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ISBN

9798189226267

Author

Thomas, Claire Nell

Publication Date

2026-06-25

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Moral Construction to Civic Destruction: Jesus in Rousseau's Thought

By

CLAIRE NELL THOMAS

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Political Science

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

Approved:

John T. Scott, Chair

Shalini S. Satkunanandan

Robert S. Taylor

Committee in Charge

2026

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine Jean-Jacques Rousseau's contrasting treatment of Jesus across *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, and *Letters Written from the Mountain*. In *Emile*, the Savoyard Vicar depicts Jesus as the model of perfect moral virtue and the teacher of a natural religion grounded in conscience and inward sincerity. Yet in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau depicts Jesus as politically destabilizing and a teacher of moral universalism who weakens the civic duties and bonds which are necessary for a thriving political body. The moral universalism that makes Jesus a moral ideal in *Emile* also creates a politically dangerous figure in *The Social Contract*. However, in *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau mentions that the different intended audiences of his works prompt changes in stylistic approaches to certain topics, which allows for the varying treatment of Jesus across *Emile* and *The Social Contract* to be further clarified. In this paper, I argue that Rousseau uses the figure of Jesus to expose the tension between universal morality and the particular requirements of political citizenship. These differing portrayals of Jesus point to Rousseau's larger claim in *Emile* of the conflict between "making a man" and "making a citizen."

Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings contain a tension in his treatment of Jesus. In the middle of Rousseau's educational treatise *Emile*, there lies a "Profession of Faith" told by the Savoyard Vicar, within which the Vicar presents Jesus as the model of perfect virtue and a pure teacher of natural religion.¹ According to the Vicar, Jesus exemplifies a universal moral ideal grounded in conscience, simplicity, an inward orientation toward the good, stripped of miracles, revelation, priestly mediation, and the historical doctrines which Rousseau does not affirm.² Yet in *The Social Contract* (*TSC*), Rousseau describes the morality of the Gospel, which he understands as Jesus's moral teaching, as incompatible with and destructive of civic life.³ In *TSC*, Jesus's universalistic ethic is represented as forming citizens who are politically aloof and detached from the loyalties required of a healthy and functioning political association. In the beginning of *Emile*, Rousseau addresses this tension by claiming: "Forced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time."⁴

In Rousseau's educational treatise *Emile*, the purified figure of Jesus plays a crucial role as the Savoyard Vicar uses Jesus to illustrate a natural religion grounded in conscience and the inward search for truth.⁵ Jesus represents the universal moral law accessible to all, uncorrupted by institutions or doctrinal authority. This is central to Rousseau's project of "making a man,"

¹ Although there remains much scholarly debate surrounding whether this profession is Rousseau speaking through the Vicar, it is not my focus here. For clarity, I treat the Vicar as a separate speaker from Rousseau and clearly indicate claims made by the Vicar from those made directly by Rousseau. I already anticipate a reasonable critique of my choice here: if the Vicar is separate from Rousseau, why is this paper exploring the differences between Rousseau's treatment of Jesus in *TSC* and the Vicar's treatment of Jesus in *Emile*? My answer to this question is that I am not here to take a stance on whether or not the Vicar is Rousseau's own thought, but rather to analyze his choice of Jesus as a perfect moral exemplar, consistent with the morality set forth by Rousseau throughout *Emile*, which also happens to be a focus of the Profession of Faith.

² *Emile*, pp. 216-313.

³ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 263-272.

⁴ *Emile*, p. 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*

meaning forming an individual capable of consulting themselves for moral truths, not an ecclesiastical body, and cultivating moral independence.⁶

Rousseau's political writings introduce a different set of concerns. In *TSC* and in the *Geneva Manuscript (GM)*, he insists that political association requires particularistic attachments. Rousseau writes: "it is certainly important to the state that each citizen have a religion which makes him love his duties, but the dogmas of that religion are of no interest either to the state or its members except insofar as those dogmas relate to morality and to the duties," meaning love of one's country, shared sentiment, civic devotion, and participation in the civic community.⁷ The Lawgiver must shape this civic identity, cultivating loyalty and partiality.⁸ Universal religion (such as the kind embodied by Jesus) pulls individuals away from these civic attachments and turns them politically aloof. Jesus's moral teachings, oriented toward humanity and the divine rather than the political community, weaken the civic passions required for citizenship. The moral purity that makes Jesus admirable in *Emile* makes him politically dangerous in *TSC*.

While in exile over the publication of *Emile*, which was condemned by political and ecclesiastical authorities, Rousseau wrote *Letters Written From the Mountain* in which he defends and clarifies certain conflicting claims in *Emile* and *TSC*. Rousseau's differing treatment of Jesus across his major works, from *Letters Written from the Mountain* to the educational *Emile* and the political *TSC*, is what scholars refer to as one of the many paradoxes in his thought. Scholars have described Rousseau's paradoxes as seeming contradictions that require careful interpretation to be reconciled, rather than a simple acceptance or dismissal of the contradiction.⁹ This is somewhat of

⁶ *Emile*, pp. 278.

