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Tocqueville on Christianity and American Democracy

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Abstract

In his monumental study Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville explained why religion, though in some ways a pre-modern and pre-democratic phenomenon, is nevertheless essential to the health of modern democracy and the preservation of freedom. For Tocqueville, political freedom requires an unshakeable moral foundation that only religion can supply. Freedom can be destroyed by democracy's tendency to foster excessive individualism, materialism, and the tyranny of the majority. Only religion, Tocqueville contends, can successfully counter these dangerous tendencies by teaching men that they are obligated to respect themselves and to respect the rights of others. Changes in American society since Tocqueville's time do not render his teaching about the political importance of religion irrelevant. They rather invite us to adapt his teaching to our own circumstances so as to preserve freedom in our own time.

In recent years, Americans have lost sight of religion's positive contribution to creating and sustaining our democracy. We have not forgotten religion's relevance to our political life; we are continually reminded of that by our ongoing debates about the proper scope of religious freedom. These debates, however, treat religion more as a private preference than a public good. They concern how much liberty private individuals and groups should have in exercising their religious beliefs. These debates therefore do little to remind us of how religion can act as a unifying social force, a set of common beliefs that are essential to maintaining our democratic way of life.

In forgetting religion's role as a public institution, we also have lost contact with an old and venerable tradition of political philosophy. Even the great non-theological thinkers in the history of Western political thought—those who considered religion not from the standpoint of the religious teacher concerned with the salvation of souls but from the perspective of the statesman concerned with protecting the common good—tell us that religion is necessary to a healthy political community. This is the teaching of the classical founders of that tradition, such as Plato and Aristotle. It is also the teaching of modern figures such as Edmund Burke and John Locke, who emphasized that free government could not be maintained in the absence of religion.

Coming closer to home, this is also the view held by the American Founders. They intended to institute a secular government but insisted that it required a religious foundation. For example, in his Farewell Address, George Washington reminded

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his countrymen that “religion and morality” are the “firmest props of the duties of men and citizens” and therefore are “indispensable supports” of “the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity.” He added, moreover, that morality depends on religion: “[R]eason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Religion, he thus suggested, is necessary to the preservation of “free government.”¹

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In seeking to renew our understanding of religion’s contribution to freedom, we can turn to no better teacher than Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville explained more thoroughly than anyone else why religion, though in some ways a pre-modern and pre-democratic phenomenon, is nevertheless essential to the health of modern democracy. This is one of the key themes of his monumental study, *Democracy in America*.

Modern democratic freedom, Tocqueville argues, developed as a result of Christianity’s influence on European civilization, and more particularly as a result of Puritanism’s influence on American civilization. This link is not accidental: Political freedom requires an unshakeable moral foundation that only religion can supply. Moreover, religion is necessary not only to democracy’s emergence, but also to its preservation. Democracy fosters intellectual and moral habits that can be deadly to freedom: the tyranny of the majority, individualism, materialism, and democratic despotism. American Christianity acts as a corrective to these perilous democratic tendencies.

Accordingly, Tocqueville concludes, the preservation of America’s traditional religion is one of the most important tasks of democratic statesmanship. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that religion “should

be considered the first” of America’s “political institutions” and even that it is necessary for Americans to “maintain Christianity...at all cost.”²

To summarize Tocqueville’s teaching thus is to be reminded of how much America has changed since he examined it, and this in turn raises the question whether Tocqueville’s teaching is any longer relevant to us. Christianity today possesses nothing like the public moral authority that it had in the 1830s. Today’s America is less religious overall than Tocqueville’s America, and religious Americans today are more diverse in their religious beliefs than were the Americans of Tocqueville’s day.

These changes, however, do not render Tocqueville’s account irrelevant. He wrote not as a religious teacher aiming to propagate a particular faith, but instead as a political analyst interested in the kind of religious beliefs necessary to uphold freedom and democracy. Moreover, Tocqueville saw democracy’s dynamism and understood its tendency to change the country’s religious landscape.

Accordingly, Tocqueville wrote not with a view to preserving completely intact a particular religion, but instead to discover the religious essentials of the free society and to explain how and to what extent they can be preserved. His thought therefore invites us not to a fruitless nostalgia for an unrecoverable past, but instead to an intelligent application of the lessons of the past to the obligations of the present—especially our obligation to preserve and pass on the free society that we have inherited.

Christianity and the Origins of American Democracy

Tocqueville opens *Democracy in America* by reminding us of something that we now tend to forget: The freedom we cherish rests upon religious foundations. Modern democracy could not have emerged but for the influence of Christianity on the Western world. Tocqueville emphasizes the historical rise of equality as both an idea and a social fact. This “revolution,” however, cannot be observed in the world at large, but is instead characteristic of “all the Christian universe.” “Conditions are more equal among Christians in our day,” Tocqueville contends,

1. “Washington’s Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796, Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series Primary Sources* No. 12, <http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address>.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 279–280, 519.

“than they have ever been in any time or any country in the world.”³

The progress of equality, Tocqueville argues, was driven both by Christianity’s influence on society’s institutions and by its intellectual influence. The first occurred with the introduction of Christian clergy into aristocratic societies, which formerly had been divided between the few hereditary rulers and the many who obeyed. “The clergy,” he notes, had opened “its ranks to all” so that “equality” began “to penetrate through the church to the heart of government.” As a result, one who formerly “would have vegetated as a serf” could now take “his place as a priest in the midst of nobles” and “often take a seat above kings.”⁴

In terms of its intellectual influence, Tocqueville holds that Christianity teaches a theological equality that suggests to men’s minds a kind of political equality as well. “Christianity, which has rendered all men equal before God, will not be loath to see all citizens equal before the law.”⁵ Christianity’s contribution here might seem superfluous to us as modern human beings: We instinctively believe in equality before the law and in political equality more generally. As far as we can remember, it has always been a fundamental principle of the societies we inhabit. We are accordingly unlikely to feel much gratitude to a religion that lends theological support to the idea of equality.

