

Harvey C. Mansfield

## PROVIDENCE AND DEMOCRACY

I stop the fast American whom I meet... and I ask him if he believes religion to be useful to the stability of laws and to the good order of society; he answers me without hesitation that a civilized society, but above all a free society, cannot subsist without religion... Those least versed in the science of government know that at least.  
Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*

Alexis de Tocqueville was a liberal, but, as he once wrote, a “new kind of liberal.” For us, no feature of his new liberalism is more remarkable than the alliance between religion and liberty that he saw in America and proposed to be imitated, wherever it can, in every free society.

In liberalism today, there is a debate over whether liberal theory needs—or should avoid—a “foundation.” Tocqueville seems to take the anti-foundational side: he never mentions the “state of nature,” which was the standard foundation of 17th-century liberalism, and in *Democracy in America* he omits any reference to the Declaration of Independence with its ringing foundational assertion that “all men are created equal.” Yet, if he avoids laying a foundation in reason, he also thinks that religion is essential to political liberty because of the “certain fixed ideas” that it offers to ground the practice of self-government. These are doctrines of faith, since for Tocqueville “religion” means revealed religion, not a rational or natural religion.

These doctrines, however, include articles of reason encompassed in faith. Tocqueville was a strong opponent of divine right in politics and a strong proponent of the separation of church and state. Although he praised the Puritans highly as be-

ing the “point of departure” for democracy in America, he criticized their theocratic character. Personally, he seems to have suffered a crisis early in life when, as he recounts it, he came upon the books of 18th-century materialists in his father’s library and promptly and permanently (so far as we know) lost his faith, not only in religion but in “all the truths” that supported his beliefs and his actions.

Questions arise that are still with us: What does Tocqueville hold against the introduction of foundational principles in democratic politics, and how can they be kept out? What is the relationship between philosophy and religion, given the hostility of modern philosophers (particularly the French philosophes) to religion and his desire to make an alliance between the two? Just what essential support does religion supply to political liberty—the essential liberty according to Tocqueville—so that despite the separation of church and state necessary to political liberty, he can say, strikingly, that religion “should be considered the first of [the Americans’] political institutions”?

## **Mores**

To see how Tocqueville understands religion one must look to his view of mores, for in *Democracy in America* (where his main discussion of religion can be found), he first treats religion as the most important of mores. Mores (moeurs), defined as “the whole moral and intellectual state of a people,” comprise both morals and customs. His definition comes from the ancients, and is related to their emphasis on virtue in human affairs, but it is virtue understood as typical, ordinary, or average, so that modern thinkers who seek laws or rules of social behavior, such as Montesquieu and Rousseau, could find the concept useful and congenial, too. Mores are connected in Tocqueville to another, newer concept of the social state (*état social*), the product (or union) of fact and laws, which then in turn becomes the “first cause” of most of a society’s laws, customs, and ideas. Mores and the social state are partly chosen by a society and partly not chosen—the two elements confused together. The consequence is the blurring of the early social-contract liberals’ clear view that politics is best understood as primarily a human choice made to escape the state of nature, which is not chosen by us.

Tocqueville declares in the Introduction to *Democracy in America* that democracy is a “providential fact.” It is a trend that began 700 years ago and only in his time has come to light as providential in the one country—America—that has adopted it and applied it fully and successfully. To call it providential means to deny that it is a human choice or discovery, for example the choice or discovery of John Locke, the philosopher who inspired the Declaration of Independence. Instead of Locke and the Declaration, Tocqueville begins with the Puritans. To be sure, the Puritans came to America with an idea: “They wanted to make an idea triumph.” But it was a religious and Christian idea, which led them to call themse-

ives pilgrims. Yet the religious doctrine was blended with “the most absolute democratic and republican theories”—not merely of equality but also of self-government and public education, all of which were put into practice by the Puritans. In place of liberalism and its deistic or atheistic foundation in the state of nature, Tocqueville sets the Puritans—their religious idea together with their practices. It was they who first brought democracy into “broad daylight,” not as a foundation but active and complete as a way of life. They not merely offered an idea but also were able to live by it, transforming it into the mores of a social state that could be considered the “first cause” of American democracy.