⁷ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 271.

⁸ *TSC*, II.7, pp. 191-194.

⁹ Stephen G. Salkever, *Rousseau's Social Contract: The Paradox of Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

a challenge to the reader by Rousseau. Part of reading and understanding his treatises includes working to uncover the intention behind conflicting claims to reveal the tension he is trying to resolve. With this approach in mind, rather than accept Rousseau's conflicting attitudes towards Jesus, we can question the function of these different treatments.

What do these differing portrayals of Jesus in *Emile* and *TSC* reveal about how moral universality and the particular civic demands conflict and take turns in taking precedence over one another in Rousseau's thought? I argue that these differences reflect the tension between universal moral religion, exemplified by Jesus as Rousseau understands him, and the civic morality demanded of citizenship. For Rousseau, Jesus is the representation of a purified universal religion that does not need miracles, revelation, ecclesiastical authority for its divinity, and is quite different from current forms of Christianity Rousseau consistently criticizes. This universalism makes Jesus a perfect model for the development of moral autonomy in *Emile*. But the same universalism threatens the civic attachments that *TSC* requires. Rousseau's treatment of Jesus highlights his paradoxical task of forming "men" guided by universal moral principles alongside "citizens" committed to the particular obligations of civic life and their political community.

Rousseau's seemingly contrasting portrayals of Jesus are embedded within a broader context of his critiques of Christianity as it has developed historically and politically. In *TSC*, Rousseau rejects Catholicism as a "religion of the priest" and in *Emile*, the Vicar rejects ecclesiastical authority and church hierarchy, denies the legitimacy of miracles, revelation, and mysteries, and dismisses doctrines such as the virgin birth, resurrection, and transubstantiation.¹⁰ What is preserved in the Vicar's Profession of Faith in *Emile*, is a stripped down, universal, conscience focused moral religion. Jesus, as the Vicar describes him, embodies a purified morality

¹⁰ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 263-272.

that stands separate from the practices and development of Christianity that Rousseau considers corrupt, political, coercive, superstitious, and destructive of civic virtue in *TSC* and *Emile*.¹¹

Although there has been extensive research on Rousseau's interactions with Christianity across his work's conversation around these topics, what is not answered is Rousseau's specific attention paid to Jesus. By examining Jesus not simply as a symbol of Christianity but as Rousseau's moral exemplar, Jesus functions both as a model of universal moral religion and as a challenge to civic strength and political stability. Framing the problem this way shows that Rousseau's apparent inconsistency is deliberate: Jesus serves as his clearest illustration of the enduring tension between moral universalism and the particularistic obligations of civic life.

Existing Literature

Although there is little research focusing solely on Rousseau's treatment of Jesus across his works, scholars have developed theories surrounding Rousseau's views on the plausibility of a civil religion, the political role of Christianity, and have paid special attention to the Profession of Faith to better understand Rousseau's arguments for the purpose of religion for the individual and for the state.

Regarding the status of the Profession of Faith in *Emile* and its relation to Rousseau's political theory, Melzer, Burns, and Karant treat the Vicar's teaching as continuous with Rousseau's broader moral and political project. Melzer argues that Rousseau attempts to reshape Christianity into a politically useful "religion of sincerity" purified of ecclesiastical corruption and dogma.¹² Burns develops this reading further, contending that the faith described in the Profession

¹¹ *Emile*, pp. 216-313.

¹² Melzer, Arthur M. "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, June 1996, pp. 344-360.

of Faith “enhance[s] the educative effects of law and political culture, and thus encourage[s] the cultivation of the characteristics essential for citizenship.”¹³ Because such a faith cannot be practiced perfectly, Burns claims it encourages humility and moral vigilance, which are beneficial traits for republican citizenship, though she notes it ultimately lacks the patriotism required of good citizens. These readings interpret the Vicar as expressing Rousseau’s commitments about natural religion and its political role.

A second set of scholars approaches the Profession of Faith more skeptically. Beiner argues that Rousseau’s civil religion is deliberately unstable, “a bit like the Cheshire Cat... the longer one stares at it, the more it evaporates into thin air.”¹⁴ On this account, Rousseau’s reconstruction of Christianity is less a solution than a demonstration of the intrinsic difficulty of reconciling universal moral religion with political loyalty. Scott similarly emphasizes the discontinuity between the Profession of Faith and Rousseau’s political writings. He argues that the Vicar’s teaching is addressed to a distinct audience and illustrates Rousseau offering different teachings depending on pedagogical and political context.¹⁵ For Beiner and Scott, the Vicar is not Rousseau’s straightforward “mouthpiece,” but represents a perspective that Rousseau stages for a particular purpose. Instead of professing an encompassing morality that takes political purposes into consideration, *Emile* is focused on “making a man,” and the faith professed by the Vicar emphasizes a morality for that purpose.

Consistent with the approaches of Beiner and Scott, by examining Jesus directly, I aim to find an explanation for the Vicar’s praise of Jesus in the Profession of Faith that can coexist with

¹³ Burns, Kimberly. “The political possibilities of the faith of the Savoyard Vicar” in *The Rousseauian Mind*. Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly, Routledge, 2019, p. 377.

