

## A STATE OF FAITH: TOCQUEVILLE'S CIVIL APOLOGETIC

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“No doubt the reader has noticed the preamble to these regulations,” remarked Alexis de Tocqueville.<sup>1</sup> The young French aristocrat and reformer was referring to New England’s seventeenth-century provisions for universal public education. He pointed out that the Puritan education code opened with the declaration that “one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, [is] to keep men from the knowledge of the scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville mused on the spiritual nature of this civil law, advancing it as an illustration of the fact that “in America it is religion which leads to enlightenment and the observance of divine laws which leads men to liberty.”<sup>3</sup> This line encapsulates one of the chief themes of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840): religious faith can be an essential companion to egalitarian democracy. After a nine-month tour of the United States, Tocqueville concluded that America’s example provided reason for his fellow nineteenth-century liberals to embrace religion.

Historians and political scientists debate the nature of Tocqueville’s claim. Does *Democracy in America* advocate religion on a politically functional basis, for the sake of democratic expedience, or on a substantive basis, for the sake of conviction? (One scholar has characterized the same alternatives as “strategy” and “sincerity.”<sup>4</sup>) In other words, did Tocqueville really believe in the metaphysical claims of the religion he was advancing? In many ways, the text and Tocqueville’s life story suggest that he did not. Although Tocqueville argued in *Democracy* that religion is not only

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., 1969; Harper & Row Perennial Library, 1988), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> James M. Sloat, “The Subtle Significance of Sincere Belief: Tocqueville’s Account of Religious Belief and Democratic Stability,” *Journal of Church and State* 42.4 (Fall 2000): 759.

compatible with, but even necessary to human freedom, he did not accompany this political appeal with traditional metaphysical arguments. In other words, contrary to what would be expected if the book's approach is substantive and devout, the author did not direct his appeal to individual conscience. Furthermore, Tocqueville's own spiritual convictions are difficult to define; although he participated in Catholic services, he expressed grave and persistent doubts about their content, as this article will show. This might lead readers to conclude that he respected religion for its utility rather than for its truthfulness.

Nevertheless, while Tocqueville's personal beliefs are relevant to the discussion, they were ambiguous enough to preclude an easy answer to the question. On one hand, a philosopher with such doubts as he expressed seems unlikely to have been a champion of sincere, substantive faith. On the other, a philosopher with such spiritual longings as he confessed seems unlikely to have advocated merely expedient forms. Despite Tocqueville's doubts about the particulars of Catholicism, the religion he followed formally if not earnestly, we have little evidence that he entirely rejected the metaphysical content of the faith. Rather, Tocqueville's descriptions of himself indicate a desire, if not an ability, to believe substantively. In addition, his writings suggest that he believed that the sources of human desires (including religious desires) lie in something beyond humanity. He apparently believed in the existence of God and a spiritual aspect to reality, even if he doubted the validity of particular religions.

In fact, if Tocqueville's own belief in Catholicism was difficult even for him to establish, defend, or (on the other hand) overcome, perhaps readers should set aside the question of religious content altogether. This is the perspective that the current article will advance. Tocqueville was employing neither a politically functional nor a substantive argument for religious forms. Instead, he argued that religion, broadly speaking, is already a core part of fulfilled human existence in democratic societies as well as aristocratic ones. In his understanding, religion and democracy run

parallel as components of the ideal human life. Furthermore, he believed that specific religious institutions derive from higher spiritual truths, which exist prior to both democracy and organized religion. In other words, if Tocqueville's religion is expedient, it is religiously as well as politically expedient.

From its author's perspective, *Democracy in America* was not an attempt to promote religion as either true or useful, but rather an attempt to remove the most prominent barrier to its acceptance on either basis. It is in this sense that the book may be seen as an apologetic work. Reacting to other French liberals, who tended to attack religion as a threat to human liberty, Tocqueville collected evidence that religion—which he viewed as humanity's natural outlook—is compatible with freedom after all.

