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**Protestantism and Progress in the Year XII:  
Charles Villers' Essay on the Spirit and Influence  
of Luther's Reformation (1804)**

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## PROTESTANTISM AND PROGRESS IN THE YEAR XII: CHARLES VILLERS'S ESSAY ON THE SPIRIT AND INFLUENCE OF LUTHER'S REFORMATION (1804)\*

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*This article examines Charles Villers's Essay on the Spirit and Influence of Luther's Reformation (1804) in its intellectual and historical context. Exiled from France after 1792, Villers intervened in important French and German debates about the relationship of religion, history, and philosophy. The article shows how he took up a German Protestant discussion on the meaning of the Reformation that had been underway from the 1770s through the end of the century, including efforts by Kantians to seize the mantle of Protestantism for themselves. Villers's essay capitalized on a broad interest in the question of Protestantism and its meaning for modern freedom around 1800. Revisiting the formation of the narrative of Protestantism and progress reveals that it was not a logical progression from Protestant theology or religion but rather part of a specific ideological and social struggle in the wake of the French Revolution and the collapse of the Old Regime.*

### I. THE REFORMATION AND THE NARRATIVE OF PROGRESS

In 1804 the émigré French Kantian (and former magnetist) Charles Villers responded to a prize essay competition sponsored by the Institut national de France on the question “What has been the influence of Luther's Reformation on the political situation of the different states of Europe, and on the progress of enlightenment?” The Institut, which saw itself as preserving the legacy of the secular Enlightenment, was alarmed at Napoleon's rapprochement with the Catholic Church and the Concordat of 1801. The Institut sought to forestall a precipitous return to Catholicism by reminding the world of the dangers that

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Catholicism had posed to liberty over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> Villers's *Essai sur l'esprit et l'influence de la réformation de Luther* was crowned with the prize; subsequently went through several editions in French, including a fifth edition as late as 1851; and was soon translated into German. It was also translated into English several times, including a translation by James Mill in 1805.<sup>2</sup> In a preface to the German edition of Villers's essay, church historian Heinrich Philipp Konrad Henke declared that "the present question has nowhere before been handled with such breadth, exactness, with the same amount of truth and value."<sup>3</sup> The Leipzig theologian and Upper Consistory president Johann Georg Rosenmüller wrote that the prize contest and Villers's book "without a doubt belong to the most remarkable events of our time. The subject chosen by the Institut was most worthy, and this question had not before been satisfactorily answered."<sup>4</sup>

The rapid success of Villers's *Essai* raises the question of why at that moment—the year XII of the French Revolutionary calendar—did it seem so important to link the Reformation of the sixteenth century to a story of progress? What was at stake in firming up a historical narrative of the Reformation that was also a narrative of the progress of Enlightenment? This question seems particularly relevant given recent historiographical controversies about the role of religion in the Enlightenment. For example, Jonathan Israel has forcefully argued for the centrality of a unitary "radical" materialist Enlightenment originating in

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<sup>1</sup> For the French context, see Martin Staum, *Minerva's Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution* (Montreal and Buffalo, 1996); Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge, 2008); and Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca, 2008). Jainchill puts Villers's essay in the context of French liberalism "after the Terror" and as having been motivated by opposition to Napoleon. For a brief yet insightful account of Villers see James Mitchell Lee, "Charles Villers and German Thought in France, 1797–1804," *Proceedings of the . . . Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 25 (1998), 55–66.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Villers, *Essai sur l'esprit et l'influence de la Réformation de Luther*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1804 (An XII)). Throughout this essay I will usually cite the second edition (which is the most commonly cited and available edition) in the body of the text with page numbers in parentheses. Citations from other editions will be referred to in the notes. From what I can tell, there are no major differences between the first and second editions, with the exception of a few passages. I would like to thank Andrew Jainchill for providing me his notes on the differences between the two. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Villers, *Versuch über den Geist und Einfluß der Reformation Luthers*, trans. Karl Friedrich Cramer, pref. Heinrich Philipp Konrad Henke (Hamburg, 1805), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Villers, *Darstellung der Reformation Luthers, ihres Geistes und ihrer Wirkungen*, trans. from the 2nd French edn by Niklaus Peter Stampeel, with a preface by Johann Georg Rosenmüller (Leipzig, 1819), vi. Rosenmüller's preface is dated Sept. 1804.

Spinozism.<sup>5</sup> He sees the resulting “moderate” Enlightenment—including the religious ones—as defensive maneuvers by those who would defend monarchy and ecclesiastical establishments.<sup>6</sup> However, other recent work on eighteenth-century religion has insisted on a positive role for religion in the Enlightenment and the formation of modern culture. David Sorkin has recently argued that “the Enlightenment was not only compatible with religious belief, but conducive to it,” making possible “new iterations of faith.”<sup>7</sup> Focusing on biblical scholarship, Jonathan Sheehan has argued for the religious roots of Enlightenment practices.<sup>8</sup> J. G. A. Pocock has demonstrated the importance of a Protestant, “Arminian” Enlightenment in the Calvinist societies of northern Europe.<sup>9</sup>

An analysis and contextualization of Villers’s *Essai* underscores the ways in which these concerns about the religious roots of the Enlightenment not only are a concern for latter-day historians, but also were heavily debated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Villers’s physical and intellectual journey from France to Germany, culminating in his prize essay, reveals the ways in which intellectuals in this period came to terms with Europe’s religious past in light of the French Revolution. His emphasis on the role of religion in the Enlightenment was a German import to French intellectual life. His *Essai* also opens up a path into the legacy of eighteenth-century historiography, which, as Pocock and others have argued, was a key Enlightenment field for religious discussion. Villers’s book represents the culmination of several pamphlets and interventions in which his growing dissatisfaction with aspects of the French Enlightenment and with the Revolution was apparent. He was not, and did not claim to be, an original historian. The purpose of his *Essai* was to synthesize a series of arguments about the contribution of the Reformation and Protestantism to contemporary notions of progress and freedom. Indeed, Villers may be described as an accidental historian, coming to history only as a result of the Institut’s prize contest. What remains to be explained is the success of his intervention and what he added to the Enlightenment historiography to which he was so clearly indebted. As I will discuss below, in his historical vision Villers bears comparison

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> John Robertson has made a different case for a unitary Enlightenment, albeit in the realm of political economy. John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, 2008), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, *The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1999).

to such a predecessor as William Robertson (1721–93). But where Villers most strongly differed from Robertson was in his reintroduction of a confessional element into the story of the progress of civilization. Specifically, Villers's *Essai* signals the emergence of a narrative of Protestant cultural supremacy. This neo-confessional aspect was stressed quite explicitly by his translator James Mill. In his preface to Villers's *Essai*, Mill writes that the work should serve as a lesson to Irish Catholics that they “should be converted from a system”—that is to say, from Catholicism—“so much more unfavourable to their progress in reason and virtue, than that embraced by the rest of their fellow subjects.”<sup>10</sup>

The narrative of Protestant supremacy would prove to be one of the more enduring cultural legacies of the nineteenth century. The most prominent claim for the connections between modern freedom and Protestantism was made by Hegel in 1807, but a consideration of Villers's *Essai*, its context, and its reception, indicate that Hegel was only voicing a commonly held view. In his *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1834), Heinrich Heine echoed Hegel in asserting the continuity between “the great religious revolution in Germany represented by Martin Luther” and Kantian philosophy. “This philosophical revolution,” Heine noted, “emerged from the religious one, and . . . is nothing other than the logical conclusion of Protestantism.”<sup>11</sup> Heine voiced an opinion shared by many German intellectuals in the early nineteenth century: that the Reformation marked the origin of modern thought and culture.<sup>12</sup> In a variety of forms, this view maintained its intellectual dominance in German culture until the First World War. After the war, German theologians could no longer claim to be representing the vanguard of civilization, as defeat and revolution shook the foundation of Wilhelmine society and the optimistic *Kulturprotestantismus* that underlay it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Mill, preface to Charles Villers, *An Essay on the Spirit and Influence of the Reformation of Luther*, trans. James Mill (London, 1805), iv–v.

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany, and Other Writings*, ed. Terry Pinkard, trans. Howard Pollack-Milgate (Cambridge, 2007) 10, 42.