¹⁴ Beiner, Ronald. “Rousseau’s place in the civil-religion tradition” in *The Rousseauian Mind*. Edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly, Routledge, 2019, p. 378.

¹⁵ Scott, John T. *Rousseau’s God: theology, religion, and the natural goodness of man*. University of Chicago Press, 2023, p. 133.

the harsh critique of Jesus's teachings in *TSC*. Although it may be that these tensions map on well to his fluctuations in treatment towards Christianity generally, there is a lack of literature focused on a specific analysis of Jesus as a figure across Rousseau's work. I argue that across Rousseau's works, the figure of Jesus is the clearest illustration of the tension between moral universalism and the particularistic obligations of civic life.

Universal Morality vs. Particular Civic Morality

Rousseau identifies universal morality as a natural moral sentiment grounded in human nature as the "the religion of man."¹⁶ This development is grounded in conscience, natural pity, and an internal sense of right and wrong accessible to all people. In *Emile*, the Vicar insists that conscience is "the divine instinct" that guides moral judgment; it "persists in following the order of nature against all the laws of men," and consistently treats this inward consultation and orientation as the basis of virtue.¹⁷

Civic morality is concerned with the formation of the citizen and is referred to as the "religion of the citizen."¹⁸ It depends on sentiments that bind individuals to a particular political community, such as patriotism and the willingness to defend the common good. In *TSC*, Rousseau states that a polity is "a sum of forces" which "can only arise from the cooperation of man" that "merely unite and direct" their forces."¹⁹ The civic feelings required to sustain this community are tied to a specific people, history, and set of laws. For Rousseau, these two forms of moral development do not coincide; as he famously writes: "one must choose between making a man or

¹⁶ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 263-272.

¹⁷ *Emile*, p. 267.

¹⁸ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 263-272.

¹⁹ *TSC*, II.6, p. 172.

a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time.”²⁰ Universal morality directs individuals beyond any specific political community, while civic morality binds them to a particular one.

Rousseau argues that the Christianity is “a wholly spiritual religion, exclusively concerned with the things of Heaven: the Christian’s fatherland is not of this world. He does his duty, it is true, but he does it with profound indifference with regard to the success or failure of his efforts” and turns believers away from civic life.²¹ Because of this, universal moral excellence becomes a source of civic weakness.

Rousseau’s Understanding of Christianity

At various points across Rousseau’s writings, there exists a hesitancy towards the supernatural foundations of Christianity. In the Profession of Faith, the Vicar explicitly denies the validity of miracles and revelation, insisting that “the testimony of men is at bottom only of my own reason and adds nothing to the natural means God gave me of knowing the truth,” arguing that the order of nature provides firmer grounds than any purported supernatural event.²² The Vicar similarly dismisses doctrinal mysteries, such as the resurrection, as incompatible with reason and unnecessary for moral life: “The God I worship is not a God of shadows. He did not endow me with an understanding to forbid me to use it. To tell me to subject my reason is to insult its Author.”²³ What remains after these conclusions of the Vicar is a “natural religion” grounded in conscience, an inward testimony, and a universal moral sentiment accessible to all.

Rousseau’s critique of institutional Christianity in *TSC* pushes the Vicar’s claims in a different direction. There, Rousseau describes Catholicism as a “religion of the priest”

²⁰ *Emile*, p. 39.

²¹ *TSC*, IV.8, p. 269.

²² *Emile*, p. 297.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

characterized by superstition, hierarchical authority, and divided allegiance.²⁴ Christianity itself, as it has been historically practiced, splits “the two heads of the eagle” and causes citizens to split their loyalty between church and state, which will always end up in obedience to the ecclesiastical authority over obedience to civil law.²⁵ For Rousseau, this makes Christianity incompatible with political liberty and destructive to republican unity.

When Rousseau speaks of “religion of man” he also speaks of “religion of the Gospel” which he identifies as a “saintly, sublime, genuine religion, men – children of the same god – all recognize one another as brothers and the society that unites them does not dissolve even at death.”²⁶ Gospel morality, as Rousseau understands it, emphasizes humility, benevolence, and a detachment from worldly affairs. These are the qualities Rousseau attributes to Jesus, and they are also the qualities that make Jesus, in the Vicar’s eyes, the model of perfect virtue, but also undermine the sentiments necessary for political association. A morality oriented toward universal brotherhood cannot sustain the necessary partiality needed for an enduring and secure political community, such as civic pride, which is required for political stability and civic duties.

Jesus is framed as an exemplar of a universal moral religion which is inward, natural, and accessible to all. This allows Rousseau to handle Jesus as a case study for how universal morality translates into political life. When the focus is individual moral education (*Emile*), Jesus appears as the ideal. When the focus is political cohesion (*TSC*), the same universalism becomes a threat to civic unity. With this established, turning to how Jesus is explicitly discussed in *Emile* allows for a testing of whether this treatment is congruent with Rousseau’s treatment of Christianity generally.