#### SUPPORT FOR A FUNCTIONAL INTERPRETATION

Certainly, good arguments can be made for a functional understanding of Tocqueville's religion. Not least convincing is the argument that Tocqueville lacked firm doctrinal conviction for most of his life. The fact that he persisted in attending Catholic services despite his doubts suggests that his perspective on religion was functional, and the fact that he advocated religion on the basis of compatibility with democracy despite these doubts, reinforces the impression.<sup>5</sup>

In a personal letter written just a few years after the publication of *Democracy*, the young nobleman confessed frankly,

I am not a believer (which I am far from saying in order to praise myself), but nonbeliever that I am, I have never been able to keep myself from feeling profound emotion when reading the gospel. Several of the most important doctrines contained there have always struck me as absolutely new, and the collection forms something entirely different from the body of philosophical ideas and moral laws that had previously governed human societies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville, 295; this establishes Tocqueville as a “practicing Catholic” able to sympathize particularly with Catholic priests during his trip through the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville to Arthur de Gobineau, 20 October 1843, my translation; quoted in Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 205.

Thus, while Tocqueville was emotionally moved by the concepts of Christianity, he did not consider himself a sincere believer in their propositional accuracy. He was not proud of his incredulity, perhaps because he admired the social implications of the gospel; while doubting the doctrines, he acknowledged their moral usefulness. This functional respect for Christianity, especially as it played out in American society, is evident in *Democracy*; presumably, sincere faith is not.

Historians trace Tocqueville's remorseful doubt to an incident or phase in his youth when he chanced upon the work of disbelieving philosophers in his father's library. "These books," writes George Wilson Pierson, "without making an atheist of the fifteen-year-old student, shook his faith irreparably."<sup>7</sup> Decades later, Tocqueville described the intensity of the experience: "I felt all at once the sensation described by those who have witnessed earthquakes, when the ground moves under their feet, walls around them, ceilings over their heads, furnishings in their hands, all nature before their eyes."<sup>8</sup> He had already used the same metaphor in a letter from Philadelphia in 1831, which, while avoiding specific reference to religion, explained that his youthful struggle with uncertainty forced him into a form of general agnosticism: "I ultimately convinced myself that the search for absolute, *demonstrable* truth, like the quest for perfect happiness, was an effort directed toward the impossible."<sup>9</sup>

Doris Goldstein offers the possibility that Tocqueville eventually recovered from the emotional turmoil this event caused him, but she notes that he never overcame his doubt.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, he never welcomed the resulting lack of belief, but it presents a difficulty to anyone who would argue that *Democracy* urges its readers to substantive faith. This apparently would require the author to have admonished his readers to embrace what he could not. Having lost his faith in 1820,

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<sup>7</sup> George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville to Mme. Swetchine [26 February 1857], in Agnès Antoine, *L'impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté et la religion* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2003), 175; my translation.

<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville to Charles Stoffels, 22 October 1831, emphasis in original; in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. and trans. Roger Boesche, James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 63-64.

<sup>10</sup> Doris S. Goldstein, *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought* (New York: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 1975), 5.

denied the possibility of certainty in 1831, and affirmed himself an infidel in 1843, Tocqueville seems not to have held any firm religious conviction when he penned *Democracy*.

Sanford Kessler adds that the “utilitarian approach to religion” adopted by Tocqueville in the book shows that the writer had an essentially secular and skeptical orientation. “The starting point for Tocqueville’s analysis,” Kessler writes, “is not the Bible, but the human need for metaphysical certainty. Tocqueville discusses this need exclusively in terms of temporal rather than otherworldly happiness, rarely mentioning service to God as the proper end of faith.”<sup>11</sup> For example, Tocqueville described the “principal source of religious beliefs among democratic peoples” this way:

For without ideas in common, no common action would be possible, and without common action, men might exist, but there could be no body social. So for society to exist and, even more, for society to prosper, it is essential that all the minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas; and that could never happen unless each of them sometimes came to draw his opinions from the same source and was ready to accept some beliefs ready made.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Kessler charges that Tocqueville was ready to alter the content of religious faith when necessary to serve the needs of democracy, even rejecting central themes of Christianity as democratically inexpedient.<sup>13</sup> Such flexibility seems to be the very definition of a functional approach to religion.

