published writings to the controversies of the day.

For this reader, what is especially striking in Rosenblatt's account is the extent to which conflicts begun during the Reformation continuously re-surfaced. For conservatives, often of a royalist and frequently of an ultramontane complexion, Protestantism, the Enlightenment, the Revolution, and liberalism were all cut from the same cloth. Each was characterized by an advocacy of individual rights that was fundamentally averse to spiritual and secular authority, and would inevitably lead to atheism, revolution, and anarchy. Conversely, much of the French political Left was anticlerical, if not anti-religious, although Protestantism was less subject to attack than Catholicism. Because Catholicism was perceived as despotic in both the spiritual and temporal realms, it was considered the leading obstacle to human progress. Over the course of his career Constant sought to steer between the extremes of "fanaticism" and militant anticlericalism, but his ideas on the relation between religion and politics gradually evolved. As a young student at the University of Edinburgh in the mid-1780s, Constant came into contact with a congenial Scottish Enlightenment that was Protestant in character, but he facetiously posed as an advocate of paganism and decided to write a book on polytheism. During subsequent stays in Paris he was introduced to fiercely anticlerical French *philosophes*, but also to moderate leaders of the Protestant community. Thereafter an extended period spent at the otherwise dull court of Brunswick was crucial for Constant's religious thought as he gained knowledge of a north

German Enlightenment that wedded respect for both religion and reason. In the late eighteenth century liberal Protestantism, strongly influenced by Kant and G.E. Lessing, was remarkably free of dogma, emphasizing sentiment, unfettered individual inquiry, and a belief in progressive revelation that meant that religions must evolve in terms of social and political context. Whether Constant ever fully accepted Protestant theology can be questioned, but in time he came to identify himself as a Protestant, and the values of the north German Enlightenment would underpin much of what he subsequently wrote.

One of Constant's early manuscripts focused on the counter-productive nature of the policies of Prussian King Frederick William II when he sought to reverse Frederick the Great's implementation of religious toleration. Back in France, from the beginning of Thermidor onwards, Constant nevertheless became party to the same sort of misguided policies. Both de Staël and Constant supported the Directory and the attempts of the *Idéologues* to 'republicanize' the public through use of festivals, imposition of the Revolutionary calendar, control of education, and—effectively—persecution of the Catholic Church. As a minor official in the canton of Luzarches, Constant sought to enforce "republicanization," an unhappy experience that would confirm his earlier doubts about the efficacy of state attempts to inculcate morality. During the Consulate he tried unsuccessfully to rally opposition to the Napoleonic Concordat. The failure of the *Idéologues* to block Bonaparte's binding of Church and State then completed Constant's break with the French Enlightenment tradition of anticlericalism, and the Catholic clergy's support of the Napoleonic regime hardened Constant's conviction that political and religious tyranny were inextricably bound. Although many scholars have drawn attention to Constant's rejection of the Terror, Rosenblatt correctly underlines the point that Constant's liberalism did not reach full maturity until the Napoleonic era.<sup>[1]</sup> Masterpieces such as *Principles of Politics* and *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* were a direct product of Constant's reflections upon the religious and political policies of the Directorial and Napoleonic regimes.

It was predictable that during the Restoration Constant would emerge as the great defender of individual liberty from the onslaught of ultramontane ultraroyalists such as de Maistre, Bonald, and Lammenais. More interesting is the attention Rosenblatt directs towards Constant's frequent clashes with elements of the Left. While he did advocate economic *laissez-faire*, Constant was sharply critical of 'industrial' theorists such as Charles Dunoyer, who argued that political liberty was unimportant and that progress lay solely in increased economic productivity. Constant's rebuttal that man must strive for moral progress as well as physical well being suggests how misleading Marx's description was. Nor did Constant think highly of early utopian socialism, which showed the same despotic tendencies as Catholicism in its desire for a state-directed religion that would foster unity by eliminating dissent. Although Constant's sympathy with Protestantism at times ran close to the thinking of others who wanted to substitute Protestantism for Catholicism, by the time that he published what he considered his masterpiece, *De la Religion*, Constant was advocating a pluralist line reminiscent of Tocqueville – religious diversity encouraged competition and, hence, progress.