²⁴ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 263-272.

²⁵ *TSC*, IV.4, pp. 266.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

Jesus in *Emile*

In *Emile*, the discussion of Jesus as a moral exemplar appears in the Savoyard Vicar's Profession of Faith, a section embedded in Book IV of an educational text concerned with forming a natural and morally autonomous individual. In Aruthur Melzer's 1996 article "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity," he illustrates the ideological continuity between Rousseau's attacks on the Enlightenment and his attempt to reconstruct Christianity in a way that effectively accomplishes the broader project of *Emile*, being accomplishing unity of the soul. Melzer argues that Rousseau develops a "religion of sincerity" which replaces an emphasis on affirming and supporting outward religious dogmas with one that instead focuses on "'inner sentiment' or on 'sincerity' broadly construed: on what, at the bottom of our hearts, we really do believe, regardless of foundations."²⁷ This emphasis on inner feeling and sincerity is what Melzer illustrates as Rousseau's successful attempt to combine individualism and freedom while maintaining a grounding in religion. In the Profession of Faith, the context in which Jesus is discussed shapes the way Jesus is illustrated. The Vicar's discussion of Jesus is consistent throughout the section. The Vicar is constructing a form of belief that can be justified to an individual using only reason, conscience, and experience and his focus is not attempting to establish a theological system or defend a particular religious tradition. Here, Jesus is described as a moral exemplar whose authority rests on the intelligibility and purity of his virtue.

The Vicar begins by rejecting the authority of tradition, testimony, and miracles as sufficient grounds for belief. As he explains, "the testimony of men is at bottom only that of my own reason and adds nothing to the natural means God gave me of knowing the truth."²⁸ This claim restructures the basis of his religion. If all external testimony must be filtered through

²⁷ Melzer p. 352

²⁸ *Emile*, p. 297.

individual reason, then religious truth cannot depend on historical transmission, institutional authority, or supernatural validation. It must instead be simple, intuitive, approachable, and easily recognizable to the individual as true, meaning it can be explained to man through man's reason.

This standard has direct implications for how Jesus is discussed later in the Vicar's profession. The Vicar does not defend Jesus through miracles, divine revelation, or doctrinal authority; rather, he casts doubt on those foundations, and emphasizes the problems of relying on a secondhand testimony for divine truth: "So many men between God and me!"²⁹ Instead of grounding Jesus's authority in revelation, the Vicar shifts the focus to the character and coherence of Jesus's moral teaching. He is insistent that true religion must be "clear, luminous, and striking by [its] obviousness."³⁰ Any religion that depends on "mysteries and contradictions" invites suspicion because it undermines human reason, which is a faculty that God has given humans to discern truth. He states, "The God I worship is not a god of shadows," and thus rejects any form of belief that requires the submission of understanding or abandonment of reason.³¹ This emphasis on clarity and intelligibility establishes the criteria by which Jesus will be evaluated. He is praised as a moral exemplar and of divine understanding because his teachings can withstand rational scrutiny and resonate with human conscience, not because he is miraculous.

Within this context, Jesus emerges as a compelling figure and a model for morality. The Vicar says this outright when he claims that Plato's depiction of the "imaginary just man, covered with all the opprobrium of crime and worthy of all the rewards of virtue" is a description of "Jesus Christ feature for feature."³² Further, the Vicar compares Socrates and Jesus by claiming that "If the life and death of Socrates are those of a wise man, the life and death of Jesus are those of a

²⁹ Ibid, p. 278.

³⁰ *Emile*, p. 300.

³¹ Ibid., p. 300.

³² Ibid., p. 300.

god.”³³ At first glance, this appears to affirm Jesus’s divinity. Yet the surrounding passage complicates that interpretation and points instead to the Vicar making a judgment about the quality and origin of Jesus’s moral life. To the Vicar, Socrates articulates principles that already existed within Greek society. Although his virtue is admirable, it is not unprecedented. By contrast, Jesus appears to introduce a form of morality that is radically pure, universal, and detached from the corrupt social context in which it emerges. This morality arises “from the womb of the most furious fanaticism,” making its existence all the more striking to the Vicar.³⁴

With this contrast, we can see how the Vicar elevates Jesus as a moral figure while also detaching him from any particular tradition. Jesus is not the product of his society, or the founder of an institution; he is instead presented as a kind of moral anomaly, whose teachings transcend the historical and cultural conditions in which they appear. This reinforces his status as a universal exemplar. His morality is not tied to a specific people, law, or political order, but is instead accessible to all individuals through conscience. This can be seen through the ways in which the Vicar carefully avoids fully endorsing the theological claims associated with Jesus, thereby separating the teachings from the doctrine. Immediately after praising him, the Vicar acknowledges that the Gospel contains “unbelievable things... repugnant to reason.”³⁵ Rather than resolving these contradictions, he adopts a position of restraint: one must “respect in silence what one can neither reject nor understand.” This response is significant because it allows him to preserve the moral authority of Jesus while withholding judgment on the supernatural elements of Christianity.