<sup>12</sup> This association had other national inflections as well, especially in Victorian England. But the German case was the most pronounced, especially given the ways in which questions of theology and philosophy were often so deeply intertwined in German thought.

<sup>13</sup> The best expression of the Wilhelmine view of the contribution of Protestantism to modern civilization was offered by Ernst Troeltsch. The title of this article alludes the English title of Troeltsch's *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt*, first given as a lecture in 1906. The 1912 English translation by W. Montgomery is *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*. Troeltsch also put his stamp on the term “Neuprotestantismus” to distinguish the theology and ecclesiastical culture beginning in the late eighteenth century from the dominant church-civilization of post-Reformation Calvinism and Lutheranism. His

While the collapse of the narrative of Protestantism and progress can be located chronologically, its origins have so far remained untracked.<sup>14</sup> It is a long and complicated story, but in attempting to explain the success of Villers's *Essai*, I will argue that one of the important moments in the development of the modern concept of the Reformation as a story of progress occurred in the post-Revolutionary years, as Napoleon was asserting his power, but before the empire had assumed its definitive shape. This article will show how Villers took up a specific German Protestant discussion on the meaning of the Reformation that had been underway from the 1770s through the end of the century. Specifically, he borrowed ideas and metaphors from Karl Leonhard Reinhold, whose advocacy for critical philosophy emphasized its moral character, compatibility with religion, and Protestant nature. Villers synthesized a series of debates about the relationship of the Reformation with the Enlightenment and gave the discussion a narrative form. Existing scholarship on Villers has so far looked at him largely in the context of French thought and politics. This study will explore Villers's encounter with German philosophical and religious debates. Revisiting the formation of the narrative of Protestantism and progress in the form of Villers's work reveals that it was not the "logical conclusion of Protestantism" (in Heine's words), but rather part of a specific ideological and social struggle in the wake of the French Revolution and the collapse of the Old Regime.

## II. CHARLES VILLERS: FROM FRANCE TO GERMANY

It was in German exile that Charles Villers was to find satisfactory solutions to what he saw as the limits of the French Enlightenment and the disappointments of the French Revolution. Born in 1765 in Lorraine, his Catholic parents (his father was a minor finance official) sent him from age nine to age fifteen to school with Benedictine monks in Metz.<sup>15</sup> By 1780 he was studying at the artillery

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fullest treatment of the distinction between "old" and "new" Protestantism is in his book *Protestantisches Christentum und Kirche in der Neuzeit*, first published in 1906, but revised and reissued in 1909 and 1922. See Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantisches Christentum und Kirche in der Neuzeit* (1906/1909/1922), ed. Volker Drehsen with Christian Albrecht, *Ernst Troeltsch Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 7 (Berlin, 2004). After the war theologians such as Karl Barth articulated strong critiques both of liberal theology's supposed accommodation to bourgeois culture, and of the notion that Protestant "culture" was the greatest gift of the Reformation to world civilization.

<sup>14</sup> On the "strange alloy of theological hostility with historical dogma from which the concept of the Reformation has been forged," see Constantin Fasolt, "Hegel's Ghost: Europe, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages," *Viator* 39/1 (2008), 350, original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> The biographical summary of the following paragraph closely follows the entry on Villers from the *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie* 39. Reprint of the 1st edn, 1895 (Berlin, 1971),

academy there. He had become a second lieutenant by 1783, eventually moving to Strasbourg and rising to the position of captain and aide-de-camp. While in Strasbourg he came under the influence of the Marquis de Puységur and embraced mesmerism (i.e. animal magnetism). One of the outcomes of his interest in magnetism was his novel, *Le magnétiseur amoureux*,<sup>16</sup> in which Villers put forth heterodox theories of magnetism through the character Valcourt. Villers had long been worried about the dangers of materialism. While we should avoid reading too much into Villers's earliest works, concern with reductive materialism even can be seen, as Louis Wittmer suggests, in Villers's heterodox magnetism. Unlike Mesmer and the other major advocates of animal magnetism who believed in the physical existence of magnetic fluid that could be manipulated by the magnetist, Villers hewed to a smaller heterodox line of magnetism that saw it as a purely moral force.<sup>17</sup> Valcourt (Villers's mouthpiece in the novel) posits a universal mover, "un être pensant," claiming that the universe is animated by this thinking being.<sup>18</sup>

According to Wittmer, the young Villers believed that the world was made up of both matter and spirit, and that this principle left him predisposed to positively receive German ideas and to oppose materialist strains of French thought: "The science of magnetism taught him 'to believe in the power of the soul and its spirituality.'" Moreover, Villers's theory of magnetism held that the power of the magnetist resided in his will and therefore could explain in part his later interest in Kant.<sup>19</sup> Villers's early interest in magnetism should not be written off as youthful dalliance, especially when we consider it in light of his heterodox view of the theory. He leaned away from the occult and extravagant style of Mesmer himself and saw in magnetism a way to convince his contemporaries of the power and reality of spirit. This early work, as well as his later book on Kant, underlines his consistent theory of the power of moral forces and is important for understanding his views on the effects of the Reformation.

Villers's early enthusiasm for the French Revolution had vanished by 1792. He published several pamphlets critical of the Revolutionary government and

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708–14, and more generally Louis Wittmer, *Charles de Villers, 1765–1815: Un intermédiaire entre la France et l'Allemagne et un précurseur de Mme. de Staël* (Paris, 1908), *passim*. Wittmer's book remains the most thorough biographical study, but is especially concerned with the French intellectual context.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Villers, *Le magnétiseur amoureux*, ed. with introduction by François Azouvi (Paris, 1978; first published 1787).

<sup>17</sup> On magnetism see Robert Darnon, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA, 1968); and François Azouvi's lengthy introduction to Charles Villers, *Le magnétiseur amoureux*.

<sup>18</sup> Wittmer, *Charles de Villers*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. Wittmer does not give any citation for the quotation.

National Assembly. His suggestions that moderate monarchy was preferable to impractical liberty soon landed him in danger, and Villers fled to join the ill-fated army of the Prince of Condé. After the defeat of the royalist army he escaped to Germany.<sup>20</sup> With the exception of a few visits back to France, he would remain in exile the rest of his life. In 1796 Villers matriculated at the University of Göttingen and became acquainted with such major German academics and intellectuals as Christoph Gottlob Heyne, Ludwig Timotheus Spittler, and August Ludwig Schlözer (with whose daughter Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer he would have a long personal relationship).<sup>21</sup> Intending to travel to Russia, Villers was sidetracked in Lübeck, where he struck up his relationship with Rodde-Schlözer. During his time in Lübeck, Villers associated with the large émigré community there, as well as with prominent German intellectuals such as the poet Friedrich Klopstock and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, whose revelation of Lessing's supposed Spinozism had set off the pantheism dispute in the mid-1780s. He wrote some seventy contributions for the Hamburg-based *Spectateur du Nord*, one of many émigré publications in Germany. Later, around 1805–6, Villers would try to initiate a *Bibliothèque germanique*, a journal intended to publicize German thought in France, but this project would not come to fruition. Villers long hoped to return to France. He saw it as his task to instruct his French compatriots about the value of German letters and thought, and believed that they would recognize its value and accept both him and the culture he sought to mediate.

In Germany, Villers found a country that was, in the words of Karl Leonhard Reinhold, “among all the European states the most receptive to revolutions of the spirit, and the least receptive to political revolutions.”<sup>22</sup> This, at least, was the image of Germany that appealed to the intellectually ambitious liberal exile. His *Essai* would embrace this idea of spiritual revolution, and he would quote Reinhold directly. Villers's work capitalized on a debate occurring within German Protestantism about the legitimacy of new religious ideas and reforms. These questions were often cast in terms of their continuity with the “spirit” of the original Reformation. For example, in 1782 the historian Ludwig Timotheus Spittler wrote that the last thirty years had witnessed a “revolution in theology,” and that the most recent period in Lutheran church history was among its

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 8–13.