Perhaps the gravest objection that can be posed to a substantive interpretation comes from the end of Tocqueville’s chapter on “how religious beliefs at times turn the thoughts of Americans toward spiritual things.”<sup>14</sup> This passage near the end of the book presents Tocqueville’s proposal for an alternative to an established church. Given the salutary effects of even minimal religion in a free

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<sup>11</sup> Sanford Kessler, *Tocqueville’s Civil Religion: American Christianity and the Prospects for Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> Tocqueville, 433-434.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see: Kessler notes that Tocqueville seemed to contradict well-established Christian teachings on humility. See: Kessler, 35-36; Tocqueville, 632.

<sup>14</sup> Tocqueville, 542.

population (even “when one believes no more than that after death the divine principle embodied in man is absorbed into God or goes to animate some other creature”<sup>15</sup>), the author explained, legislators should take steps to promote spirituality without creating an official religion. To this end, politicians may find it useful to dissemble:

What means are then left to the authorities to lead men back toward spiritual opinions or to hold them within the religion thereby suggested? . . . I think that the only effective means which governments can use to make the doctrine of the immortality of the soul respected is daily to act as if they believed it themselves. I think that it is only by conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs that they can flatter themselves that they are teaching the citizens to understand it and to love and respect it in little matters.<sup>16</sup>

So Tocqueville advocated a form of religious sentiment having minimal doctrinal content, fostered by society for the sake of its temporal benefits, and disseminated through insincere observance if necessary. While he may have embraced his doctrinal minimum, the immortality of the soul, as substantively true, Tocqueville seems to have framed his appeal in *Democracy* in functional terms. He assured his audience that religion does not need to be substantively true to be beneficial.

#### SUPPORT FOR A SUBSTANTIVE INTERPRETATION

On the other hand, we may observe that the foremost characteristic of *Democracy*'s religion is its practice by pious individuals and communities in America. Some practitioners' observance reflected consciousness of social utility, yet that utility resulted largely from the substantive convictions of other people. Tocqueville was hardly blind to this. In the United States, he noted approvingly, religion was powerful precisely because it limited itself to private conviction rather than public authority, so that “its influence is more lasting” than in Europe; “it functions in one sphere only, but it pervades it and dominates there without effort.”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere in *Democracy* he added, “In this way Christianity has kept a strong hold over the minds of Americans, and—this is the point I

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 544.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 299.

wish to emphasize—its power is not just that of a philosophy which has been examined and accepted, but that of a religion which has been believed in without discussion.”<sup>18</sup>

Although social pressure reinforced the religious tone of American society by suppressing doubts, in other words, that pressure came from the primacy of the genuine believers rather than from “the political organization.”<sup>19</sup> In contemporary Europe, meanwhile, the lack of such powerful heartfelt belief was allowing society to descend to an unnatural state of skepticism, in which the unbelievers marginalized the believers and the uncertain.<sup>20</sup> Thus, we see that Tocqueville recognized that the religiosity of the United States was the result of substantive faith, although it was bolstered by the functional respect shown to religion by American unbelievers. By appealing to this model as an appropriate one for other democratic societies to emulate, Tocqueville seems to have undercut a purely functional interpretation. “While he does not call people to the altar of religious belief,” as James Sloat writes, “he certainly hopes that many will go there and remain faithful, sincere, and confident in their belief.”<sup>21</sup> Tocqueville was aware that his recommendations for religious society required at least some practitioners to base their observance on substantive conviction.

Cynthia Hinckley presents a further reason for interpreting Tocqueville’s religion substantively. “Scholars,” she writes, “have mistaken the distinction between genuine religion and organized religion for a distinction between organized religion and civil (mythical) religion.”<sup>22</sup> According to her analysis, Tocqueville viewed the visible forms of religion as “a species” or “a reflection of the highest sort of religion.”<sup>23</sup> While Tocqueville questioned the substantive accuracy of Christian doctrine, he accepted the substantive truthfulness of its spiritual core. Hinckley quotes a letter Tocqueville wrote in 1837, which defined “what an established worship is to religion—a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>21</sup> Sloat, 779.