³³ Ibid., p. 307.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 307.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 307-308.

This separation between moral teaching and theological doctrine is central to Rousseau's project as seen in other parts of his works which will be explored later, namely TSC and the *Letters Written from the Mountain*. The parallel here is in how the Vicar identifies Jesus's value, which lies not in the truth of miracles or the authority of revelation, but in the example he provides of a life governed by perfect moral clarity and sincerity. By sidelining the elements of Christianity that cannot be justified by reason, the Vicar effectively reconstructs Jesus as the ideal representative of what the Vicar calls "natural religion" and focuses entirely on the teachings of Jesus rather than the institutional dogmas that followed him.

This reconstructed Jesus is defined by several key features: internal morality, universal morality, and a detachment from political life. First, his morality is internal meaning it is grounded in conscience rather than external law or authority. The Vicar emphasizes that moral judgment must come from within, guided by what he calls the "divine instinct" of conscience.³⁶ Jesus exemplifies this inward orientation, acting not out of obedience to institutions but out of a direct alignment with moral truth.

Second, his morality is universal, meaning that unlike with civil religions, which bind individuals to a particular community, the morality associated with Jesus applies equally to all human beings. This universality is part of what makes his virtue appear so pure. It is not shaped by local customs, political needs, or collective identities, and reflects a concern for humanity as a whole.

Third, Jesus's morality is detached from political life. Nowhere in the Vicar's account does Jesus function as a legislator, a founder of a polity, or a source of civic obligation. His teachings

³⁶ Ibid.

focus entirely on the moral development of the individual and do not aim to organize a community or sustain a political order.

This detachment is what makes Jesus the ideal model for the Vicar's purposes of constructing a natural religion. As mentioned earlier, the goal of *Emile* is to form a "man," not a citizen. Rousseau explicitly structures the education of Emile to avoid premature exposure to social and political institutions, allowing Emile's moral faculties to develop independently. With this intention in mind, a figure like Jesus whose morality is inward, universal, and independent of external authority provides the perfect example of what a fully developed human being might look like.

Yet this construction also has important implications. By presenting Jesus as a purely moral figure, detached from institutions and politics, there are implicit limits to the scope of his applicability. Jesus can serve as the model for individual moral development, but his example offers little guidance for the formation of a political community. His universalism, which directs concern toward all humanity, does not generate the particular attachments required for collective life.

Neither Rousseau nor the Vicar in *Emile* address the political limitations of Jesus, although it may be intuitive based upon how Jesus is depicted. This tension is explored in *TSC* however, where the very qualities that make Jesus admirable, such as his independence from tradition, his indifference to social distinctions, his focus on inward virtue, also distance him from the kinds of commitments that bind individuals to a political body. In this sense, the presentation of Jesus in *Emile* is both elevating and isolating. He is raised to the status of the highest moral exemplar, but only by being removed from the domain of civic life altogether.

Jesus in *The Social Contract*

In Book IV of *TSC*, the second to last chapter, and the last substantial chapter of the entire social contract, is dedicated to civil religion. This chapter encompasses nearly the entirety of substance regarding religion in *TSC*. As it is the final substantial chapter of the work, this positioning signals the importance Rousseau assigns to religion as a political problem. This positioning has been noticed and emphasized by previous scholars.³⁷ In this chapter, Rousseau is not concerned with the formation of individual conscience or morality as he is in *Emile*, but rather the conditions that are necessary for maintaining political unity. For this reason, Jesus is illustrated as the source of a destabilizing and dangerous religion that threatens the survival of the state.

Rousseau begins this chapter situating the history of religion within the history of political development, stating that: “Men at first had no other kings than the gods, nor any other government than a theocratic one.”³⁸ In early societies religion and politics were unified. Since each political community had its own gods, religion and political boundaries reinforced one another since worship, law, and civic identity were one in the same. However, this unity came at a cost. With God “placed at the head of each political society, it followed that there were as many gods as peoples” and these differences in political societies led to polytheism, but worst of all according to Rousseau, “theological and civil intolerance, which are naturally the same thing.”³⁹ During these times political wars and theological wars were one in the same, since each state had no separation between gods and laws.⁴⁰ As Rousseau notes, the multiplication of gods across societies created intolerance, wars between states were also religious wars, and although religion strengthened internal cohesion within a state it also intensified external conflict between states.

³⁷ See Scott and Beiner.

³⁸ *TSC*, IV.8 p. 263.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

In this context, Rousseau sees the emergence of Christianity and the teachings of Jesus Christ serve as a fundamental point of rupture. He states: “it was under these circumstances that Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom on earth, which, by separating the theological system from the political system, made it so that the state ceased to be a unity, and caused the intestine quarrels which have never ceased to convulse Christian peoples.”⁴¹ Here, Jesus is the origin of a structural division between spiritual and political authority and his teachings led to the creation of a religion that is not tied to a particular political body, unlike earlier civic religions. Since Christianity did not reinforce the boundaries of the state, it created a form of allegiance that exists independently of political structures, thus creating political fragmentation. By separating religion from the state, Jesus created a divided loyalty between God and the state. Rousseau sees this division as inherently destabilizing and impossible to reconcile. This sentiment is repeated by Rousseau in *Emile* and *Letters Written from the Mountain*, where he identifies Christianity as a “universal religion.”