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Tocqueville’s account, however, is based on the long view of human history. It reminds us that if we consider the whole story of the human race, democracy and equality are not society’s default position.

The political communities of classical Greece and Rome, Tocqueville observes, had deep social and political inequalities that were so well established and so taken for granted that modern ideas of equality and universal rights were inconceivable even to the “most profound and vast geniuses” of the ancient world. Under these conditions, “it was necessary that Jesus Christ come to earth to make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal.”⁶

Christianity in America: A Political Principle

According to Tocqueville, Christianity is responsible for more than the general rise of equality as a European phenomenon. American democracy owes its birth to the influence of a specific form of Christianity: English Puritanism. The Pilgrims, he holds, laid the essential groundwork for America’s experiment in self-government.

America grew from a specific “point of departure,” a political and social state that conditions all that comes after it.⁷ This point of departure was provided by the northern settlements. The principal ideas of the northern states “spread at first to the neighboring states” and then gradually “penetrated the entire confederation.”⁸

Religion was in fact the primary reason for the northern settlers’ immigration to the New World. They did not come to improve their material conditions; on the contrary, they left behind a rather comfortable situation to brave the hardships of the American wilderness. They made this sacrifice, according to Tocqueville, in order “to obey a purely intellectual need,” to “make an *idea* triumph.” This idea was, of course, their conception of the Christian community they wanted to establish. These settlers called themselves Pilgrims because their journey had a religious purpose: They sought to build Puritan communities, to live in America “in their manner and pray to God in freedom.”⁹

3. Ibid., p. 6.

4. Ibid., p. 4.

5. Ibid., p. 11.

6. Ibid., p. 413.

7. Ibid., p. 29.

8. Ibid., pp. 32–33.

9. Ibid., p. 32 (emphasis in original).

Tocqueville is not an uncritical admirer of the Puritans. He acknowledges that the societies they established were marred by excesses and follies. They copied much of their criminal law—including very harsh penalties—directly from the Old Testament, thus carrying “the legislation of a rude and half-civilized people into the heart of a society whose spirit was enlightened and more mild.” Elsewhere, “forgetting completely the great principles of religious liberty” that they had “demanded in Europe,” they used legal punishments to enforce worship and regulate its conduct.¹⁰

These errors and abuses proved to be temporary and were corrected by later generations of settlers. The positive political contribution of the Puritans, however, proved to be of lasting and fundamental importance to America’s way of life: establishing and sustaining democratic self-government.¹¹

Puritanism, Tocqueville explains, “was not only a religious doctrine; it also blended at several points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories.”¹² The Pilgrims came to establish religious communities, but their beliefs called for such communities to be instituted and administered by the consent of the governed.

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The Mayflower Compact, for example, identified the purpose of the Plymouth colony as “the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and the honor” of “King and country.” It also, however, established the colony’s government on the basis of the colonists’ decision to “covenant and combine

ourselves into a civil body politick” and to “constitute and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and officers, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony.” Other New England colonies similarly “began by drafting a social contract that was submitted to the approval of all interested persons.”¹³

Puritan churches were governed democratically. “The greatest part of English America,” Tocqueville contends, was “peopled by men who, after having escaped the authority of the pope, did not submit to any religious supremacy.” Thus, they “brought to the New World a Christianity” that Tocqueville characterizes as “democratic and republican.” This fact “singularly” favored “the establishment of a republic and of democracy” in politics as well.¹⁴

Although Tocqueville does not spell out the connection here, we can discern it easily enough. The Puritans no doubt regarded the government of their churches as the most important of their duties. It would naturally have occurred to them that if ordinary people are good enough to manage the community’s spiritual affairs without the approval of a pre-existing hierarchical authority, then they surely are good enough to manage its temporal affairs in the same manner. Moreover, their experience of managing their churches in this way would have fostered the habits and skills necessary to democratic self-government in the political realm.

We might be tempted to dismiss Puritanism’s political contribution to American civilization as worthy but not decisive. From our vantage point, the rise of self-government appears to be a worldwide movement carrying all nations on the path to democracy. Why, we might ask, should the Puritan founders of America get any special credit for going along with what history seems to be doing in any case?

Tocqueville takes care to remind us, however, that in establishing self-government, the New England settlers were not merely following the rise of

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

11. For a different account that emphasizes, instead of the continuity of American democracy with its Puritan origins, the natural rights doctrine that emerged at the time of the Founding, see Thomas G. West, “Misunderstanding the American Founding,” in *Interpreting Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), pp. 155–177.

12. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 32.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

modern democracy, but were pioneering it. The Puritans' democratic political principles turned out to be those "on which modern constitutions rest" in the civilized world. Such institutions were not commonplace at the time they were planted in New England. They were "hardly understood" by "most Europeans of the seventeenth century" and were only "incomplete" even in England.¹⁵

America, Tocqueville's account thus reminds us, owes its democratic origins to its Puritan settlers. The North American English colonists were not uniformly religious, but it was the religious ones who established and nourished the spirit of self-government that later came to characterize the whole country. Moreover, we might add, this debt to the Puritans is owed not only by America, but also by much of the rest of the world. During parts of the 19th century, America was, if not the only democracy, then certainly the only large-scale, successful, and moderate democracy. Without its example, it is doubtful that the world would have moved as decisively in the direction of democracy as it finally did.

Religion and the Moral Foundations of Freedom

Besides recounting the historical debt that political freedom owes to Christianity, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* also offers a philosophic account of why a free society necessarily requires a religious foundation. Here his argument may surprise us, because it emphasizes society's need for certain shared beliefs in order for there to be common action. Freedom certainly includes a right to question conventional opinion, but that freedom in turn always rests on some intellectual foundation in which all citizens must partake. For Tocqueville, religion is best equipped to provide that intellectual foundation for society.

Modern Americans understand their society to be a free one, believe that they have an obligation to preserve it as such, and think—rightly—that such a society depends on freedom of thought and discussion. We sometimes talk, however, as if this freedom requires an unfettered skepticism about all things or a willingness to treat all ideas as open to question. This, Tocqueville contends, is a mistake.