<sup>22</sup> Cynthia J. Hinckley, “Tocqueville on Religious Truth and Political Necessity,” *Polity* 23.1 (Fall 1990): 52.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 51.

form which powerful minds, whether for good or evil, break through, but which serves as a protecting barrier to the weak and ordinary.”<sup>24</sup> If this view is accurate, Tocqueville’s grave doubts about the specifics of Christianity did not threaten his belief in higher spiritual truths from which organized religion derives. Thus, *Democracy*’s vagueness and flexibility on theological particulars result not from insincerity but from an authentic religious conviction, however unorthodox that conviction may have been. In addition, Hinckley notes, while Tocqueville naturally wished to be as inclusive as possible for the sake of building a strong democratic society, not all religions were acceptable to him. His religious orientation was specifically Christian.<sup>25</sup>

Goldstein concludes from a similar analysis that the debate over Tocqueville’s Christianity is “essentially a matter of nomenclature. Unquestionably, he thought in terms of the God revealed in the Gospel, and of the basic philosophical and ethical tenets of Christianity. . . . But he was unconcerned with the doctrinal differences that separated the various Christian Churches.”<sup>26</sup> Behind his Catholicism, which he could not help questioning, was at least a form of deism, which led him at times to restrain his doubts. William Johnston summarizes this view: “Tocqueville is said to have practiced as a Catholic while harboring doubts about Catholicism’s many dogmas. In other words, he may have been a Christian before he was a Catholic and a philosopher before he was a Christian, the priority being as important as the practice.”<sup>27</sup>

#### TOCQUEVILLE’S TENUOUS BELIEFS

When interpreting *Democracy in America*, therefore, we may find it worthwhile to examine more closely Tocqueville’s own attitudes toward religion. It is not enough to note that Tocqueville

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<sup>24</sup> Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, 1837; quoted in Hinckley, “Tocqueville on Religious Truth,” 51.

<sup>25</sup> Hinckley, “Tocqueville on Religious Truth,” 41, 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> Goldstein, 9.

<sup>27</sup> William E. Johnston, Jr., “Finding the Common Good Amidst Democracy’s Strange Melancholy: Tocqueville on Religion and the American’s ‘Disgust with Life,’” *Journal of Religion* 75.1 (January 1995): 60n.

harbored doubts about the doctrinal content of Catholicism; his doubts do not prove that he did not encourage others to hold sincere faith, nor that he denied that Catholicism reflects a measure of substantive truth.

First, we should note that while Tocqueville clearly lacked firm faith in the Catholicism he practiced, his persistent doubts did not induce him to adopt hostility toward sincere, zealous belief. This set him apart from many of his fellow liberals, whom he accused of attacking religion unjustly: “But they have seen religion in the ranks of their adversaries, and that is enough for them; some of them openly attack it, and the others do not dare to defend it.”<sup>28</sup> Tocqueville, by contrast, displayed only remorse at his inability to overcome his doubts. During his travels in America, he explained in a letter that he had embraced life’s uncertainty as an act of resignation, a step required in order to emerge from despair; he avoided metaphysical speculation as a self-inflicted torment.<sup>29</sup>

“The crisis Tocqueville experienced in about the 1820s,” Agnès Antoine writes, “does not constitute an isolated case. It is characteristic, on the contrary, of the post-revolutionary generation hit by the *mal du siècle*, in other words, the generation that experienced human existence in a disenchanted world.”<sup>30</sup> Tocqueville was the victim of a common sort of “existential malaise”; he tried to overcome it by focusing on the certainties of the present life, but this was not enough.<sup>31</sup> “If it were sufficient only to want to believe,” Tocqueville wrote a friend, “I would have been devout a long time ago.”<sup>32</sup> That feeling of helplessness may be an important element in a proper understanding of Tocqueville’s work.

An interesting remark in *Democracy* implies that Tocqueville drew a distinction between such a condition of uncertainty and a condition of actual unbelief. Describing what he saw as Europe’s

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<sup>28</sup> Tocqueville, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Boesche, 64. Tocqueville to Stoffels, 22 October 1831.

<sup>30</sup> Antoine, 175, my translation.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Antoine, 176; my translation.

unnaturally aggressive secularism, the author noted that his society was characterized by new breeds of people afraid to identify with Christianity. These included Christians unwilling to claim their faith, but also “others in a permanent state of doubt who already pretend no longer to believe.”<sup>33</sup> According to Tocqueville, then, it is possible to have persistent questions without becoming a non-Christian; in fact, claiming a loss of faith when one is merely uncertain is disingenuous. Tocqueville did tell Gobineau in 1843 that he had lost his faith, but he was not always able to describe his spiritual state so succinctly, and *Democracy* never betrays a truly skeptical outlook. Instead, Tocqueville’s book was an attempt to balance the certain needs of this world with the appealing uncertainties of the next.