<sup>21</sup> She was the first woman to hold a doctorate of philosophy in Germany. She married the prominent Lübeck patrician and businessman August Rodde, with whom she had three children.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Briefe über die kantische Philosophie* (Leipzig, 1790), 16. “Deutschland ist unter allen übrigen europäischen Staaten am meisten zu Revolutionen des Geistes, am wenigsten zu politischen aufgelegt.”



greatest.<sup>23</sup> “Without a doubt,” continued Spittler, “this theological revolution was given its greatest push by the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*.” This journal (1756–1806), which published hundreds of reviews a year and thereby served as a major organ of the Berlin Enlightenment, fostered a bold willingness to examine new ideas, many of which lay hidden in little-read works, Spittler notes.<sup>24</sup> Many were emboldened to move from orthodoxy to heterodoxy. He continues, “As if seized by a spirit of confusion [*Taumelgeist*]<sup>25</sup>, some theologized and reformed the received system because now reform was as much the spirit of the times as in a previous age the posture was that one should always hold true to the system inherited from one’s fathers.”<sup>26</sup> For Spittler, reforming had become as much a matter of attitude and *zeitgeist* as of conviction. In 1789, Andreas Riem called on the Protestant teachers to improve church teachings, invoking “the spirit of our brave first reformers and all children of the light.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1793, Heinrich Philipp Henke, a frequent contributor to the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* and professor of theology at Helmstedt, went so far as to label the changes in religious thought a “new Reformation” that, unlike its predecessor in the sixteenth century, proceeded “quietly, without disturbance and tumult.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, this Reformation was not a matter for theologians alone, but “on account of the general enthusiasm for reading [*Leselust*] and a contest for popularity . . . spread to all classes of people.”<sup>29</sup> Echoing Henke ten years later, Karl Friedrich Stäudlin noted that “just as the Reformation had its

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<sup>23</sup> Spittler listed the achievements of Johann Salomo Semler (the father of historical–critical biblical theology), as well as the work of Wilhelm Abraham Teller and Johann Joachim Spalding (the later two usually considered neologs). Ludwig Timotheus Spittler, *Grundriß der Geschichte der christlichen Kirche* (Göttingen, 1782), 465–6.

<sup>24</sup> On the role of Nicolai and the *ADB* see Christian Nottmeier, “Aufgeklärter Protestantismus: Friedrich Nicolai, die Neologie und das theologische Profil der *Allgemeinen Deutschen Bibliothek*,” in Rainer Falk and Alexander Košenina, eds., *Friedrich Nicolai und die Berliner Aufklärung* (Hannover, 2008), 227–49.

<sup>25</sup> See Isaiah 19:14: spirit of perverseness, confusion.

<sup>26</sup> In 1790, Johann Georg Rosenmüller published a small book answering the question “Why are we called Protestants?,” noting that such a work had become necessary in recent times on account of confusion about the true nature of the confession. See Johann Georg Rosenmüller, *Beantwortung der Frage: Warum nennen wir uns Protestanten?* (Leipzig, 1790).

<sup>27</sup> Andreas Riem, *Das reinere Christenthum, oder die Religion der Kinder des Lichts*, 4 parts (Berlin, 1789–95), 1: 73.

<sup>28</sup> The occasion for this comment, however, was his condemnation of the Prussian Religion Edict, which Henke saw as putting a stop to this Reformation. Heinrich Philipp Conrad Henke, *Beurtheilung aller Schriften welche durch das Königlich Preußische Religionsedikt und durch andre damit zusammenhängende Religionsverfügungen veranlaßt sind* (Kiel, 1793); facsimile reprint (Königstein/Ts., 1978), 37.

<sup>29</sup> Henke, *Beurtheilung*, 36.

beginning among the [Germans], so too began in the eighteenth century a new revolution in religious knowledge and in theology, without noise, violence and war.”<sup>30</sup> Stäudlin further noted that

many Protestants began to change the sense of the very word by which they identified themselves. For them, Protestantism did not mean the principle that Scripture should be recognized as the sole source and norm for faith . . . but that in matters of religion each was free and independent to decide for himself, and human reason should itself be recognized as having divine status.<sup>31</sup>

These comments, from Spittler in the 1780s to Stäudlin in 1804, reflect the intellectual atmosphere of German Protestantism that Villers absorbed in Germany. This is a large story and deserves an extensive treatment on its own account. The point here, however, is that German Protestantism was undergoing profound and rapid changes and, more importantly, there was an intense awareness that the very meaning of the term “Protestantism” was open to reinterpretation. The first of several broad efforts to capture the mantle of Protestantism occurred in the 1770s as neologs (“new men” or “new teachers,” as they were disparagingly called by conservatives) waged a vigorous theological campaign over the nature and authority of doctrine, the status of the clergy, freedom of conscience, and the interpretation of the Bible.<sup>32</sup> While the neologs fought against orthodox Lutheran theology in the public sphere as well as in universities and seminaries, their success was heavily dependent on the support of their respective states. The strongest center was in Berlin, as Frederick the Great appointed many neologs to the *Oberkonsistorium*, giving neology a firm foothold in German Protestantism (at least until the appointment of Johann Christoph Woellner as minister for religion and education after Frederick’s death in 1786).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Karl Friedrich Stäudlin, *Kirchliche Geographie und Statistik*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1804), 2: 324.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 321–2.

<sup>32</sup> The classic account of the neologs is Karl Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit* (Halle, 1929). A more recent overview is Albrecht Beutel, *Kirchengeschichte im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Göttingen, 2009). On the implications of these intellectual controversies for careers and the functioning of churches, schools, and universities see Anthony La Vopa, *Grace, Talent, and Merit: Poor Students, Clerical Careers, and Professional Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, 1988). The term “neology” is more useful in indicating an attitude and direction in liberal theology than a concrete set of intellectual positions, given the diversity of the authors it represented.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Themel, “Die Mitglieder und die Leitung des Berliner Konsistoriums vom Regierungsantritt des Kurfürsten Johann Sigismund 1608 bis zur Aufhebung des königlichen preussischen Oberkonsistoriums 1809,” *Jahrbuch für Berlin-Brandenburgische Kirchengeschichte* 41 (1966), 52–111; Günter Birtsch, “The Christian as Subject: The Worldly Mind of Prussian Protestant Theologians in the Late Enlightenment Period,” in Eckhart

A second phase in the quest to claim the mantle of Protestantism may be said to begin with the rise of Kantian philosophy. From the middle of the 1780s, philosophers inspired by Kant's critical philosophy began to formulate new visions of the primacy of philosophy. Karl Leonhard Reinhold, and Fichte soon after, asserted that their projects were a continuation of Protestantism.<sup>34</sup> Reinhold's "Letters on the Kantian Philosophy" (1786–7) were important for awakening a broad interest in Kant's philosophy, which had languished in the five years after the publication of the first *Critique* (1781).<sup>35</sup> Among Reinhold's more important arguments in the first set of letters was that Jesus Christ had restored the union between religion and morality after a long separation.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, according to Reinhold, the history of Christianity showed that many became absorbed in religion and devotion and forgot about morality. Matters were only set right by the Reformation:

As a result of the Reformation, reason has regained the free use of its powers—at least in one half of the Christian world—and especially in recent times has recovered quite markedly from the natural consequences of its earlier captivity. Yet however much reason may have accomplished since the Reformation in terms of restoring the unity between religion and morality, the success of its efforts until now has indisputably been more a preparation for this grand undertaking than a completion of it.<sup>37</sup>

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Hellmuth, ed., *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), 309–26.

<sup>34</sup> Fichte's rise to prominence in Jena in the 1790s lent further vigor to German Idealism. Fichte's sudden downfall in the wake of the Atheism Conflict of 1798–9 revealed many forceful crosscurrents in German culture. It also showed that the accusation of atheism was still enough to end a career. See La Vopa, *Fichte*, 368–424.