On the contrary, all societies depend in some degree or another on shared beliefs or "opinions men receive on trust." Society is coordinated action, which requires common beliefs, but it is not possible for societies or even for individuals to arrive at such beliefs on the basis of the unguided, independent thinking of each individual. This, Tocqueville claims, is an "inflexible law" of the human condition. "If man were forced to prove to himself all the truths he makes use of every day, he would never finish; he would exhaust himself in preliminary demonstrations without advancing." Having neither "the time because of the short span of life, nor the ability because of the limits of his mind," man cannot establish by his own efforts all of the convictions that he needs; those that claim to have done so are dishonest or deluded.

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* also offers a philosophic account of why a free society necessarily requires a religious foundation.

Accordingly, an individual is "reduced to accepting as given a host of facts and opinions that he has neither the leisure nor the power to examine and verify by himself." The functioning and prosperity of society therefore require "that all the minds of the citizens be brought and held together by some principal ideas; and that cannot happen unless each of them sometimes comes to draw his opinions from one and the same source and unless each consents to receive a certain number of ready-made beliefs."¹⁶ All societies, and especially free ones, require some intellectual unity, which in turn supports a unity of the citizens' sentiments.

Religion, Tocqueville thinks, is the most important source of common beliefs for citizens. Here he is careful to note that his defense of society's religious consensus is undertaken not with a view to what is good for religion, but instead with a view to what is good for society. Such religious beliefs are evidently useful "even if one wants to pay attention

15. Ibid., p. 39.

16. Ibid., pp. 407–408.

only to the interests of this world.” As the author of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville is concerned not with the salvation of souls but with the preservation of a decent political order. Such an order depends, however, on the preservation of commonly held religious beliefs.

Here Tocqueville especially emphasizes religion’s contribution to sustaining public morality. Almost all human actions, he contends, “arise from a very general idea men have conceived of God, of his relations with the human race, of the nature of their souls, and of their duties towards those like them.” As a result, men “have an immense interest in making very fixed ideas for themselves about” such questions, “for doubt about these first points would deliver all their actions to chance and condemn them to a sort of disorder and impotence.”

Once again, Tocqueville notes the limited power of the individual human mind, which makes it impossible for common ideas on moral and religious questions to arise from the spontaneous and unregulated thought of each individual. Therefore, he concludes, “general ideas relative to God and human nature” are “the ones it is most fitting to shield from the habitual action of individual reason and for which there is most to gain and least to lose in recognizing an authority.”¹⁷

We might illustrate Tocqueville’s meaning with an example from recent American history. Fifty years ago, America had a strong national consensus about sexual morality, a consensus that rested on an almost universal respect for the moral teaching of the Bible. Since that time, this consensus has eroded in proportion as respect for the Bible as a source of religious truth has declined. The result, as Tocqueville predicted, is a form of public “disorder and impotence,” with Americans expending vast amounts of social energy fighting each other over political issues—such as the definition of marriage—that arise from disagreements about sexual morality.

Settled, common religious beliefs about morality are especially necessary, Tocqueville argues, for “free countries.” Without such beliefs, men are faced with a kind of intellectual and moral chaos that renders them incapable of preserving their freedom.

“When religion is destroyed in a people,” he claims, “doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others.” As a result, each citizen comes to have only “confused and changing notions” about the most important questions—such as the nature of his duties to himself, to others, and to the community.

Confronted with this uncertainty about the highest things, “one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all.” “Such a state,” Tocqueville concludes, “cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude.”¹⁸

There is a connection, Tocqueville’s argument reminds us, between solidity of conviction and energy of soul, or between the confidence we have in our moral judgments and our ability to act on them. The latter depends decisively on the former. Those who believe with certitude in the rightness of a cause will fight for it most zealously, while those who are uncertain will fight less zealously or perhaps not at all. Such moral certainty and energy is necessary to the preservation of freedom. Political freedom or self-government requires exertion, and such exertion depends on the citizens’ solid belief in the rightness of self-government, or their belief that they are worthy of governing themselves. Without that belief, they cannot rouse themselves to action, and they will let their freedom slip away.

Indeed, Tocqueville continues, they might even go so far as to give it away on purpose. The moral uncertainty that follows the loss of religious belief not only weakens men; it also frightens them. When men are no longer restrained by the moral authority of religion, they are “soon frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence.” Because “everything is moving in the world of the intellect, they want at least that all be firm and stable in the material order,” and since they can no longer recover their lost religious beliefs, “they give themselves a master.”¹⁹

Human beings, Tocqueville’s argument suggests, desire freedom, but not an unlimited freedom. They want to govern themselves, but they do not want the responsibility of exercising an absolute and unlimited power over each other and the political community

17. Ibid., pp. 417–418.

18. Ibid., p. 418.

19. Ibid.

to which they belong. When they have firm moral convictions rooted in firmly held religious beliefs, they can be confident that they know how to exercise power justly, but what if they lose their religion and therefore become uncertain about what is morally right while nevertheless retaining a certain decency? In that case, they will no longer want to govern themselves, because they will find the responsibility frightening and oppressive. At this point, they will come to think that they can solve their problem by simply submitting themselves to the state, letting their rulers decide all things for them.

If they wish to retain their freedom to govern themselves, a democratic people must strive to sustain the common religious culture that underlies their common moral convictions.

For Tocqueville, the way to prevent despotism from arising in this way is for a religious country to cherish and try to sustain its commonly held moral and religious beliefs. “As for me,” he concludes, “I doubt that man can ever support a complete religious independence and an entire political freedom at once.” If “he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.”²⁰ If they wish to retain their freedom to govern themselves, a democratic people must strive to sustain the common religious culture that underlies their common moral convictions.