This concern is further clarified through Rousseau’s discussion of Thomas Hobbes, whom Rousseau credits as the only Christian philosopher “who clearly saw the disease and the remedy, who dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle and the complete return to political unity,” meaning the reunification of religious and political authority.⁴² However, Rousseau rejects this solution proposed by Hobbes by emphasizing the impossibility of Christianity fitting into this structure. To Rousseau, the problem with Hobbes’ solution is that “the domineering spirit of Christianity was incompatible with his system and that the interest of the priest would always be stronger than that of the state.”⁴³ The “domineering spirit” of Christianity means that Christian

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 265.

⁴² Ibid., p. 266.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 266.

religious authority will always compete with political authority, and of the two will always weigh more heavily since salvation is at stake. The issue here is in the internal logic of Christianity as a religion, but not the complete impossibility of a civil religion.

As mentioned earlier, in the chapter “On Civil Religion,” Rousseau distinguishes between the “religion of man, (also referred to as “the religion of the Gospel,” or Christianity)⁴⁴ the religion of the citizen and the religion of the priest.⁴⁵ When discussing the religion of the priest, or Roman Catholicism, Rousseau claims that “everything that destroys social unity is worthless. All institutions that put man in contradiction with himself are worthless,” and because of this, quickly disregards it.⁴⁶ This leaves the religion of man and the religion of the citizen. The religion of man is characterized by inwardness and universality, and is “without temples, without altars, without rites, limited to the purely internal form of worship of the supreme God and to the eternal duties of morality.”⁴⁷ Grounded in simplicity and conscience rather than institutions, it closely resembles the account given by the Savoyard Vicar in *Emile*. The religion of the citizen is nearly opposite. Rather than an internal worship and eternal morality, it is “inscribed in a single country... it has its dogmas, its rites, its exterior form of worship prescribed by the laws.”⁴⁸ The moral duties of this religion are isolated to its single nation, where outside of it, everything is “infidel, alien, barbarous” and it “does not extend the duties and the rights of man any farther than its altars.”⁴⁹

It is important to emphasize that Rousseau’s descriptions of these religions shift when situated in the political context of *TSC*. While the religion of man is morally admirable, it is

⁴⁴ Rousseau states that the “religion of man” can also be referred to as Christianity: “the religion of man, or Christianity, not that of today but that of the Gospel, which is altogether different” (Ibid., p. 268).

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 267.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 267.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 267.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 267.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 267.

politically insufficient because it lacks any particular relation to a given political community. It binds individuals to humanity rather than fellow citizens. Rousseau clearly addresses this point of concern when he identifies the religion of man as gospel Christianity, meaning not the practice of Christianity known during his time but the teachings of the Gospel and those from Jesus himself. He describes these teachings as a “saintly, sublime, genuine religion” from and for the same god, and “all recognize one another as brothers and the society that unites them does not dissolve even at death.”⁵⁰ This universal brotherhood, while morally appealing, undermines the partial attachments required for political life. Meanwhile, the religion of the citizen is good in that it reunites the “two heads of the eagle” noted earlier, and “it makes the fatherland the object of the citizens’ worship, it teaches them that to serve them that to serve the state is to serve the tutelary god.”⁵¹ But these social unity and moral exclusion breeds intolerance, and “breaths only murder and massacre” leading to a “natural state of war with all others.”⁵²

The figure of Jesus is central in these discussions, even when not named directly. The religion of the Gospel is inseparable from Rousseau’s understanding of Jesus’s teaching. As in *Emile*, Jesus represents a morality grounded in inward sincerity, humility, and universal benevolence. In *TSC* these same qualities take on a different significance. Rousseau argues that such a religion cannot sustain the unity required for collective action, but even more concerning, it is actually destructive of a political state due to its universal morality and eternal brotherhood. Gospel Christianity produces individuals whose moral orientation is misaligned with political necessity. Rousseau describes the Christian as someone who fulfills his duties but does so with “profound indifference” to their outcomes. The Christian’s homeland lies beyond the political

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 268.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 267-268.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 267-268.

world, which weakens his attachment to any particular state. And although this indifference is not a moral failure, it is a consequence of a morality that extends equally to all human beings and does lead to political failure.

Since successful political communities require cohesion and shared identity, Christianity as it is practiced and as Rousseau understands it, divides loyalties and threatens social unity by directing individuals toward a universal moral community that transcends political boundaries. Unlike the religion of man or the Gospel, the religion of the citizen is explicitly particularistic. It binds individuals to a specific political community and to serve the state is to serve the divine, and this type of religion successfully produces civic attachment, but does by relying on “error and falsehood” and often leads to intolerance.