<sup>35</sup> For the complicated history of the successive versions of this work see Karl Ameriks's introduction to Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks, trans. James Hebbeler (Cambridge, 2005); as well as Martin Bondeli's extensive introduction to Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*, ed. Martin Bondeli (Basel, 2007). The "letters" were first published individually in *Der Teutsche Merkur* from August 1786 to September 1787. They were later published with significant revisions and additions as a book (which Bondeli designates as *Briefe I*) in 1790. A second volume, which reflected Reinhold's changing view of Kant and evolution of his own distinct philosophy appeared in 1792 (*Briefe II*). Wittmer asserts that Villers remained attached to Reinhold's first series of letters (1786–7), although it is likely that he would have had access to all three iterations of the work. I have not attempted to trace Villers's specific sources for this article, as the main point is the way in which Villers took up Reinhold's attempts to cast Kant as a solution to the religious and philosophical debates of the mid-1780s. For a philosophical critique of Reinhold's project as a misreading of Kant in the context of *Popularphilosophie*, see George di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Reinhold, *Letters*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

The task of critical philosophy, according to Reinhold, is to continue purifying reason and morality, a task set in motion by the Reformation. Reinhold held that the philosophy of Kant enabled a way out of the impasse of the pantheism dispute and, more generally, beyond the intense discussions over the relationship between reason and revelation that dominated the Enlightenment in Protestant Germany.<sup>38</sup> Villers was drawn to Reinhold's work, as Louis Wittmer argues, and drew on Reinhold's interpretation of Kant in the 1786–7 letters for his own exposé.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, in a passage of the *Essai* Villers elaborates on the charge that the Protestantism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had quickly retreated into a sort of pseudo-Catholic system of dogma and authority. Protestantism in these years, he argues, had a difficult time in freeing itself from the leftovers of medieval Catholicism. He casts this story in the dramatic language of reason against darkness:

human reason was for so long a captive of the theological schools that she did not know how to best use her new liberty. A prisoner who has been freed of his chains, who has the door of his cell thrown open, leaves with halting steps. His numbed feet cannot carry him; the light of day, destined to enlighten him, strikes him blind. He wanders forward, throwing himself against all obstacles, falls, and is wounded. Was it better to have left him in his cell? The opponents of reform would say yes. (335)

In this passage, Villers more than echoes—though no attribution is given—one of Reinhold's essays from almost twenty years earlier. Reinhold had written a “defense” of the Reformation, a lengthy response to the Enlightened Catholic historian Michael Ignaz Schmidt's volumes on Luther and the Reformation.<sup>40</sup> Schmidt had alleged that the Reformation had retarded progress, and set back a gradual renewal of culture and learning that had commenced with the Renaissance and was best represented by Erasmus.<sup>41</sup> Against Schmidt, Reinhold had called the period of the Reformation “the dawn” of the present day. He wrote that the “Protestants had no other name than freedom for that which they had just won. The freedom of the prisoner begins from that moment when the chains are removed and the cell door is opened.” It should still be called freedom even if he cannot immediately walk properly or see well because of the “weight of the

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<sup>38</sup> For a good overview see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> Wittmer, *Charles de Villers*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion see Michael Printy, *Enlightenment and the Creation of German Catholicism* (Cambridge, 2009), 185–211.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Leonhard Reinhold, “Ehrenrettung der Reformation, gegen zwei Kapitel in des k.k. Hofraths und Archivars, Hrn. M. I. Schmidts Geschichte der Teutschen, 6. Band,” in *Der Teutsche Merkur* 1786, 2. Vierteljahr, 58.

heavy irons” that had been on his legs or because his eyes have yet to become used to the light.<sup>42</sup> The Reformation was the “happy preparation for the brilliant epoch that has begun in Germany in the second half of our century.”<sup>43</sup> In associating himself with Reinhold’s attempt to insert Kantian philosophy into a narrative of Protestant succession, Villers capitalized on this cultural moment by providing a clear and compelling narrative synthesis that linked the Enlightenment to the birth of Protestantism.

While confessionalism was not the central motivating force of this revision of German Protestantism, it was nonetheless present, and it was sparked by an awareness of the intellectual changes within Catholicism itself. Early eighteenth-century Catholic scholarship and learning had laid strong foundations for a vigorous reform movement, in which many Catholic clergymen and laymen sought to reform significant aspects of Catholic life, including education, the liturgy, and the Church–state relationship.<sup>44</sup> Reinhold, a former Jesuit and Barnabite who had fled Vienna for Weimar, was well aware of the efforts toward a Catholic Enlightenment. Yet in the first of his “Letters on the Kantian Philosophy” he assured his fictive correspondent that the supposed “waning” of the Enlightenment in Protestant Germany in comparison with its rise in Catholic Germany was an “optical illusion.” This apparent rapid progress on the part of Catholics was simply due to their late start.<sup>45</sup> Reinhold’s letter tacitly acknowledged the discord among Protestants about the extent to which they should take their reforms, about the apparent rise of irrationalism and the cult of feeling, and about the fear that rationalist theology and pantheism would undermine Christianity.<sup>46</sup> Reinhold’s “Letters” acknowledged the slowness of the Protestant Enlightenment, but encouraged his readers to see Kantianism as the next stage in its progress.

Villers embraced this self-description of liberal German Protestant intellectuals, and he found in Kantianism answers to the intellectual problems he encountered in France. His efforts at making German thought accessible to the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>44</sup> For an overview, see Ulrich L. Lehner and Michael Printy, eds., *A Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe* (Leiden, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Karl Leonhard Reinhold, “Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie,” in *Der Teutsche Merkur* 3 (1786), 99. Translation from Reinhold, *Letters*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Sauter has recently argued that Woellner’s *Religious Edict* (1788) was not the attack of an anti-Enlightenment conservative, but rather evidence of a split within the Prussian Enlightenment, whereby Woellner stood for those who thought that the public sphere needed to be disciplined, and that reform must proceed from the top down. See Michael Sauter, *Visions of the Enlightenment: The Edict on Religion of 1788 and the Politics of the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century Prussia* (Leiden, 2009).

French began in earnest with his *Philosophie de Kant, ou principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendente*,<sup>47</sup> a work which built on his earlier expositions in the *Spectateur du Nord* and his *Lettres westphaliennes* (1797). Villers hoped that the French would see in critical philosophy a way out of the intellectual rut in which they had been left by stale empiricism. He dedicated his work on Kant to the Institut de France, a “Tribunal invested with a supreme magistracy in the empire of the sciences.”<sup>48</sup> According to Villers, the time had come to change course and to realize that the current path of French philosophy would only lead to error. Fortunately, according to Villers, Kant had effected a revolution as significant as those of Copernicus and Descartes. He argued that his age was witness to two revolutions in thought: in chemistry (he presumably meant Lavoisier), which has “given a new face and direction to the natural sciences,” and transcendental philosophy.<sup>49</sup> His presentation of Kant bypassed the controversies and philosophical disagreements that had emerged since the middle of the 1780s.<sup>50</sup> While he was acquainted with Jacobi and borrowed explicitly from Reinhold, Villers did not seem as heavily engaged in the intense philosophical disputes about the limits of reason, representation, and the foundations of knowledge that characterized German thought in the 1790s. Instead, he seems to have largely hewn to Reinhold’s initial interpretation of Kant’s philosophy that saw it as a way out of the intellectual and moral impasse of late eighteenth-century thought between materialism and rationalism, in which the foundations of knowledge, religion, and morality were at stake.<sup>51</sup>

Villers believed that he was providing his countrymen with a self-evidently superior philosophy, but his confidence was quickly dashed by the unfavorable reception of his book in France.<sup>52</sup> Although Kant’s work was discussed at the Institut by such figures as Destutt de Tracy, it was ultimately rejected.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Villers, *Philosophie de Kant, ou principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendente* (Metz: Collingnon, 1801 (An IX)).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., np.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>50</sup> On the development of post-Kantian idealism and its relation to religious questions see di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion*.

<sup>51</sup> See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*.

<sup>52</sup> For an account of the work and its reception see Wittmer, *Charles de Villers*, 67–136.