To be clear, Tocqueville is not contending that democracy requires a complete uniformity of religious belief. He never suggests that such a thing is either possible or desirable, and he admits that it did not exist even in the America of his own day. America never had, and a successful democracy does not need, total agreement about the proper modes of worship or the details of theology. Rather, what is required is a common body of religious opinion in support of the common morality that a free democracy needs. In Tocqueville’s own words, democratic citizens need a shared understanding of “God, of his

relations with the human race, of the nature of their souls, and of their duties towards those like them.”²¹

Put more simply, democracy requires citizens who believe that the rules of morality—and hence the rights of their fellow citizens—are not merely convenient fictions but are instead rooted in the mind and will of the Author of all things, to whom they are accountable for their actions. Such shared beliefs were held across the various Christian denominations in Tocqueville’s America and are even held, as C. S. Lewis observes in *The Abolition of Man*, across different religions.²² Accordingly, Tocqueville’s call for modern democracies to preserve their shared religious beliefs is not a rejection of pluralism; it is an effort to preserve the moral and religious foundation on which a successful pluralism can exist.

Religion as a Restraint on the Tyranny of the Majority

For Tocqueville, religion not only establishes the positive conditions required for modern democracy to emerge, but also acts as a necessary corrective to some of democracy’s most dangerous inclinations. Tocqueville presents democracy as a new form of freedom that displaced the servitude of the ancient and medieval world. Nevertheless, he warns that this democracy carries within it the possibility of new forms of servitude. Democratic freedom is also a form of power: the power of the people to rule. This power carries with it new possibilities for abuse, and Tocqueville accordingly emphasizes the importance of religion’s ability to impose a necessary limit on the majority’s power.

Tocqueville sees the danger of majority tyranny. Like America’s Founders, he sees that human nature is flawed and that human beings in any form of government are prone to do injustice to each other if they are not restrained in some way.

What “is a majority taken collectively,” Tocqueville asks, “if not an individual who has opinions and most often interests contrary to another individual that one names the minority?” If we can “accept that one man vested with omnipotence can abuse it against his adversaries, why not accept the same thing for a majority?” Men do not change their “character by being united,” nor do they “become more patient

20. Ibid., pp. 418–419.

21. Ibid., pp. 417–418.

22. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1947).

before obstacles by becoming stronger.”²³ Accordingly, Tocqueville concludes that the vast power held by the democratic majority carries “consequences” that are “dire and dangerous for the future.”²⁴

Tocqueville understands, respects, and explains in his own work the institutional arrangements, such as federalism and separation of powers, that the American Founders established to restrain majority tyranny. He also holds, however, that the preservation of democratic freedom requires more than just an astutely organized government. It also calls for certain social and cultural institutions. Among these, he emphasizes newspapers, the legal profession, and the country’s impressive network of private voluntary associations. But most important, he also notes the role that American religion plays in checking the tyranny of the majority.

“In the United States,” Tocqueville observes, “religion” exercises a beneficial “empire over intelligence.” Almost all Americans believe in or at least respect Christianity, with the result that “everything is certain and fixed in the moral world.” Therefore, in America, “the human spirit never perceives an unlimited field before itself: however bold it may be, from time to time it feels that it ought to halt before insurmountable barriers.”

Tocqueville views this popular sense of immovable moral limits as necessary because of the protection it provides for the rights of those outside the majority, who are subject to the majority’s power. He notes that in America, even the most revolutionary political actors are “obliged to profess openly a respect for the morality and equity of Christianity.” Because of Christianity’s public moral influence, nobody in America up to Tocqueville’s time had “dared to advance the maxim that everything is permitted in the interest of society. An impious maxim—one that seems to have been invented in a century of freedom to legitimate all the tyrants to come.”²⁵

In the 20th century, ruthless ideologies like Nazism and Communism arose and took hold of certain countries. These atheistic ideologies boldly and shamelessly held that everything was permitted in

society’s interests, even to the extent of destroying certain categories of citizens that were held to be socially undesirable. In contrast, Americans, both in Tocqueville’s time and in our own, cannot think or talk about society’s interests without at the same time professing respect for the rights of individuals and minorities. This decent sense of restraint, Tocqueville suggests, is a heritage of Christian morality. So important is this contribution of religion to the decency of the Americans’ political order that Tocqueville goes so far as to declare that religion “should be considered the first of their political institutions.”²⁶

Tocqueville asks: “What makes a people master of itself if it has not submitted to God?”

On the basis of these arguments, Tocqueville seeks to correct the anti-religious European thinkers of his day—and, we might add, those of our own day—who fault America for its religiosity, deride religion as nothing but a source of oppression, and promote public atheism as a guarantee of freedom. For such men, “the freedom and happiness of the human species” require us to believe that human beings can be understood as nothing more than an accidental aggregation of matter and not as beings with souls. When such thinkers “attack religious beliefs,” Tocqueville argues, “they follow their passions and not their interests.” That is, they neglect the interests of society while following their anti-theological animus instead.

In reality, Tocqueville argues, religion “is much more necessary” in a “republic” than in a “monarchy,” and “in democratic republics more than all others.” It is safe to give the people power to rule only if they believe that there are moral limits on their power that they must respect and if their belief in such limits is sustained by their belief in religion. Thus, Tocqueville asks: “What makes a people master of itself”—or able to discipline itself to respect justice—“if it has not submitted to God?”²⁷

23. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 240.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 279–280.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

Individualism and the Danger of Democratic Despotism

Democracy in America warns of another grave threat to freedom that arises in democratic times: the danger of democratic despotism. Here the peril is not that the majority will abuse its power in order to violate the rights of the minority. It is rather that the people as a whole will surrender their right to govern themselves, handing themselves over to the rule—perhaps benevolent, but perhaps not—of an all-powerful government directed by one man or perhaps a small elite.

In other words, the danger of democratic despotism is not the *abuse* of majority rule but the effective *end* of majority rule. According to Tocqueville, this danger emerges in a way that will be surprising to us. Most Americans, and especially most conservatives, think of individualism as opposed to despotism. Tocqueville, however, suggests that the former can give rise to the latter.

Here again, religion provides a necessary corrective. Despotism can arise within democracy when excessive forms of individualism and materialism make citizens indifferent to their public duties. Religion restrains these tendencies by reminding men of their obligations to each other and teaching them that the virtues of the soul are superior to the pleasures of the body.