Nonetheless, Tocqueville goes on to criticize them gently—without Puritan severity— but profoundly. They were after all puritanical in their “ardor for regulation” and their “narrow spirit of sect” and legislated against sin with abundant resort to penalties of death. Their excesses had to be and were corrected at the time of the American Revolution in what James Ceaser has called “Tocqueville’s second founding,” when many states abandoned the establishment of religion in favor of the separation of church and state.

### **Indirectly Under God**

The puritan point of departure needed to be departed from, and replaced by the principle, or dogma, of “the sovereignty of the people.” Not wishing to offend religion or praise its enemies, Tocqueville doesn’t mention its disestablishment. He only says strangely that according to this new sovereignty, “the people reign over the American political world as God does over the universe”—as if somehow the people who are like God had replaced God. The people, strictly speaking, have no authority above themselves. They set an authority above themselves when they establish the Constitution, yet do not retain the power to unseat God as they do the Constitution. Indeed, “what makes a people master of itself if it has not submitted to God?” A people, like an individual person, makes itself more powerful, not less, with self-restraint. As political scientist Bryan Garsten has written, the American people turn religion from an external to an internal restraint.

Since religion has its influence in America through mores, it works more indirectly than directly. Even when considering religion “from a purely human point of view,” Tocqueville observes, it has an unfailing source of strength in human nature: “the desire for immortality that torments the hearts of all men equally.” When founded on this desire, religions can aim at universality, but when they become united with government, they, apply only to certain peoples. Religion should avoid attaching itself to earthly authority and forswear all reliance on divine right, using mores; to regulate democracy rather than relying, on laws as much as the Puritans did. Religion is more powerful if it is pure, and it is pure only if it avoids earthly attachments. Paradoxically, religion is more powerful politically if it stays out of

politics, if it does not appear as an authority in its own regard but under cover of the mores that the people practice and hold to.

These are Tocqueville's formulations, yet ever careful as he is to deprecate the role of philosophy and of the philosopher, he presents them as opinions of Americans; the paradox that the less religion is involved with politics the greater is its sway over politics is the perception, he reports, of American priests. Not that they have much choice: they perceive that the majority wants them to stay out of politics. There is another power with whom American clergy share their indirect influence, and that is American women. Religion, he says, does little to restrain the American man from his ardor for self-enrichment, but it "reigns as a sovereign over the soul of woman, and it is woman who makes mores." It was a commonplace of the philosophes that superstitious women were willing victims of the manipulation of superstition by the clergy, but when we consult Tocqueville, we find a contrary statement. He says that Americans give girls an education in reason as well as religion, and that they resort to religion for defense of their virtue only when „they have reached the last limits of human force." American women are not weak and credulous; they "display a manly reason and a wholly virile energy" yet "always remain women in their manners."

Here, as with the clergy, one may suspect that Tocqueville's description is idealized, masking a recommendation he would prefer not to give outright. He is as modest and as manly as the American women he pictures. It would not have surprised him, however, that in our time women have chosen to be manly and have abandoned the defense, if not the practice, of modesty.

### **Mediocrity and Materialism**

In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville turns to the question of the truth of religion as opposed to, or in addition to, its usefulness. His approach to the question is still through the usefulness of religion, but now we get a better view of just how it is useful and why American democracy has a stake in its truth. We also see better why he distrusts ideas and why philosophy needs to be concealed under religion.

Religion is useful mainly because it hinders the taste for material enjoyments that is endemic to American democracy, indeed to modern democracy as such. Religion is of course a brake on licentious liberty and on the sovereignty of the democratic majority. It opposes the "maxim that everything is permitted in the interest of society," an impious maxim, Tocqueville says, "that seems to have been invented in the century of freedom to legitimate all the tyrants to come." Yet the true danger is not in the occasional viciousness of democracy, but in the mediocrity of soul it produces in law-abiding citizens through the taste for material pleasures. This taste is surely bourgeois, but it comes from democracy, not from what we call capitalism.

When all are equal, no one has natural authority over anyone else, and when a democratic citizen looks for a guide to life, he finds no superior in whom to trust—and ends his search by looking to himself. To him there is no distant goal in life to which he can devote himself, for everything beyond the immediate is vague and beyond his ken. The only evident goods to him are palpable and available—material goods—and he devotes himself to goods that he and everyone like him (his semblables) can appreciate.

