CHAPTER 2

ROUSSEAU AND DEMOCRATIC CIVIL RELIGION

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the promise of democracy was inseparable from the challenges posed by the theologico-political problem in modernity. In some respects, Rousseau deepened the philosophical underpinnings of modern democracy first articulated by Spinoza. However, it was perhaps inevitable that one of the greatest critics of the Enlightenment would also differ in fundamental ways from one of its greatest system builders. Whereas Spinoza drew much of the theoretical heft of his case for democracy from his necessitarian metaphysics, Rousseau brought democracy down from the heavens somewhat by integrating the claims for popular government into a normative framework supplied by human psychology and social context. From his first major work, The Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, through to his later writings, Rousseau aimed to dismantle the alliance that Spinoza had tried to build between science and democracy (Strauss 1947: 473–74; Orwin 1998: 182–83). For Rousseau, while the social spirit embodied in his doctrine of the general will derived invaluable moral support from the carefully crafted presentation of a metaphysical structure of natural order, that order was compatible with the pre-existing sentiments of the common person and largely rejected the materialist ontology of Spinoza and Hobbes. In this chapter, we will examine the way in which Rousseau’s approach to the relation of politics and religion shaped a vision of democracy that extended far beyond government structures, one that culminates in the prospects of a new democratic civil religion.

While Rousseau praised democracy stating, “Were there a people of Gods, it would govern itself democratically,” he was not naive about the capacities of democratic government.1 He never even joined Spinoza in identifying democracy as the best regime simply. Arguably, the formative
context for Rousseau’s reflections upon democracy was his upbringing in Geneva (Cranston 1983: 13–29; Damrosch 2005). The Genevan model of alpine democracy is both similar to and different from the Dutch political context that confronted Spinoza a century earlier. The Dutch Republic and the Swiss cantons shared a common genesis in revolt against the Habsburg empire (Everdell 2000: chs. 4, 6), even as the quasi-federal structures in both reinforced the principle of localism, making republicanism practically synonymous with local self-government; and, both republics emerged from a Protestant revolt against Catholic power. Yet, the generally tolerant commercial republic of Spinoza’s time stood in contrast to the much more homogenous Genevan society founded, in a sense, by the religious lawgiver John Calvin.

The government of eighteenth-century Geneva was decidedly more democratic than the regent controlled assemblies in Holland. Geneva’s formally democratic institutions tended, nonetheless, to mask decidedly oligarchic features in the republic. Geneva’s political history since independence had been defined by the conflict between the patrician class, represented in the Pétit Conseil composed of 25 members, on one hand, and the Conseil Général composed of the entire body of citizens, on the other. In principle, the general or grand council served as the legislative body, while the small council played an administrative or executive function. The reality, however, of the Genevan system enshrined in the 1738 Règlement, designed to end decades of simmering conflict, fell far short of the democratic ideal that Rousseau would do so much to popularize. For instance, by Rousseau’s time, most adult males in Geneva were not citizens, and while membership in the grand council could reach 1500 individuals, the attendance in actual sessions of the council rarely exceeded 700 or 800 (Fralin 1978: 167). Practically all the actual power rested in the patrician council of 25, which by law had sole power to summon the grand council and had complete control over what proposals could be submitted to it for ratification.

Nonetheless, a version of the Genevan Republic remained a touchstone for sound government throughout Rousseau’s writings. He claims that it was Geneva, as opposed to any classical republic, which provided the model for political legitimacy in Of the Social Contract (Rousseau 2001: 233). However, the ideal of the Social Contract is a radically democratized conception of Geneva in which constituent power grounds an indelible connection between the formation of the social compact, on one hand, and the actual operation of government, on the other. For as Rousseau recounts, the original social pact “produces a moral and collective body composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly” (SC 1.6.24). The distinctively democratic feature of Rousseau’s