Despotism can arise within democracy when excessive forms of individualism and materialism make citizens indifferent to their public duties.

Tocqueville praises the tremendous social and economic energy unleashed by the American spirit of self-reliance and individual exertion, seeing its great potential to better the human condition. Nevertheless, he also warns that democracies are susceptible to a debilitating individualism that isolates citizens from each other and therefore undermines their ability to sustain the spirit of cooperative citizenship on which self-government depends.

Here, as in many other places in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warns of democracy's weaknesses by directing our attention to aristocracy's strengths. Aristocracies, he observes, bind men closely together in a web of reciprocal duties. The laws of inheritance keep families forever associated with a particular plot of land and thus give each family a prominent place in the imaginations of its members. Moreover, the caste system continually reminds individuals of their duties to members of their own class as well as of their obligations to those who are above and below them in the social hierarchy.

Democracies, by contrast, are devoid of such lasting social bonds. The democratic law of inheritance breaks up large estates, thus narrowing our sense of family obligation by diminishing our sense of the family as an institution with a long history. In addition, while democracies certainly have differences in wealth and status, they do not have permanently established classes that impose extensive duties on their members.

Democracy's overall effect on citizens, then, is to render them isolated from each other. Not only does it make "each man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in the solitude of his own heart."²⁸ To some extent, we simply have to accept these consequences of democracy. There is nothing anyone can do to make democratic citizens as closely linked to their fellows as are the subjects of an aristocracy. Nevertheless, Tocqueville warns us that we cannot responsibly permit democratic individualism to go unchecked. We must seek to moderate it because in its unrestrained form, it opens the door to despotism.

Despotism, whether it takes the form of rule by an individual or rule by a small political elite, actually favors a spirit of extreme individualism among its subjects. It wants them to be isolated from each other because their cooperation is a threat to the government's power. The despot, Tocqueville observes, "readily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided they do not love each other. He does not ask them to aid him in leading the state; it is enough that they do not aspire to direct it themselves."²⁹

28. *Ibid.*, p. 485.

29. *Ibid.*

Democracy thus favors the development of precisely the kind of habits that permit despotism to arise and flourish.

According to Tocqueville, the Americans of his time, aware of the political dangers that arise from the isolation of citizens from each other, took steps to moderate the individualism that democracy fosters. One of their most important tools in this indispensable task was “the doctrine of self-interest well understood.” American moral teachers, Tocqueville notes, work tirelessly to promote the idea that each citizen can advance his long-term interests most effectively by diverting some of his effort from the pursuit of his own needs and dedicating it to the needs of the community. By fostering the cooperation needed to sustain self-government, the doctrine of self-interest well understood helps Americans to maintain their freedom.

Tocqueville also contends, however, that the doctrine of self-interest well understood needs to be enlivened by religious belief if it is to accomplish all that democracy needs. If this doctrine “had only this world in view,” he argues, “it would be far from sufficient; for there are a great number of sacrifices that can find their recompense only in the other world.”³⁰

By teaching the existence of an afterlife with rewards for virtuous living, religion gives men the confidence to make the short-term sacrifices demanded by self-interest well understood. Without such beliefs, their sacrifices for the community in some cases would be made only with a certain reluctance and in other cases would be omitted entirely. One could not be sure that they would pay off, for one might die before receiving the return on one’s investment. Such doubts would inevitably stifle men’s public-spiritedness. The religious belief in rewards and punishments after death sustains such sacrifices by making their rewards certain. If one does not live long enough to be rewarded in the here and now, one can be sure of being rewarded in the hereafter. Thus, according to Tocqueville, does American religiosity combat the excessive individualism that can lead democracies to succumb to despotism.

Materialism and the Danger of Democratic Despotism

Another path by which democracy can fall into despotism is by succumbing to an excessive “passion for material well being.”³¹ Tocqueville observes that democracy engenders an “ardent” interest in acquiring material comforts. This trait, like the individualism that he also observes, is also dangerous to freedom. If the democratic taste for material comforts goes unchecked, Tocqueville warns, democratic citizens will begin to view the duties of political participation as a burden because they take time and energy away from private economic activity.

Once again, Tocqueville points to religion’s ability to protect democracy from its own worst tendencies. By teaching the immortality of the soul, religion provides the intellectual ground on which democratic man can rise above absorption in material cares, find his self-respect, and attend to his moral duties.

Democracy is not solely responsible for creating the taste for material well-being. On the contrary, Tocqueville acknowledges that this desire is “natural and instinctive” for human beings. But different regimes guide this passion differently: Aristocracy, for example, tends to calm this desire, while democracy tends to agitate it.

According to Tocqueville, “what attaches the heart most keenly” to material well-being “is not the peaceful possession of a precious object, but the imperfectly satisfied desire to possess it and the incessant fear of losing it.” That is, aristocracy tends to quiet the passion for material comfort in all classes by the way in which it presents such comforts to each class:

[In an aristocracy,] the people in the end become habituated to poverty like the rich to their opulence. The latter are not preoccupied with material well-being because they possess it without trouble; the former do not think about it because they despair of acquiring it and because they are not familiar enough with it to desire it.³²

30. *Ibid.*, p. 504.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 506.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 506-507.

In contrast, democracy tends to stimulate the love of material well-being universally, among all classes alike. Democracies do not have a fixed social hierarchy. As a result, although there are rich families, most of them have become rich through the exertions of their members. Such people cannot show the aristocrat's indifference to material comforts because these individuals' characters were formed while they were striving to acquire such comforts.

The rich in a democracy also know that through mismanagement of their fortunes, they may become poor. They are therefore worried about their material enjoyments even when their possessions are vast. Moreover, because there is the real possibility of social and economic mobility, even the poor in a democracy show a desire for material comforts. Finally, democracies are above all dominated by the middle class, whose position in life is such that it especially stimulates the desire for material comforts. Democracy therefore tends to produce a "multitude of mediocre fortunes." Those "who possess them have enough material enjoyments to conceive the taste for these enjoyments" but "not enough to be content with them."