<sup>53</sup> In 1802 Joseph-Marie de Gérando’s *De la génération des connaissances humaines* was awarded a prize by the Berlin Academy of Sciences (which likewise did not admit Kant as a member). De Gérando continued a tradition of empiricism derived from Locke and Condillac, and dismissed Kantianism in his work. Wittmer, *Charles de Villers*, 101. For a recent discussion of the thinkers associated with the Institut see Michael Sonenscher, “‘The Moment of Social Science’: The *Decade Philosophique* and Late Eighteenth-Century French Thought,” *Modern Intellectual History* 6 (2009), 121–46.

a significant factor in the fate of Villers's Kant treatise was that he did not, according to Madame de Staël, tread gently enough around the egos of the French philosophers he was aiming to educate. She wrote to Villers that he should be careful to distinguish between Rousseau and Montesquieu (and even Voltaire) on the one hand and Helvétius and Diderot on the other. The first group was the sworn enemy of Catholicism and the Church, whereas the second went even farther to attack "our religious ideas." While these two groups may have "marched together," they had, according to de Staël, different routes and opinions. Moreover, Villers might have had more success, she continued, if the two of them had had a chance to consult before the publication of the book: "I may have been able to get you to concede a couple of phrases to the *amour-propre* of our philosophers. Whatever you may think of *amour-propre* it is necessary that one treat it as a Cerberus who guards the entry against evil as well as good."<sup>54</sup>

Beyond issues of style and tact, Villers's reductive portrait of French thought as superficial and materialist certainly hindered the reception of his book. By drawing such a stark contrast between the two modes of thought, he tried to position himself as uniquely qualified to offer fundamental correction to the national culture.<sup>55</sup> Villers ascribed the differences between the two intellectual cultures to the notion that the French were celebrated in belles-lettres before they turned to science and scholarship, whereas the Germans were *savans* long before their achievements in literature.<sup>56</sup> Villers states that despite the efforts of the advocates of "superficial materialism" and "crude self-love" to "return us to the condition of beasts," a "more humane doctrine" has always been put forward throughout history from the ancients onward.<sup>57</sup> He argues that there has always been a struggle between versions of materialist and determinist philosophies and the tradition of "enlightened conscience that objected to ignorant self-love."<sup>58</sup> There has always arisen some "stoic voice that speaks up in favor of the beautiful, the absolute good, and the ideal." Implying that Kantianism was heir to a long line of these purifications of philosophy, Villers proclaims that the new doctrine has been purified and "rendered more methodical and clear by a few sages of northern Europe." He has decided to present it as "a remedy to the evils caused by contrary maxims." In a bit of self-inflation, Villers also notes that since he had been unable to operate on the political stage on account of his exile, he has taken

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<sup>54</sup> De Staël to Villers, 1 Aug. 1802, in Kurt Kloocke et al., eds., *Correspondance: Madame de Staël, Charles de Villers, Benjamin Constant* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 20–1.

<sup>55</sup> Some of these themes of course re-appeared with more force in de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, which borrowed heavily—and not always with acknowledgment—from Villers's work.

<sup>56</sup> Villers, *Kant*, xlvi.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, lxvi–lxvii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, lxvii.

it as his task to “hasten the development of morality and science.” As a “man of letters detained far from home,” Villers cast himself as ordained for the task of “returning the spoils of foreign literature to the treasury of national literature.”<sup>59</sup> The spoils, however, were not accepted. As de Staël had suggested, Villers was too rash in his treatment of French philosophy. Moreover, the general thrust of his introduction essentially set out an overly simple dichotomy between materialist France and idealist and spiritual Germany.

### III. VILLERS'S *ESSAI SUR L'ESPRIT ET L'INFLUENCE DE LA RÉFORMATION DE LUTHER*

With the announcement of the Institut's prize contest, Villers had a second chance to relate his acquired German vision for a reform of French philosophy and morality. In so doing, he also inserted German debates about Protestantism and moral and intellectual progress into a historical narrative of the emergence of modern Europe. The success of his work in France, Germany, and elsewhere was due to the way in which these themes spoke to a cohort of intellectuals concerned about the surprising resurgence of Catholicism, the fate of the Enlightenment after the French Revolution, and the prospects for political freedom under Napoleon.

In the *Essai*, Villers argues that the Reformation completed a process begun by the Renaissance, releasing Europe from its torpor. However, he does not think that the “recovery of letters” alone would have been sufficient to revive Europe: what was needed was a moral “jolt.” This was provided by Protestantism in that it not only liberated many from the papal yoke but galvanized entire societies. Thus the Reformation linked intellectual and moral renewal where it took effect, and specifically laid the groundwork for later German philosophy. His argument implies that the Enlightenment was the worthy successor to this moral and intellectual revival because it likewise—in its German form—linked morality and intellectual progress across a broad spectrum of society. At the core of Villers's account of the Reformation is an argument about the importance of unleashing moral forces. This was the Reformation's most valuable contribution to world history. Implicit in Villers's essay, then, is an association of the upheavals of the era of the Reformation with those following in the wake of the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. While not stated so explicitly, also implied is a parallel between Luther's Reformation in the sixteenth century and Kantian philosophy (or at least Villers's understanding of it) in the early nineteenth century.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., lxviii.



The immediate context for the prize contest sponsored by the Institut was its concern with Napoleon's increasing power, and with the Concordat signed in 1801. The Institut saw itself as preserving the legacy of the secular Enlightenment but it had to tread carefully around Napoleon. In the fall of 1801 it had sponsored a contest on the "spirit of liberty since Francis I."<sup>60</sup> The Institut moved into even more controversial waters when it timed the announcement of its contest on the Reformation and the Enlightenment to coincide both with the Mass at Notre Dame celebrating the Concordat and with the publication of Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* in April 1802.<sup>61</sup> Villers argues that the very fact that the Institut had posed the question was itself a mark of progress. In previous centuries, an analogous "assembly of learned men" would instead have sought to remedy problems in the Church. History, he argues, shows how all constitutions established for preserving natural rights degenerate, and he employs a corporal metaphor for this process of political degeneration and renewal. The spirit no longer conforms to the body, he writes, and senses itself "constrained, oppressed and paralyzed. Finally, it is necessary that it break through, that it escape the body that no longer offers the organs that aid its development" (29).

Five major themes come to the fore over the course of Villers's book. First, he emphasizes the necessity—though not in these exact words—of the Reformation. The "recovery of letters" and the exploration of the New World were not enough on their own to reinvigorate Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. Second, he argues that the political effects of the Reformation were, in the long run, beneficial because it diminished the power of the Pope and the Habsburgs. Following from the political fallout is the third theme, that the political reorganization and competition in the era of the Reformation spurred intellectual activity. Fourth, Villers carefully notes that not all aspects of the reawakening were positive. In this vein, he draws parallels between the "radical" reformers and recent-day Jacobins.<sup>62</sup> Fifth, Villers refutes the frequent charge that the Reformation actually *retarded* progress toward enlightenment by overwhelming the intellectual progress of the "recovery of letters" and ushering in an age of confessional polemic. These five themes will structure my account of Villers's essay.

The first theme, the necessity of the Reformation, signals a move beyond the dominant theme of Enlightenment historiography, namely the progress of moderation and toleration. His arguments for the significance of German Christianity also point toward a revived confessional drive in historiography.

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<sup>60</sup> Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> For the context and timing see *Ibid.*, 98; Staum, *Minerva's Message*, 75; Wittmer, *Charles de Villers*, 194. On the political context see Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics*, 267–75.

<sup>62</sup> The term "radical Reformation" is of course not contemporary to Villers. Its use was established by George Hunsten Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirkville, 1962).

Villers writes that Europeans found themselves constrained and paralyzed at the end of the fifteenth century within the geographical boundaries of the ancient world, and began to test its limits. While navigators explored the expanses of the globe, intellectuals sought to expand the scope of human knowledge, and it was clear that humanity was moving forward. Villers writes that a host of new discoveries, the invention of printing, the founding of a new university in Wittenberg, the system of Copernicus, not to mention the enthusiasm for the revival of learning among princes, meant that the first years of the sixteenth century must be regarded as one of the “most decisive eras for the improvement and amelioration of our species.” But, in this “first conflict of light and shadows [*de la lumière et des ténèbres*], each party tensed its muscles, affirmed its position, and prepared for a shock” (66–7). However, as long as Catholicism remained motionless, there would be no profound change. Italian Catholicism had absorbed the “Asiatic luxury and corruption” of the Roman Empire (71).