The religion of the citizen supports political unity but distorts morality. The religion of the Gospel preserves morality but undermines political unity. Jesus, as the founder of the latter, becomes the clearest embodiment of this tension. He is the source of a moral vision that is universally binding yet politically destabilizing. This duality reveals the logic of Rousseau’s treatment of Jesus across his works. In *Emile*, where the goal is to form a morally autonomous individual, Jesus appears as the ideal model of human virtue. His universalism is an asset, enabling the development of a conscience that is independent of social and institutional pressures. In *TSC*, however, where the goal is to sustain a political community, the same universalism becomes a liability. Jesus serves as an example of the limits of moral universalism within political life.

Rousseau does not resolve this tension. Instead, he uses Jesus to expose it. The figure of Christ shows how the incompatibility between a morality extends to all humanity and a politics that depends on particular attachments. In this sense, Jesus is not only a religious figure within Rousseau’s thought, but a conceptual tool where Rousseau articulates one of the central problems

of his political theory: the difficulty of reconciling the formation of “man” with the demands of citizenship.

Letters Written from the Mountain

In *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau returns to the question of religion and its political meaning in the aftermath of his exile from Geneva for his works *Emile* and *TSC*. Written as a defense against political and ecclesiastical authorities who burned his works, Rousseau provides a defense of his works as well as a reflective articulation of his views on Christianity, civic religion, and, importantly for this project, Jesus himself. While *Letters Written from the Mountain* includes twelve letters, the first four are especially important for understanding Rousseau’s treatment of Jesus. In these letters, Rousseau is not only responding to his condemnation but also distinguishing between different ways of speaking about Christianity. He separates Christianity as a doctrinal system from it as a political institution, and as a moral teaching. This allows him to refine, and in some ways complicate, the distinction already present in *Emile* between the Savoyard Vicar’s account of natural religion and Rousseau’s own position when writing in his own name. *Letters Written from the Mountain* stands in a unique place in Rousseau’s treatment of Jesus because it is the only text in which he writes in his own name while defending himself against political and religious condemnation. Unlike *Emile*, where the Savoyard Vicar mediates the discussion of religion and Rousseau is the editor, or *TSC*, where religion is treated strictly in relation to political order, the *Letters Written from the Mountain* is where Rousseau clarifies what he believes about Christianity and Jesus. In doing so, the text refines the tensions that appear across his works.

One of Rousseau's most important moves in the *Letters Written from the Mountain* is to distinguish between the spirit of Jesus and the historical development of Christianity. He defines Christianity in its original form as a universal religion: "Christianity... is in its principle a universal Religion, which has nothing exclusive in it... [its] divine Author came to... unite the whole human race in a people of brothers."⁵³ Previously in *TSC*, the moral teachings of Jesus and the historical development of Christianity are one in the same: "it was under these circumstances that Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom on earth, which, by separating the theological system from the political system, made it so that the state ceased to be a unity, and caused the intestine quarrels which have never ceased to convulse Christian peoples."⁵⁴ This way of situating Jesus and Christianity closely aligns with the portrayal of Jesus in *Emile*. Here again in *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Jesus is associated with universal moral unity, not with doctrine, hierarchy, or political structure. His teaching dissolves boundaries rather than reinforcing them. Rousseau immediately contrasts this original form with what Christianity becomes when incorporated into political life. Those who attempt to transform it into a national religion, he argues, "deviated from the spirit of Jesus Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world," and in doing so "made it the weapon of tyrants and the instrument of persecutors."⁵⁵

This distinction is crucial. In *TSC*, Rousseau appears to attribute political instability directly to Christianity itself, claiming that Jesus's establishment of a "spiritual kingdom" divided political unity. In *Letters Written from the Mountain* Rousseau shifts the source of the problem. The issue is no longer Jesus's teaching as such, but the misuse and politicization of that teaching by later actors. This allows Rousseau to preserve Jesus as a morally pure figure while still

⁵³ *Letters Written from the Mountain*, First Letter, p. 147.

⁵⁴ *TSC*, IV.8 p. 265.

⁵⁵ *Letters Written from the Mountain*, First Letter, p. 147.

criticizing Christianity's historical effects. Jesus is not responsible for the corruption of religion; rather, his message has been distorted by those who attempted to adapt it to political purposes. This allows Rousseau to move closer to the Vicar's tone in *Emile*, where Jesus is detached from institutional Christianity and presented as a figure of pure moral clarity.

At the same time, *Letters Written from the Mountain* does not abandon the critique developed in *TSC* since Rousseau explicitly acknowledges again that the universalism associated with Jesus has political consequences. He states that Christianity, "making men just, moderate, and friends of peace, is very favorable to the general society. But it weakens the force of the political spring... inspiring humanity rather than patriotism, and tending to fashion men rather than Citizens" (p. 148). Just as discussed in *TSC*, the morality associated with Jesus is not flawed since in the sense that it is socially beneficial at the level of humanity as a whole. Yet this same universality undermines the particular attachments required for political life. A religion that teaches individuals to see all people as brothers cannot easily sustain the partiality necessary for citizenship.