As a result of all of these forces, the "love of material well-being" is the "national and dominant taste" in America. The "great current of human passions bears from this direction," and "it carries everything along in its course."³³

This taste for material well-being can be dangerous to freedom if it is not kept within reasonable limits. Obsessed with improving their economic status and winning material comforts, the citizens of a democracy may lose sight of how their prosperity depends in the long run on their ability to remain free.

According to Tocqueville, there is "no need to tear from such citizens the rights they possess; they themselves willingly let them escape. The exercise of their political duties appears to them a distressing contretemps that distracts them from their industry." Neglecting these duties, they leave a kind of vacuum in the political realm, a political void that may be filled by despotism. If "an ambitious, able man comes to take possession of power" under such

circumstances, he will find "the way open to every usurpation." And if he chooses the path of usurpation, the citizens will surrender their freedom and submit to his rule.³⁴

Obsessed with improving their economic status and winning material comforts, the citizens of a democracy may lose sight of how their prosperity depends in the long run on their ability to remain free.

Alternatively, despotism can also take a subtler but no less dangerous form: A small minority can dominate a nation's politics, directing it in the name of the people even while acting contrary to the people's interests:

[The members of such a faction] alone speak in the name of an absent or inattentive crowd; they alone act in the midst of universal immobility; they dispose of all things according to their whim, they change laws and tyrannize at will over mores; and one is astonished at the small number of weak and unworthy hands into which a great people can fall.

Here a democracy may arrive at despotism in practice while retaining self-government in form. The people retain all of their rights of political participation, but they do not use them because they are more interested in private pursuits.³⁵

For Tocqueville, religion is necessary to avert this danger. Nothing, he notes, has such a striking power to turn Americans away from their pursuit of gain as their religion. Every Sunday, they stop their work and go to church. There they encounter teachings that remind them of and give them inspiration to live up to their obligations to the community to which they belong. At holy services, the American is "told of the necessity of regulating his desires, of the delicate enjoyments attached to virtue alone, and of

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 507-508.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 515-516.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 516.

the true happiness that accompanies it.” Returning home, he opens “the book of the Holy Scriptures,” finding there “sublime or moving depictions of the greatness and the goodness of the Creator, of the infinite magnificence of the works of God, of the lofty destiny reserved for men, of their duties, and of their rights to immortality.”³⁶

To remain self-governing, Tocqueville teaches, people need to believe that they are made for something higher than the production and consumption of goods. Religion is necessary to that belief.

On the basis of these considerations, Tocqueville concludes that it is imperative for Americans—and all of the democratic peoples of Europe as well—to “maintain Christianity...at all cost.” Tocqueville is not writing here as an apologist for any particular religion; he is trying to defend the conditions of human freedom.

Once again, Tocqueville is writing neither as a theologian concerned with the theoretical truth of any particular religion nor as a preacher concerned with the salvation of souls, but rather as a political theorist concerned with the beliefs that are necessary to sustain a democratic people’s capacity for self-government. Thus, he emphasizes what he takes to be Christianity’s most politically relevant teaching, one that it holds in common with many other traditional religions: the immortality of the soul. “Most religions,” he contends, “are only general, simple, and practical means of teaching men the immortality of the soul.” This teaching “is the greatest advantage that a democratic people derives from” religious beliefs and is what makes these beliefs “more necessary to such a people than to all others.”³⁷

Belief in the immortality of the soul, Tocqueville argues, is necessary to counter philosophic materialism: the belief that there is nothing but matter and that human beings are therefore nothing but matter. This form of materialism is dangerous to any kind of society but especially perilous to a democracy because of its tendency to encourage the thirst for material well-being. This desire, if it goes unchecked, gradually suggests to men that there is nothing but matter, and the belief that there is nothing but

matter can only serve to convince men that material enjoyments are the only real enjoyments and thus to “carry them toward these enjoyments with an insane ardor.”

Such an excessive love of these pleasures is fatal to a people’s capacity for self-government. Therefore, religion should be cherished by democratic peoples because it teaches belief that the human soul is “immaterial and immortal,” which belief is in turn “necessary to the greatness of man.”³⁸

Tocqueville is writing neither as a theologian concerned with the theoretical truth of any particular religion nor as a preacher, but rather as a political theorist concerned with the beliefs that are necessary to sustain a democratic people’s capacity for self-government.

Human beings cannot attain the dignity required for self-government, both as individuals and in communities, unless they can subordinate their bodily desires to their moral and political duties. That subordination in turn requires that they believe that they have souls, that some part of their being transcends their ordinary material interests. Religion is essential to that belief and therefore necessary for human greatness.

Tocqueville’s concern to preserve the conditions of human greatness also leads him to warn against the pantheistic impulse in religion. Democracy modifies all traditional religions in the direction of pantheism: the belief that God is the universe and the universe is God. This belief gradually takes the place of the traditional belief that God is the Creator of the universe who stands apart from and above His creation. Pantheism is morally and politically dangerous, Tocqueville concludes, because it presents a God who gives no laws, to whom one can have no duties, and who therefore cannot inspire modern men to transcend their selfishness.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 517.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 520.

The popularization of pantheism, Tocqueville holds, is the result of equality's influence on the human mind. Democratic life disposes man to make use of "general ideas." Because democratic citizens continually encounter human beings who are equal and basically similar—pursuing the same ends by the same kinds of means, enjoying all the same rights and privileges—they are inclined toward simplicity of explanation and like to make use of general ideas that cover a multitude of complex phenomena with one basic idea. This tendency is also encouraged by their lack of leisure for detailed study.

Thus, democratic peoples are attracted to the idea that complex political phenomena, such as war, can be explained by the operation of simple economic motives that govern the actions of all human beings and that complex human phenomena, such our emotions, can be explained by chemical processes found in the brains of all animals. These same habits of mind, Tocqueville argues, lead democratic peoples to pantheistic—which is to say vague and very general—notions of the divine. "God and the universe" become enclosed "within a single whole."³⁹

"All who remain enamored of the genuine greatness of man," Tocqueville proclaims, "should unite to do combat against" pantheism.⁴⁰ Although Tocqueville does not explain in detail why pantheism is a threat to human greatness, his account provides the materials with which the attentive reader can piece together the explanation for himself.