Germany—and specifically Saxony—was another story. The Saxons had never been “softened” by luxury. They were an “energetic and free [*franche*] nation.” Having stopped the Roman Empire at the Elbe, they became conquerors themselves (74–5). According to Villers, it took Charlemagne thirty years to force the Saxons to receive Christianity, which they eventually adopted with simplicity and good faith. They were serious men, generally of pure morals, who practiced a more purified and spiritual Christianity. They endured the “yoke” of papism, but managed to reject it at the first opportunity. Even though they broke through the “parasitical crust” of the Catholic Church the core of the Gospel remained with them: “Interest in religious matters remained vital and active among them. They were ready for a reformation” (76).

At this point, Luther enters Villers’s story. The intellectual and moral climate was favorable at Wittenberg because of its “love of scholarship, true religion and freedom of thought” (78). Luther, he writes, exposed the abuse of indulgence traffic, and was met with Tetzels fury (81). From this explosive conflict, Villers writes, “the Reformation was born. It found a multitude [*foule*] disposed to receive it, as well as several eloquent and enlightened men prepared to become its apostles” (81–3). Villers notes that the early days of the Reformation were beset by the attacks and uprisings of the Swabian and Franconian peasants, giving rise to a multitude of “fanatical sects.” The worst spectacle of fanaticism, he states, was offered by the radical Kingdom of Münster. This wave of excess was deeply disturbing to Luther, Melancthon and other Protestant leaders, who saw it as “contrary to Christianity and to the spirit of reform” (86).

The second major theme of the essay involves the specifically political consequences of the Reformation. This is significant given the rise of Napoleon and his official embrace of the Catholic Church. Villers argues that “the Reformation which was at first only a return to liberty in religious affairs became

nonetheless, for all of these reasons, a return to political liberty as well” (138). In fact, Villers argues, the religious split in the empire had the effect of securing individual liberty. He notes that during the long and cruel civil discord in Germany, their old bonds were never entirely ruptured, and that the Germans wanted to remain under a common sovereign, even though they were of different confessions. Dividing the empire could have meant that two weak confederations would have become the prey of some foreign power. Villers writes that the opposite proved to be the case. The emergence of an evangelical association [*corps*] within the empire has proved beneficial for its constitution, leading to greater order and organization (152). In a footnote to the third edition (1808) he notes that now that the Holy Roman Empire is dissolved, a new system will take its place. He acknowledges that the constitution of the empire seemed strange and confusing to the outsider, but that one must recognize the good it created. Villers’s praise for political decentralization is notable for a Frenchman writing to his compatriots. As Tocqueville famously argued, the Revolution only accelerated a process of centralization that commenced during the *Ancien Régime*. Rather than putting down German *Kleinstaaterei* as Voltaire had done so mockingly, Villers sees in German decentralization—a feature strengthened by the Reformation—a lesson for the protection of the individual. Division into many states fostered liberty and happiness for individuals, he argues. The constitution

protected the weak and contained the powerful. A tribunal of judges, situated in a small town, could impose the law on princes with large armies;<sup>63</sup> they could punish a sovereign who had unjustly harmed his subjects. It is to be hoped that the same spirit will reappear in the new confederation.<sup>64</sup>

In sum, the political advantages of the Reformation in Germany derived from the incorporation of religious pluralism into the imperial constitution, while on the European scale the Reformation broke Habsburg and papal hegemony.

The political effects of the Reformation had beneficial consequences for intellectual activity, the third major theme of the *Essai*. “[H]aving been plunged for many centuries in stupor and apathy, interrupted only by war, or rather plunder with little common goal,” Villers writes,

Europe suddenly received a new life and activity. A universal and profound purpose agitated its peoples. Their forces developed, and the spirits opened to new political ideas. The preceding revolutions had only set the arms of men in action. This one [the Reformation] forced their minds to work as well. The people, which until then had been

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<sup>63</sup> Villers likely has in mind the Imperial Chamber Court at Wetzlar (*Reichskammergericht*). Although he greatly exaggerates its effectiveness, recent scholarship has indicated that the court was more effective than its image in older literature.

<sup>64</sup> Villers, *Essai*, 3rd edn, 123.

considered as passive troops submitted to the caprice of their leaders, began to act of their own accord, aware of their importance and the need one had of them. (231–2)

According to Villers, the Reformation stimulated intellectual activity from below and even led to commercial expansion. By shaking Europeans out of the mental fog of the Middle Ages, they were urged on for further development. Confession mattered. He cites the example of Spanish and Portuguese exploration of the New World. Because of their sparse populations, all exploration and trading activity was undertaken by the government, which meant that all the profits were absorbed by “luxury and inability.” But, he writes, when Protestant countries such as England and Holland took up trade and exploration—“states where the entire nation deployed all its forces, used all its resources, and seconded the actions of the government”—commercial trade finally took off: “Without the religious jolt [*secousse*] created by Luther, these events would not have occurred as they did.” Holland would have remained small and without a navy, while England would not have had the “volcanic force” it was able to turn against Spain. As it was, “the maritime and commercial system in Europe undertaken by these two powers obtained a development and growth proportional to the internal force that animated it.” Their example in turn pushed even Catholic countries like France to follow suit. “Thus the fermentation excited in Europe by religious opinions sustained a new order of things more beneficial for humanity, and was felt in both worlds [*les deux mondes*]” (235–6). Even academic theology, which was so often written off by Enlightenment historians as a waste of intellectual effort, Villers acknowledges to have produced some social benefit. By engaging so many, religious dispute awakened the slumbering forces of society.

However, Villers does not count among the slumbering forces of society that needed to be awakened the peasants of 1525, the fourth theme of the essay. He tersely pushes aside the demands of the peasant as fanatical, likening them to the Jacobins:

Among the Anabaptists one finds . . . the same pretensions to equality and absolute liberty that caused all the excess of Jacobin France: the agrarian law, the pillage of the rich were already part of their emblem. On their banners one could already have written “war on the castles, peace to the cottages!” (141–2)

Villers’s invocation, however brief, of Jacobinism, points to the ways in which the memory of the Terror and of Revolutionary radicalism could be construed for radically opposed intellectual agendas. While Villers does not mention him explicitly, he would have been aware of the Abbé Barruel’s *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme* (1797), which attempted to show how it was part of a long and deep conspiracy. Barruel cast both Kant and Adam Weishaupt (founder of the radical Masonic organization the Illuminati) into the genealogy of Jacobinism (past and future). “In Germany,” wrote Barruel, “there is another species of

Jacobins that today is making great progress. These are the disciples of the god Kant, who has emerged from the shadows and chaos of his categories in order to reveal to us the mysteries of his so-called Cosmopolitanism.”<sup>65</sup> Barruel attacks Kant’s *Idea for a Cosmopolitan History from a Universal Point of View*, a synopsis of which had appeared in French in Villers’s *Spectateur du nord* in April 1798.<sup>66</sup> He complains that, according to Kant, there is no hope of a future world. While individuals should develop their faculties they will never fully achieve this and will perish as individuals. Moreover, this complete development can only take place in a perfect society, which will be a general confederation without jealousy and war. Even after this perfect world is achieved, humanity will only be “halfway to its goal.”<sup>67</sup> Barruel tries to show how, even though they seem very different, the Illuminati and Kantianism are part of the same conspiracy—or at least have the same aims and will unite at some point. “The only difference I see between these two heroes of German Jacobinism [*Jacobinisme tudesque*],” Barruel writes, is that the one, in his school at Königsberg, envelops himself in pacific appearances, while the other [Weishaupt], in his mysteries, presses and animates his adepts, infuses his initiates [*époptes*] with his enthusiasm and fury in showing them the day when it will be necessary to resort to violence and subjugate and suppress all who resist.<sup>68</sup>

While he says that Kant and his followers maintain a more pacific mien, they nonetheless nurture the wish “of the great day when the men of liberty and equality will dominate.” According to Barruel, this Kantian Jacobinism has established itself “in the clubs, [Masonic] lodges, literary societies, ecclesiastical offices [*bureaux des discastères*] and even in the hearts of the princes,” meaning that “all thrones there are atop a volcano, and the fires will not explode until the most propitious moment.”<sup>69</sup> In an odd way, Barruel and Villers agree that the Kantians in Germany represent the vanguard of change, only they see this change from diametrically opposed points of view. For both, however, enthusiasm and Jacobinism are keywords for a feared radicalism.