Religion, however, is a “form of hope” in human nature. Its most important practical teaching is that man has an immortal soul, which is therefore divine, and man’s natural hope is that he will live forever. To have an immortal soul is a possession of inestimable value, yet it is also universal and equal, hence democratic, its perfection not a goal of aristocratic honor that sets one above others. As a form of hope, religion is not primarily a form of fear (except insofar as one fears one’s hope for salvation may be dashed), as the early liberal theorists, particularly Thomas Hobbes, supposed. The fear of invisible spirits (said Hobbes) and the uneasiness of the self (Locke) turn one’s attention to the present; hope appeals to the future. In the future lies accomplishment in which one can take pride.

The early liberals believed human pride to be the source of trouble, especially the prideful notion that human beings are special in the universe because of their immortal-souls. This claim, which is so easy to make in general and so hard to specify in particular, leads easily to the tyranny of religion or to the miseries of religious civil war. But for Tocqueville, the reliance on worldly passions such as fear and material gain produces abject souls more fit for despotism than liberty, and the weaknesses of democracy are rather stability and stagnation than anarchy and rebelliousness. So for him religion promotes liberty by teaching men that they are special and that they deserve to take pride in their accomplishments. His most significant apparent departure from Christianity is from Christian humility. It is in regard to pride that he says, with apparently conflicting import, that religion is “the most precious inheritance from aristocratic centuries,” and yet that religion warms the hearth of patriotism in America.

The pride constituting the specialness of man emerges in Tocqueville’s insistence on the greatness of man. He seeks to rally the „true friends of liberty and human greatness,” and he puts the two together because liberty mired in mediocrity brings on the new sort of despotism he identifies at the end of Democracy in America, mild (*doux*) despotism. Mediocre souls trapped in material enjoyments will readily trade their political liberty for peace and security in those enjoyments. Such people suffer from the new democratic ill he identifies as „individualism,” which occurs when democratic citizens believe and feel themselves to be passive victims of large, impersonal, historical forces they cannot control or influence. In reaction, they withdraw from the public, forgetting they are citizens, and concentrate their lives on family, friends, and themselves. Losing sight of the public, they become oblivious to any distant goal and welcome the benevolent aid of big government, “the

immense being” that acts on it knows better and offers to take over responsibility for the „trouble of thinking and the pain of living,” Tocqueville says sarcastically.

### **Doubt and Materialism**

Thus the only true liberty is political liberty, in which the goal and the result may sometimes be greatness but the practice of which exercises the soul, regardless. He remarks on Americans’ veneration for Plymouth Rock, a piece of matter that matters to them: „Does this not show very clearly that the power and greatness of man are wholly in his soul?” Religion provides a confirmation that men are not mere pawns of fate or of chance forces hostile or indifferent to them; it is a guarantee of greatness in human spirituality as it connects men to God. Religion combats the short-sightedness and fecklessness of democracy, and gives it something to be proud of, above the mediocrity of material enjoyments.

When this mediocrity reveals itself as the main enemy of democracy through the erosion of political liberty, we come upon the baleful influence of democratic ideas. We begin to appreciate why Tocqueville is so suspicious of philosophy. What he often simply calls „doubt,” so characteristic of democratic ages, is philosophic doubt of religion that issues in the suspense of belief—or in practice, when suspense is no longer possible, in denial of belief, and in materialism. The doubt in question amounts to a denial of the human soul and in consequence, of human agency (as we say today). The spiritual, not the material, is what is doubted—though in modern mathematical physics it turns out not to be so easy to define or grasp what matter is.

In the early liberalism Tocqueville rejects, men are liberated from prejudice and superstition only to be enthralled to the worldly passions of fear and gain; they are conquered or bullied into promising obedience (in Hobbes’s theory) or „quickly driven into society” (in Locke’s words) rather than freely choosing to give their allegiance. The model for liberty is the abstract, pre-political state of nature, which is only posited and may or may not exist, rather than the actual model of political liberty that Tocqueville finds in the township of New England. Early liberalism is apolitical; it supports politics with non-political motives and it betrays the goal of liberty with the passive and slavish means it specifies for achieving liberty. This is not liberalism with a soul, like Tocqueville’s liberalism, because it degrades souls by overwhelming them with fear and seducing them with incentives for material gain. It is not a liberalism that can sustain liberty.