Belief in the immortality of the soul is necessary to man's ability to look down on and thus transcend his desire for material comforts. That ability is in turn necessary to man's capacity for self-rule, both as an individual and as a member of a political community. Without the belief that there is a part of his nature that is higher than his bodily desires, he will be unable to control those desires, to subordinate them to some conception of his moral and political duties. And without each man's ability to exercise such individual self-rule, the community as a whole will be incapable of self-rule, because most citizens will ignore politics while pursuing their own private interests.

Democracy's pantheistic impulse, however, tends to create the kind of religion that actually undermines man's ability to look down on his bodily

desires and conceive his moral and political duties as something higher to which he must subordinate those desires. Because pantheism places God in all things, because it divinizes all things, it obliterates the sense of a moral hierarchy that is crucial for man to govern his lower nature. If all things are divine, then all activities are divine. If the single-minded pursuit of private gain is just as divine as attention to the common good, there is no compelling reason for the democratic individual to resist his inclination to the former and dedicate part of his life to politics. And when most citizens refuse to fulfill their duties of political participation, the path is cleared for the despotic rule of an individual or a minority.

Tocqueville thus teaches us that religion—or the right kind of religion—is necessary to human greatness within democracy. Religion teaches the immortality of the soul. Belief in the immortality of the soul is necessary to man's self-rule, on the level of both the individual and the community, and self-rule, in a sense, deserves to be called human greatness. This is perhaps more immediately obvious on the level of the individual. Certainly, we would call no man great who lived for nothing but to satisfy his desire for material comforts, who permitted himself to be borne along by such desires with no effort at all to direct them to anything higher.

Popular self-rule, government by the people, is not the ordinary tendency of things but instead a rare and high achievement.

It is more difficult to see why popular self-government should be understood as a form of human greatness. We are so accustomed to it that we take it for granted, believing (mistakenly) that it is just part of the ordinary course of politics. Yet Tocqueville took the longer view of human history, realizing that popular self-rule, government by the people, is not the ordinary tendency of things but instead a rare and high achievement. Most societies in history have not attained it. The Americans were able to achieve

39. *Ibid.*, p. 426.

40. *Ibid.*

and sustain it because of their virtuous habits of public-spirited attention to the affairs of the community, and their religion was necessary to sustain those virtues and therefore necessary to America's claim to political greatness.

The Challenge of Sustaining Religion in Democracy

Tocqueville's teaching on the role of religion in a modern democracy presents us not so much with a solution to a problem as with a challenge. There is, after all, no button that we can push to activate religion and thus automatically correct democracy's tendency to lose its freedom. On the contrary, Tocqueville's teaching reminds us that as responsible citizens of a democracy, we must take care to preserve the country's inherited religious traditions and that this task in turn requires a clear understanding of democracy's character and needs.

This task is a challenge because democratic conditions tend to undermine religion—to undermine the system of belief that is so necessary to the preservation of freedom. The inhabitants of a democracy, Tocqueville observes, tend to be natural skeptics and rationalists. Aristocracy fosters a kind of trust in authority: Since most men are uneducated and must rely on a small class of enlightened rulers, they acquire habits of faith in some superior intelligence. Democracy does away with such a hierarchy and leaves all men fundamentally equal. Such men are left to rely primarily on their own understanding to answer the questions they confront in life; as a result, they are not much disposed to trust any human authority, nor sometimes even divine authority.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville certainly does not suggest that religion is doomed to extinction by the rise of democracy. On the contrary, he holds out hope that religion can be preserved within democracy, despite the social and intellectual forces working against it. This is possible, Tocqueville suggests, because religion is rooted in something even more fundamental than the democratic social state: human nature.

Tocqueville indicates repeatedly that man is by nature a religious being, or at least open to religion. The short span of this life “will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart.” Man is

unique among animals because he alone shows both “a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist: he scorns life and fears nothingness.” The effect of these disparate passions impels man's “soul toward contemplation of another world, and it is religion that guides it there.” Accordingly, religion is “only a particular form of hope,” one that is “as natural to the human heart as hope itself.”⁴¹

To sum up the situation as Tocqueville sees it, religion is necessary to the preservation of freedom within democracy but is itself in danger of being undermined by democracy. Nevertheless, it is also rooted in human nature and therefore capable of being preserved even in democratic times. What steps, then, must be taken to preserve and strengthen religion in democratic times? How can we draw on human nature to preserve religion's influence against the democratic social state's tendency to undermine it? According to Tocqueville, this essential task requires a certain prudent statesmanship that must be practiced both by religious leaders and by political leaders.

Tocqueville advises religious leaders to take care that their presentation of the faith not needlessly offend modern democratic sensibilities. He does not suggest that they should modify their *doctrines* to suit modern tastes. That would be counterproductive, since a religion that edits its fundamental teachings to curry favor with the public cannot be taken seriously as a source of divine teaching. It is, however, possible for religious leaders to modify the presentation and practice of the faith in nonessentials so as to avoid alienating their flocks.

As we have seen, democracy favors a certain simplicity in doctrine. The taste for general ideas inclines the democratic mind to prefer a simple system, such as one that emphasizes the relationship between God and the human person, over more complex schemes that emphasize a wide variety of intermediary beings. Accordingly, in democratic times, there should be less emphasis by religious leaders on veneration of the saints and angels, which in the past was so congenial to the aristocratic mind, the kind of mind that had been habituated to think in terms of a complex hierarchy.

Similarly, Tocqueville also advises democratic religions to keep the externals of their worship as

41. Ibid., p. 284.

simple as possible. Democratic men, he argues, are pragmatic and businesslike. They want any task—including the worship of God—to be completed in as efficient and straightforward a manner as possible. They have nothing like the taste for ceremony and form that characterizes aristocratic ages.