Finally, the fifth theme Villers takes up has to do with the question whether the Reformation retarded progress already underway or whether it spurred further improvement. While some have speculated that even without a reformation enlightenment would nonetheless have progressed, Villers asserts that the

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<sup>65</sup> Augustin Barruel [l’abbé Barruel], *Memoires pour servir à l’Histoire du Jacobinisme*, 5 vols. (Hamburg, 1800), 5: 270, original emphasis. This was originally published in 1797.

<sup>66</sup> Immanuel Kant, “De ce que pourroit être une histoire universelle dans les vues d’un citoyen du monde,” in *Le Spectateur du Nord* 6 (April–June 1798), 1–39. Translator not given, notes signed V\*\*\*\*\*. Presumably it was Villers.

<sup>67</sup> Barruel, 271–2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

infallible Church would never have allowed intellectual progress, and that only the Reformation could stop the two growing powers: the papacy and the house of Austria (94). A hypothetical interlocutor suggests that the gradual improvement of learning and Catholic princes' asserting their independence would have led to the Enlightenment without the unnecessary interruptions and disturbances of the Reformation.<sup>70</sup> Villers asserts, on the contrary, that it would not have arrived as soon, and would not have been as complete since the Habsburgs enjoyed such unchallenged authority, and the papacy exercised such control over intellectual life.

A major charge leveled at the Reformation and Protestantism that succeeded it was that it differed little from its Catholic heritage. Despite signs of liberality and openness in the early years, the accusation went, Protestant theology soon retrenched into scholasticism and theological disputation. Thus, in the eyes of Enlightenment critics of established religion, the theological systems put in place by the Reformers and their successors slowed down, if not reversed, the progress that had been made with the revival of learning. Edward Gibbon, who had much more patience for doctrine and paid serious attention to the influence of ideas, theology and religious history than many of his contemporary historians, wrote, "The patriot reformers were ambitious of succeeding the tyrants whom they had dethroned. They imposed with equal rigor their creeds and confessions; they asserted the right of the magistrate to punish heretics with death."<sup>71</sup> Voltaire saw Luther as a fanatic, and Hume was hardly more complimentary. In *The History of England*, Hume portrays Luther as unwilling to give up the leadership of the "sect" he had founded. While Villers does not embrace the practice of theological disputation and the rise of Protestant orthodoxy as progressive in their own right, he is much more forgiving than earlier Enlightened critics had been. He seeks to relativize the difficulties, again distinguishing between the essence and the effect of the Reformation. The first generation of Reformers argued and disputed so much with each other, according to Villers, because they came to the reform as Catholics, and they carried over the tradition and culture of disputation. Eventually, this spirit of disputation was overcome by the spirit of reform, "which was nothing other than that of the Gospel, and by the spirit of science and philosophy—so strongly aided by the Reformation—that is nothing other than the spirit of humanity and tolerance" (334).

Villers insists that one needs to consider separately the "moral impulse given by the Reformation" and the "jolt that resulted from this original impulse when

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Ignaz Schmidt suggested this in his *Geschichte der Deutschen*, 5 vols. (Ulm, 1778–83).

<sup>71</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London, 2000), Book LIV, 689–90.

it came to be mixed with others that modified it in different ways and denatured it” (240). He first considers the results of the “moral impulse” of the Reformation regarding the liberty of thought, the study of religion, languages, history, sciences, and arts. He then looks at the results of the events of the Reformation, including the political and military consequences, theological controversy, the creation of secret societies, and the formation of the Jesuits and the emergence of the Jansenists. Summing up the results of the “moral impulse” of the Reformation, Villers asserts that only the removal of the Roman yoke enabled free thought. He admits that even in Catholic countries one finds learned men as advanced as anywhere else. “But,” he adds, “they are rare, and it is the masses of the nation that one needs to compare” (243). For Villers, Protestantism consists in the principle “Examine, and do not submit to anything other than your conviction” (248). He continues, “He who is a slave in his conscience, a slave at the center of his being, is, without knowing it, a slave in all his conduct, degraded by the stultification and apathy that enervates his faculties” (250). Villers clearly expresses here his Kantian version of the Reformation.<sup>72</sup> Most explicit is Villers’s assertion that “the Reformation, in its principle, is nothing other than the act by which reason declares itself emancipated and liberated from the yoke of arbitrary authority—an emancipation that is nothing other than the natural consequence of the renaissance of knowledge [*renaissance des lumières*]” (326). While he does not downplay the importance of the Renaissance, Villers asserts that the Reformation added something more than the intellectual and scholarly change represented by the “recovery of letters” (the contemporary term for the Renaissance). The Reformation, as he notes several times in the text, gave a “jolt” [*secousse*] to society, and, more importantly, engaged the entire “nation” where it did take effect. At its core was the “moral impulse,” a very Kantian theme, reflecting the latter’s overwhelming concern with the moral law and moral imperative. For Villers, then, the Reformation was at the root of the progress of Enlightenment because of the way it combined a renewal of knowledge and intellect with a broad-based social reform.

Indeed, the moral impulse of the Reformation may have been its longest-lasting effect. It assured that morality would be at the center of German philosophy. According to Villers,

There is nothing more pure, more religious, more severe, and more stoic than the moral doctrine of the celebrated schools of Germany, such as that of Kant or Jacobi. Superficial lessons, the errors of Helvétius and his associates, never could gain a foothold here. The influence of the Reformation on the study of morality was as decisive as it was on other branches of philosophy.

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<sup>72</sup> This point is also made by Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics*, 270.

Villers asserts that the study of morality, “which is for man’s conduct what metaphysics is for his knowledge,” had all but disappeared by the sixteenth century (276–7). But the Reformation did not succeed only on account of its intellectual merits. Villers sees as key to its success the employment of the vernacular. The Reformation would not have been consummated if it had remained in the “narrow enclosure” of Latin-speaking scholars. “It was necessary,” Villers writes, that it leave its confines, that it become the cause of the multitude, that it win a million minds [*têtes*] in order to arm a million men in its favor” (306). This call to the people elicited, according to Villers, an appeal by the Reformation’s opponents in the language of the people to the same tribunal. Thus even the opposition to the Reformation encouraged the spread of Enlightenment indirectly, by engaging a wide spectrum of society. The inner forces of a nation needed to be released for progress, and this was only possible by turning to the vernacular.

Villers concludes by noting that the Reformation had long been the subject of polemical histories, and that it was difficult to measure its historical contribution objectively. He argues that “today, we are better placed than ever to judge a revolution that burst out over three centuries ago. We consider the state of things before, and what they became later, when we listen to all sides and see things as they are today, and judge” (378). He continues, “It is therefore from this point of view that we ought to envisage the Reformation: as a necessary product of a new century, and the manifestation of a new spirit” (381). According to Villers, the most important legacy of the Reformation was to break through the hold the Church had on all aspects of life. “Religion was not a simple opinion or a simple moral being. It had an immense weight that oppressed all political bodies, which aspired to all thrones and all the goods of the earth. At the first wound it experienced, the colossus trembled, and the world was shaken” (383).

#### IV. BEYOND THE ENLIGHTENED NARRATIVE

Villers’s contribution in his *Essai*, therefore, was to take up large parts of this new narrative of Protestant intellectual and moral progress and weave it into a narrative of Enlightenment that reached beyond its German context. As J. G. A. Pocock has argued, Enlightenment historians were preoccupied with the “exit from the Christian millennium into a Europe of state power and civil society.” The emergence of the modern state and the recovery of civil society from ecclesiastical tutelage were the key themes in this “Enlightened narrative.”<sup>73</sup> Villers’s *Essai* distilled Enlightenment-era history. Villers himself was not an

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<sup>73</sup> Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 1: 4.



original historian in the sense of having spent years consulting manuscripts and sources. His earlier works, as we have seen, included a magnetist novel, political pamphlets, and an explication of Kantian philosophy. His turn to history was prompted by the prize contest, and his essay established him as something of a historian of the Reformation. Although he later published a translation of Melancthon's *Life of Martin Luther*, he otherwise did not write any major works of historical scholarship on the Reformation. The questions arise, then, how to situate Villers in the tradition of Enlightenment historiography to which his *Essai* is so clearly indebted, and what his *Essai* added to this endeavor. Villers was not quite an "Enlightened" historian in the sense that J. G. A. Pocock has described, but he was not a Romantic one either. This periodization dilemma of course says more about our latter-day categories than it does about the concerns of Villers and his contemporaries. But clarifying Villers's historical vision and work will go a long way toward situating the view of Protestantism and progress in the troubled years between the Revolution and the Congress of Vienna.