Materialism teaches democratic peoples that they have nothing special in them to be proud of, and in the form of the scientific determinism powerful in Tocqueville’s time, that they are incapable of avoiding the fate that chance decrees and science uncovers and displays for all to see. But since pride is in human nature, materialists are unable to avoid taking pride in themselves. Their system might be

useful if it gave them and taught others to take a modest idea of oneself—all of us, including Nobel prize winners, being matter of little account—but materialists do not in fact draw or expound this lesson. When they believe they have proved that men are no better than brutes, Tocqueville says, they are „as proud as if they had demonstrated they were gods.” The scientific materialism that deprives citizens of their belief in the possibility of self-government is used to justify, instead, the rational control of citizens by experts with knowledge of such science.

The danger of materialist ideas in our democratic age is responsible for Tocqueville’s leery distrust of philosophical ideas, and for his selective trust in religious ideas. As we shall see, the religious ideas he presents have more to do with philosophy than with revelation. He approves of certain philosophical ideas, such as those advancing spiritualism, but without much discrimination. He would rather you believe your soul can migrate to the body of a pig than that you have no soul. He reserves his approval for whatever spiritual doctrine emerges from philosophy, and criticizes the usual effects of philosophical inquiry in democracy. Philosophical inquiry begins with doubt, but instead of truly doubting, people taught to doubt merely doubt the authority of others and then turn to themselves and their own authority. That is why he treats Descartes, the philosopher of doubt, as a teacher of democracy—a perceptive estimation one will not find in textbooks.

When Cartesian doubt is generalized and transferred from philosopher to citizen, the result is the democratic dogma that each individual has reason sufficient to run his own life. So Descartes’s thought is most perfectly realized in America where nobody has read Descartes because nobody needs to read him, where doubt of dogmatic authority has become the dogmatic authority of doubt. In the modern age the democratic propensity for material well-being, with its mediocrity, its individualism, and its mild despotism, renders philosophical materialism dangerous, and all philosophy dubious because in that age philosophy is likely to be materialist.

### **Faith and Philosophy**

The debate over foundations in liberalism today is between those who insist on philosophical foundations of liberty, so as to exclude illiberal notions of virtue or salvation that are harmful and hostile to liberty, and those who argue that such foundations are an infringement of liberty and in any case difficult to prove and to gain consent for. Tocqueville stands on neither side of this debate but in a middle position of his own. Though opposed to philosophical foundations, he holds that America has and needs foundations in religious faith in order to keep its democratic liberty.

As to philosophy, Tocqueville writes: „Americans have not needed to draw their philosophic method from books; they have found it in themselves.” And as to religion: „Men... have an immense interest in making very fixed ideas for themse-

ives about God, their souls, their general duties.” In the first quotation we see Tocqueville rejecting the bookish influence of philosophers in favor of actual practice, by which citizens manage to make their way forward without the guide of a foundation prescribed by philosophy. In the second quotation, however, we see the need stated for „very fixed ideas” that do not arise from practice but precede and guide practice. These ideas must come from religion rather than philosophy. Any society, and especially a democratic one, must take account of what most people think, and most people have recourse to the dogmas of religion for guidance because they have neither the time nor the capacity for philosophizing. Even if they did or could philosophize, they would find that through the ages, philosophers „despite all their efforts... have been able to discover only a few contradictory notions.”

Those who try to rely on philosophy for the fixed ideas they need in their ordinary lives, Tocqueville says, do not find them but come to grief in doubt. „Doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyses all the others.” Each person becomes accustomed to hearing confused and changing opinions on matters of most interest to himself and people like him—vaguely troubling issues of the day, in which it is hard to follow the arguments. We throw up our hands, feeling defeated, and in cowardly fashion refuse to think. If people will not think, doubt „cannot fail to enervate souls,” thereby threatening the maintenance of liberty because enervated souls will not take the trouble to exercise liberty or defend it. Thus one of his memorable phrases: „I am brought to think that if [a man] has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.”