What changes in the *Letters Written from the Mountain* is the source of the issue, but the issue itself remains. In *TSC*, this incompatibility leads Rousseau to reject Christianity as a viable foundation for political order. In *Letters Written from the Mountain*, however, he adopts a more nuanced position. Christianity is not condemned outright; instead, it is repositioned as something that must remain separate from the political sphere. This is also reflected in his treatment of Jesus. In *TSC*, Jesus is responsible for the flawed institutionalization of Christianity, whereas in *Letters Written from the Mountain*, it is those who missed his message. This is noticeable in Rousseau's proposed solution: "What ought a wise Legislator to do...? ... establish a purely civil Religion... or... leave Christianity as it is in its genuine spirit: free... with no other obligation than that of

conscience.”⁵⁶ This is where Rousseau resolves the tension by institutional separation. Christianity, in its true form, belongs to the domain of individual conscience and moral development. Politics need a different kind of religion; a civil religion tailored to the needs of the state. This context allows Rousseau to affirm the moral value of Jesus’s teaching and its political limitations without collapsing one into the other.

The *Letters Written from the Mountain* also clarify the relationship between Rousseau and the Savoyard Vicar by clarifying Rousseau’s position on miracles. Whereas the Vicar appears to reject miracles outright, Rousseau insists that he takes a less rigid stance by not rejecting miracles, but also not affirming them: “There is a big difference between denying something and not affirming it... I am so undecided on this point...”⁵⁷ This distinction does more than allow Rousseau to sidestep harsher criticism from the political and ecclesiastical figures who have condemned him and allows him to emphasize a point of the Vicar regarding miracles being unnecessary for Jesus’s divinity. This affects how Jesus is understood, since Rousseau argues that even if miracles occurred, they are not essential to Jesus’s authority: “if he performed miracles... he did not do so as a sign of his mission.”⁵⁸ He further states, “Take the miracles out of the Gospel and the whole world will be at the feet of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ This claim reinforces the same move made by the Vicar in *Emile*: Jesus’s authority is grounded not in supernatural validation, but in the force of his moral teaching. By arguing that Christianity does not depend on miracles, Rousseau further detaches Jesus from the doctrinal and evidentiary disputes that divide religious communities.

Even though Rousseau is affirming a message of the Vicar, Rousseau’s refusal to outright deny miracles marks a divergence. Writing in his own name, he adopts a more politically cautious

⁵⁶ *Letters Written from the Mountain*, First Letter, p. 148.

⁵⁷ *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Third Letter, p. 181.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172

position by avoiding definitive claims that might further alienate his audience from his message. Since *Letters Written from the Mountain* themselves are a defense, his clarification of this difference between himself and the Vicar allow his message regarding the divinity of Jesus to shine separate from doctrinal stances that take away from his argument. This suggests that the differences between Rousseau and the Vicar are contextual and philosophical. The Vicar speaks within an educational framework aimed at shaping an individual; Rousseau, in *Letters Written from the Mountain*, speaks defensively within a charged political environment.

These elements show that *Letters Written from the Mountain* occupies a middle position between *Emile* and *TSC*. Like *Emile*, it preserves Jesus as a figure of universal moral purity, detached from institutional corruption and grounded in conscience. Like *TSC*, it acknowledges that this universalism is politically problematic. What distinguishes *Letters Written from the Mountain* is the way Rousseau reassigns the tension. Rather than presenting Jesus as either an ideal or a threat, he situates him outside the political domain altogether. Jesus's moral teachings are inevitably distorted when they are used for the purposes of organizing a state. This is captured in Rousseau's insistence that: "The doctrine of the Gospel has only one aim: it is to call and save all men... Their freedom, their well-being here below has no part in it."⁶⁰ Jesus's mission is separated from political concerns, and the Gospel addresses salvation, not governance; humanity, not citizenship. To mix these domains is what Rousseau believes is the true impiety and political error at hand, because it "sullies [religion's] sanctity with human interests." The *Letters Written from the Mountain* clarifies the underlying structure of Rousseau's thought. Jesus consistently represents a universal moral ideal, but one that cannot be directly translated into political life. The tension observed between *Emile* and *TSC* is contextualized and reframed as a problem of domain:

⁶⁰ *Letters Written from the Mountain*, First Letter, p. 149.

what is true and valuable for the individual is not necessarily suitable for the state. *Letters Written from the Mountain* offers an explanation for the tension between the treatment of Jesus across *Emile* and *TSC*.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the seemingly contradictory ways Rousseau uses the figure of Jesus throughout his works. *Emile* offers an idealized description of Jesus while *TSC* takes a polemic stance on his teachings and the effects of his message on political communities. *Letters Written from the Mountain* serves as a bridge between *Emile* and *TSC* by emphasizing the political concerns of Jesus serving as a moral ideal and clarifying the differences between Jesus as a figure and the historical development of Jesus's teachings in a political context. The vast differences in the aims of these texts explains Rousseau's fluctuating stances and lack of specificity regarding Jesus and doctrine in some areas due to the focus and scope of the work. Through analyzing these variances across these texts, I hope to have shown how these variances parallel with the scope of each text.

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