Prompted by the Institut's prize contest, Villers composed the essay in less than a year. As Wittmer suggests, Villers saw the prize competition as a second chance to establish his reputation in France after the failure of his Kant exposition. The *Essai* was just that: in under four hundred pages it discussed the whole sweep of modern European history from the sixteenth century, and did not rely on original research or extensive quotation from primary sources. In the preface to the second edition Villers writes that his general historical material was drawn from Spittler and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. He notes that he drew especially on the work of the Göttingen historian August Ludwig Heeren. The latter intended to compete in the prize contest, but withdrew upon learning of Villers's interest and sent him draft of his own essay.<sup>74</sup> Heeren's "Entwicklung der politischen Folgen der Reformation für Europa" restricts itself to the political consequences of the Reformation, just as his somewhat later book focused on the European state system from 1500 to 1800.<sup>75</sup>

While Villers's immediate historical sources were the Göttingen historians he knew personally, it remains to situate his historical vision within the longer tradition of Enlightenment historiography. Of the work of the major Enlightenment historians, Villers's *Essai* seems, in terms of both tone and subject matter, closest to that of William Robertson (d. 1793), whose *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* spanned over 1600 pages in four volumes (in the 1792 edition). The most obvious difference between Villers and his Enlightened predecessor was simply one of scope and ambition. But this observation needs

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<sup>74</sup> August Ludwige Heeren, *Kleine historische Schriften* 1 (Göttingen, 1803).

<sup>75</sup> Heeren, *Handbuch der Geschichte des europäischen Staatssystems und seiner Colonien* (Göttingen, 1809).

to be measured against Villers's general aim: he did not strive to supplant that historical tradition, and in one of his few references to Robertson freely admitted that his arguments were similar, although he focused exclusively and with more detail on the question of the relationship between the Reformation and the progress of enlightenment.<sup>76</sup>

A brief comparison between Villers and Robertson illuminates how Villers had absorbed and transmitted the Enlightenment historical legacy; it also sheds light on the novelty of his account. A clergyman and moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Robertson was by no means hostile to religion in his historical works. Nicholas Phillipson writes that a belief in Providence underlay Robertson's historical account of the gradual improvement of European civilization and manners. First signaled in a sermon of 1755, Robertson's historical vision was indebted to an Augustinian notion that Christ came into the world when the Roman Empire was at its height, and that God thus chose the most propitious moment for his Word to be spread. The Reformation was another such providential moment, when centuries of superstition and ignorance were cleared away. In his own day, Robertson saw that the roughness of European civilization at the time of the Reformation had been tamed by commerce and the European balance of power. Even Catholicism had been improved.<sup>77</sup>

Villers's *Essai* carries over core aspects of this argument—though it cannot be said to be derived exclusively from Robertson—as part of a generalized diffusion of Enlightenment historical writing.<sup>78</sup> But Villers moves beyond the Enlightened view in two important ways. First, the Kantian aspects of Villers's account, emphasizing the “moral forces” of the individual, obviously would not have been an element of historical writing before the 1790s. More importantly, the political–religious context in which Villers's *Essai* was written points to a new European situation. Robertson, albeit certainly affirming the positive effect of the Reformation and clearly embracing a Protestant view of history and religion, nevertheless was writing a history of post-confessional Europe. The emergence of a relatively stable balance of power among the European states was seen by Robertson and his cohort as a salutary response to the destructive wars of

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<sup>76</sup> Villers, 3rd edn (1808), xv.

<sup>77</sup> See Nicholas Phillipson, “Providence and Progress: An Introduction to the Historical Thought of William Robertson,” in Stewart J. Brown, ed., *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), 55–73.

<sup>78</sup> Robertson's *Charles V* was translated into French by Jean-Baptiste Antoine Suard almost immediately. It was also available in German. On his reputation in France see John Renwick, “The Reception of William's Robertson's Historical Writings in Eighteenth-Century France,” in Brown, *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 145–63.

religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His formative years shaped by the Jacobite rebellion and its brutal suppression, Robertson had no interest in stoking confessional conflict, seeking instead to propagate a tolerant world view in his own life and work. For all its criticism of the papacy and the superstition of Spanish conquistadors (in his *History of America*), Robertson's history is not anti-Catholic in that it recognizes a gradual improvement of all European societies. Villers's *Essai*, however, owed its conception precisely to such an anti-Catholic (or at least antipapal) impulse: namely the fear of Napoleon's Concordat and threatened union of state power and repressive Catholicism. The Institut sought out essays that would remind the world of the dangers of Catholicism to political and intellectual liberty. Villers's *Essai* fit the bill. Although clearly the heir of the "Enlightened narrative" and a generalized eighteenth-century historical vision of progress, the *Essai*'s sharp attention to the supremacy of Protestantism in creating the conditions for enlightenment heralded the rise of neo-confessional history.<sup>79</sup>

The return of confessionalism represented a move beyond Enlightenment themes of moderation and recovery of civil society from ecclesiastical tutelage. A dozen years after the Civil Constitution of the Clergy a narrative celebrating the return of civil society, the state, and polite civilization was not enough. More pressingly, in the wake of the Terror on the one hand, and the threat of Napoleonic despotism on the other, a new narrative was needed, one that balanced the independence of the state with the moral and religious autonomy of the individual. As a political program—one that envisioned decentralization and individual liberty—Villers's vision had scant prospects in Napoleonic France. But as a theory of historical progress on a European scale it would bear fruit. Villers's intervention came at the right time, and served as a bridge to better-known works by Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant.<sup>80</sup> Looking at Villers's work allows us to reflect about what it meant at this moment—the year XII—to offer to his contemporaries a new version of the Enlightened narrative that accounted not only for political developments, for but also moral progress, and which closely linked Europe's Protestant history to its outlook for the future.

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<sup>79</sup> While not explicit in Villers's *Essai*, Kantianism itself could be said to have a "neo-confessional character," as Ian Hunter argues in *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 2001). It is also quite apparent from Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), in which the entire fourth section is an attack on Jewish and Catholic "legalism" and clericalism.

<sup>80</sup> Villers admired Germaine de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800), where she makes general comments about the effect of Protestant culture on the progress of philosophy. She, in turn, learned much from Villers for her widely read *De l'Allemagne* (1810). For an argument on the importance of religion and Protestantism to Benjamin Constant's thought see Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*.

Villers was certainly not alone in binding the story of European progress to Protestantism. In 1802, several years before he published the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, the then relatively unknown Hegel wrote in a lengthy critique of Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte that

[t]he great form of the world spirit that has come to cognizance of itself in these philosophies, is the principle of the North, and from the religious point of view, of Protestantism. This principle is subjectivity for which beauty and truth present themselves in feelings and persuasions, in love and intellect.<sup>81</sup>

Here he was only hinting at a more thorough critique of Enlightenment's limits that would come with the *Phenomenology*. I raise the point here only to show that it was becoming possible to link Protestantism to the Enlightenment, even if Hegel did not do so in the same historically specific way as did Villers. In fact, Villers's more explicit construction of a straightforward narrative linking the Reformation and Protestantism to the Enlightenment explains both the immediate impact and the positive reception of the *Essai* and also demonstrates the rhetorical contours in which Hegel and other thinkers could work out their views. The multiple ways in which Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers connected their narratives of progress and liberation to a story of the Reformation show that this theme was more than a matter of antiquarian interest. The assertion that the Reformation had prepared the way for modern notions of progress and freedom was for so long a fixture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical consciousness that it is easy to forget that this association had a history. Revisiting Villers's *Essai* is a step toward recovering that history.

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<sup>81</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, "Faith and Knowledge," in *idem, Faith and Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany, 1977), 57.