Here is a liberal who rejects liberal foundations in philosophy yet requires them in religion. But his statement against doubt blames it for preventing people from thinking, that is, from thinking practically and usefully. Philosophical thinking leads to paralysis of practical thinking, in which overmatched would-be philosophers are led ultimately to passive acceptance of things as they are. Philosophy may begin from the questioning of authority, but when it appears that all the questioning leads to no answers, it stops and finds rest in the conclusion that nothing can be done. Faith, then, is not a substitute for reasoning simply, but only for philosophical reasoning; it clears the way, and is actually the basis, for reasoning about one’s closest interests.

Tocqueville says that religion imposes a „salutary yoke” on the intellect by preventing the use of individual reason to raise doubt and by establishing „general ideas” about God and human nature that permit men to recognize” an authority.” Reason as philosophy gets in the way of reason as practice because the one attacks authority and the other requires it. Now what is the solution? Is it merely to declare that the two aspects of reason are antithetical, and that practice being more important than philosophy, the need for active practice must dominate the pleasure, if it is a pleasure, of speculating—that dogma must silence philosophy?



Tocqueville does not adopt that solution, though he may appear to do so because sometimes he seems to criticize all philosophy, philosophy itself. But he also shows appreciation for the contemplative life of the philosopher, praising the “ardent, haughty, and disinterested love of the true” one finds in Pascal and Archimedes’ lofty contempt for practice as “vile, low, and mercenary.” He distinguishes the science of the “most theoretical principles,” which may flourish in aristocracy, from science devoted to practical applications, which is characteristic of science in democracy. It is a weakness of democracy that it does not encourage “the contemplation of first causes.” Tocqueville himself warns his readers that he feels “obliged to push each of his ideas to all its theoretical consequences,” and he does not hesitate to speak of “first causes.”

### Reasonable Religion

Religion, then, does not replace philosophy or science, but it serves as their public face and supplies the fixed ideas that men need to live in freedom. Servility of soul is not the consequence of religion, as the philosophes asserted, but of anti-religious materialism, which denies the soul by demeaning man into matter, or abases the soul by endorsing the democratic propensity to a life of material well-being.

At the end of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville discloses something of the character of the religion he recommends. It is not just any religion, as he seemed to imply earlier when speaking of religion as part of democratic mores. But a reasonable religion the confirms the intelligibility of nature and of the world.

In his own name he strives, like a philosopher, like the youthful Pascal but with a view to the intelligible, to enter into the comprehensive “point of view of God” in regard to democracy and aristocracy. God is approachable to man through His mind. Although Tocqueville speaks here of, “as it were, two humanities,” thus apparently distinguishing them profoundly, he also justifies the comparisons he has made continuously throughout the book by referring them to one superhuman whole in which they are joined. “God” is apparently a person, and clearly distinct from His Creation.

Tocqueville does not insist on the difference between revealed and natural or rational religion, and he had declared that “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.” Revealed truth is distinct from the truth of nature, but revelation makes nature apparent to us in a way unassisted human realism cannot. Philosophy is the under a duty not overlook the difference between itself and revelation but also not to present that difference in a way hostile to the latter. The order that Tocqueville seen in or imputes to God’s mind leaves untouched the statements of God’s hidden character in Scripture without contradicting them.

Religion understood as the order of God's mind repels "two false and cowardly doctrines." What are they? We see them in what he writes of Providence: "Providence has not created the human race either entirely independent or perfectly slave." The first is the aristocratic criticism of democracy that it is anarchic; the second is the democratic idea that peoples "necessarily obey I do not know which insurmountable and unintelligent force born of previous events, the race, the soil, or the climate." Strangely, both of these may be found in liberal social-contract theories—the first in the state of nature in which men are anarchic and at war; the second in the means for escaping the state of nature, which play on fear and subject men to "insurmountable and unintelligent force," consisting variously of the laws or rules of sub-rational motivation discovered by history and social science. As opposed to these, religion can cement its alliances with liberty and with reason, all three together in the politics of democracy.

The two contraries of being entirely independent and perfectly enslaved stand for the two aspects of chance, unpredictability and subjection – "chance fate" – to which religion is opposed. Religion as Tocqueville portrays it tries to make our life predictable, but not so predictable that we can succeed without trying. And it sets limits to our intellect, our freedom, and our choice – but not such narrow limits that we can never succeed no matter how hard we try. The task of politics, which Tocqueville sometimes calls, in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, the task of the legislator, is to cooperate with religion and to guide our lives so that our virtue is rewarded and our freedom preserved.

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