Ultimately, Constant's liberalism derived from his recognition that the tutelage of an authority—be it religious or political—hinders the individual's inclination to draw conclusions for himself or herself, thus blocking self-improvement or collective progress. The Protestantism he came to profess was remarkably tolerant, and his notion of religious sentiment was intentionally obscure, seemingly amounting to little more than an innate desire for moral growth. Moral preoccupations thus led Constant to become an early champion of individual liberties. His sources of inspiration were diverse, but increasingly very few of them derived from specifically French intellectual traditions. Throughout his career Constant had been perceived as an enemy of authority and order by the French Right. In his later years he drew far more criticism than admiration from the French Left for his attacks on the *philosophes*, *Idéologues*, materialist champions of *laissez-faire*, and utopian socialists. After his death in 1830, French liberalism came to be dominated by the *doctrinaires*. Like the latter, Constant believed that political rights should be determined by capacity and based on property ownership. He thought that

landed property was more valuable than business property because ownership of the former encouraged cultivation of moral attributes. But he was far more generous than his erstwhile liberal colleagues in evaluating capacity and far less worried about preserving social order from the alleged anarchic tendencies of the masses. Most crucially, Constant was consistently suspicious of *dirigisme* in all its forms, placing him outside the mainstream of modern French political thought.

By underlining the ties between Constant's political and religious thought, Rosenblatt provides an illuminating analysis of Constant's liberalism. But it is also true that such a perspective places Constant in a perhaps excessively favorable light; other perspectives might be less flattering. *Liberal Values* is not a biography, although it does discuss broad swathes of Constant's life and times. In the concluding chapter Rosenblatt explains why Constant's reputation plunged after his death, noting how contemporaries such as Guizot and Saint-Beuve belittled his contribution. Rosenblatt correctly attributes their animus partly to political partisanship, but it seems fair to say that, at least for his contemporaries, there was a pronounced disjuncture between Constant's intellectual quest for moral improvement and his private conduct. There is a certain logic to arguing that Constant's collaboration with Napoleon during the Hundred Days can be reconciled with his desire to limit state power, especially given the alternative of Bourbon rule. Many biographies, however, suggest that Constant's principles were not always proof against his quest for power and fame.<sup>[2]</sup> None of which affects the merit of his thought, but it does suggest that not all perspectives on Constant are equally appealing. Similarly, the liberal Protestantism endorsed by Constant was not fully representative of the faith at a time when the 'Awakening' was challenging notions of free will and the application of reason.

Minor *caveats* aside, Helena Rosenblatt's *Liberal Values* is a fine study of a profoundly important religious thinker and political philosopher. Happily free of jargon, Rosenblatt's prose is lucid and her principal arguments are thoroughly demonstrated and utterly convincing. Constant's political and religious thought were intricately bound; the combination of the two made him one of the great contributors to western liberalism.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, Francois Furet, "La Révolution sans la Terreur? Le débat des historiens du XIXe siècle," *Le Débat*, 13 (June, 1981), 41, and Marcel Gauchet, "Benjamin Constant: L'illusion lucide du liberalism" in B. Constant, *Ecrits politiques*, ed., M. Gauchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 28.

[2] On the complex relations between Constant's principles, ambitions, and penchant for political gambling during the Hundred Days, see Dennis Wood, *Benjamin Constant* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 213-15, Kurt Kloocke, *Benjamin Constant* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984), pp. 204-12, Paul Bastid, *Benjamin Constant et sa doctrine* 2 vols. (Paris, Armand Colin, 1966), vol. I, pp. 278-92, and Elizabeth Schermerhorn, *Benjamin Constant* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), pp. 258-89.

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