

**Why is religion at the heart of modern liberty? Benjamin Constant on religious experience, the power of the clergy and the 'vivid love of individual independence'**

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Abstract:

Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) famous for his distinction between liberty of the moderns and liberty of the ancients and as a defender of civil rights has resurfaced in academic debates due to the interest toward his hitherto neglected four volume book *De La Religion*. Contemporary critics argue that we should no longer see Constant as a sophisticated exponent of negative freedom and rights, but as a thinker who took duty, morality and religion very seriously. I argue that Constant's views on religion do not undermine but reinforce his concept of modern liberty closely associated with defence of civil rights. His ideas help us draw an enlightening sketch of the links between religion, duty and morality on the one hand and protection of privacy and individual rights on the other. Entitlement to privacy and rights protection is based not so much on the fear of the crushing power of the tyrannous majority but on the formative role of religious experience. The blame however is cast on the clergy: priests take political advantage of religious faith and stifle its formative impact.