Finally, coming to the question of human conduct, Tocqueville holds that religious leaders should not set themselves too inflexibly against the people's pursuit of material comforts. This inclination could be condemned in aristocratic ages, but such outright denunciation would go too much against the grain of democratic man's character. Therefore, religious leaders in democratic times should teach men to restrain their love of such comforts but not tell them to give them up entirely. By making excessively demanding claims, religion would succeed not in reforming men, but instead in making them ignore religion's claims.⁴²

Tocqueville contends that religion is so powerful in America precisely *because* of the separation of church and state.

Turning to political leaders, Tocqueville's advice is both negative and positive. He emphasizes both a fundamental error to be avoided and the things that must be done. He insists, in the first place, that we must avoid the error of creating an official establishment of religion. This advice is congenial to the American mind, since it approves the policy that our Founders placed in the Constitution: The First Amendment forbids Congress to make any law respecting an establishment of religion.

Nevertheless, from the standpoint of the task at hand, Tocqueville's advice might seem counterintuitive: If democracy needs religion, and if responsible political leadership means providing for the things that democracy needs, then why should our political leaders not safeguard religion's place in the community by supporting it with governmental power? Tocqueville believes that the American Founders, in setting up a separation of church and state, had actually

struck upon an arrangement that would both protect religious liberty and help religion to flourish. He contends that religion is so powerful in America precisely *because* of the separation of church and state.

The union of religion and politics, Tocqueville argues, actually tends in the long run to weaken the citizens' attachment to religion by tying it to all of the dissatisfaction and animosity that is inevitably caused by wielding political power. Put another way, the union of church and state actually makes some men—even those disposed to be believers—into political enemies of religion. This danger, he held, is especially acute in a democracy. The politics of an aristocracy is characterized by stability, while the politics of a democracy is characterized by agitation and change. In the latter, power passes from hand to hand, and parties rise and fall, so quickly that it would be folly to think that religion could be aided by being tied to such transitory allies. Given religion's natural hold on the human mind, then, the first step in ensuring its social and political power is not to hinder it artificially by tying it to the government.⁴³

Such negative advice, however, does not preclude the possibility of positive steps that democratic leaders might take to lend their support to religion. Democratic statesmen can use their position to foster religious belief even as they scrupulously avoid using the power of government to do so. In fact, Tocqueville contends, this is one of their most important duties. Religion is so important to democracy's ability to remain free that "legislators of democracies and all honest and enlightened men who live in them must apply themselves relentlessly to raising up souls and keeping them turned toward heaven." If such leaders are truly concerned for the "future of democratic societies," they must "unite" to "make continuous efforts to spread within these societies a taste for the infinite, a sentiment of greatness, and a love of immaterial pleasures."⁴⁴

How, we may wonder, is this to be done, especially when Tocqueville insists that democratic statesmen must not pursue this end by using the most obvious tool they have at their disposal: the power of the government? Tocqueville hesitates to give his answer, deterred by how strange he expects it will sound to

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 419–423.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 282–288.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

most democratic political leaders, but is nevertheless driven to it by democracy's need for religion and the lack of alternative means to support it. Recognizing that his claim will "harm" him "in the eyes of politicians," he declares that "the only efficacious means governments can use to put the dogma of the immortality of the soul in honor is to act every day as if they themselves believed it" and that "it is only in conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs that they can flatter themselves they are teaching citizens to know it, love it, and respect it in small ones."⁴⁵

Tocqueville expects that most democratic politicians will scoff at this advice because he knows that they ordinarily think of nothing but winning power for themselves by delivering benefits to their constituents. He also knows, however, that the ordinary behavior of democratic politicians is a true indication only of the smallness of their own minds, not of what is necessary to the greatness of a free democracy. He teaches that democratic freedom requires a flourishing religion, which in turn requires that we strive to produce statesmen with the loftiness of vision to see, and the courage of heart to give, democracy what its greatness requires rather than what its passions demand.

Conclusion

America's religious landscape has changed markedly since Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States and wrote *Democracy in America*. The country is not as religious now as it was then, and the religious segment of the country is not as exclusively Christian as it was then. One could not say today, as Tocqueville said in the 1830s, that all commerce and activity stops on Sunday or that everyone in American public life is obliged to profess respect for Christian morality. These changes, however, do not render Tocqueville's teaching about religion and democracy irrelevant to us any more than other far-reaching changes in American society render irrelevant other institutions bequeathed to us by the Founders and emphasized by Tocqueville as necessary to freedom and democracy.

The national government, for example, is far more powerful and extensive today than it was in the 19th century, and the executive branch is far more

powerful and exercises a much more wide-ranging discretion than it did in the 19th century. But we do not abandon our commitment to fundamental American principles such as federalism and separation of powers simply because we can see no hope of making today's government conform to those principles in the same way that it did in the early years of the republic. We instead seek to sustain and restore these principles to the extent possible in contemporary circumstances, with a view to preserving freedom to the extent that we can do so in our time.

So it is with religion. The responsible democratic statesman could not and should not aim to restore America as a Christian nation such as it was in the 1830s. Such a statesman can and should, however, seek to learn from Tocqueville what Christianity contributed to the growth and flourishing of American democracy and how a certain kind of religion—a religion that reminds majorities of the limits on their just power and individuals of their duties to their fellows and to the political community—is necessary to support democracy in general. Such a statesman would then be in a position to try to preserve what remains of the freedom-sustaining moral culture first planted in America by Christianity; to acknowledge and encourage the politically salutary teachings of America's non-Christian religions; and to remind everyone, including America's non-religious citizens, of the positive contribution that religion can make to upholding democracy and freedom in our own time.

Such a Tocquevillian statesmanship would take religion seriously, but without a spirit of religious dogmatism. Such a statesman offers not a sectarian call to a religiously pristine past, but a set of principles by which we can chart our way into a future that will be different but will also preserve the essential virtues of the past and with them the freedom we have inherited.

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45. *Ibid.*, p. 521.