Tocqueville at times sensed a related tension between reason and revelation, pragmatism and zeal, even within the religious observance he saw in America. Despite the ubiquitous influence of religion in the United States, he wrote to Louis de Kergolay from New York, “either I am badly mistaken or there is a great store of doubt and indifference hidden underneath these external forms.”<sup>34</sup> From America’s Protestant milieu, which involved a struggle to balance authority and reason, two extremes seemed to be emerging: fervent Catholicism on one side and Unitarian deism on the other. America, like the author himself, wrestled with both “religious and irreligious instincts,” and neither extreme provided satisfaction for the soul.<sup>35</sup> Pure authority “gives rise to real and profound beliefs; but it . . . creates divisions on earth that should exist only in the other life”; conversely, pure reason “is an inert work, without strength and almost without life.”<sup>36</sup> This tension was one cause of “the misery of our nature”—not just the American nature, but also that of the rest

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<sup>33</sup> Tocqueville, 300.

<sup>34</sup> Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, 29 June 1831; in Boesche, 48.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

of modern humanity.<sup>37</sup> Tocqueville saw his own uncertainty mirrored in American society, which for the moment had resolved the difficulty by settling for pluralistic religious observance.

Second, after observing that Tocqueville did not evince hostility toward religion, we should note that he indicated that truly effective (functional) religion requires genuine belief. He not only described an American religiosity that was effective because it incorporated substantive belief, as noted in the previous section; he also specifically prescribed substantive belief as a precondition of full functionality.

In the ninth chapter of the second volume of *Democracy*, for example, Tocqueville briefly departed from his pragmatic language. He had been explaining that the American religious model was appropriate to democracies because it made allowance for self-interest, allowing it to combat the destructive tendencies of individualism. He did not wish, however, for the reader to interpret the religion he was describing as a purely self-serving observance. On the contrary, he explained that religious people act not only out of desire for gain (reward in the afterlife) but also because they love God for his own sake:

Christianity does, it is true, teach that we must prefer others to ourselves in order to gain heaven. But Christianity also teaches that we must do good to our fellows for the love of God. That is a sublime utterance; man's mind filled with understanding of God's thought; he sees that order is God's plan, in freedom labors for this great design, ever sacrificing his private interests for this wondrous ordering of all that is, and expecting no other reward than the joy of contemplating it.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, Tocqueville observed that at least part of the civic utility of religion comes from a substantive belief in a personal God. This passage cannot easily be emptied of theological sincerity; the socially useful Christianity described here is contingent upon faith in God's existence. Furthermore, even this religion's appeal to self-interest, compatible as it seems to be with a functional orientation,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Tocqueville, 529.

requires faith in the reality of the afterlife. Therefore, although Tocqueville was commending this religion for its practical benefits, he was also deliberately portraying it as genuine belief.

A similar emphasis on sincerity may be seen in Tocqueville's correspondence during his research for the book. In the same letter that told Kergolay about America's struggle to reconcile reason and authority, Tocqueville lingered over the potential consequences of Unitarianism's rapid growth. "Can deism ever be suitable for all classes of people?" he wondered. "Especially for those who have the most need to have the bridle of religion? This is what I cannot convince myself of."<sup>39</sup> He proposed that sincerely held doctrine is a crucial element in religious observance, even for those holding only a minimal faith, and even when their religion's external forms are purely functional:

I confess that what I see here disposes me more than I ever was before to believing that what is called natural religion could suffice for the superior classes of society, *provided that the belief in the two or three great truths that it teaches is real* and that something of an external religion mixes and ostensibly unites men in the public profession of these truths. By contrast, the people either will become what they once were and still are in all parts of the world, or they will see in this natural religion only the absence of any belief in the afterlife and they will fall steadily into the single doctrine of self-interest.<sup>40</sup>

At this point early in his trip through America, then, Tocqueville rejected as functionally useless all forms of religion that are devoid of doctrinal substance. For most people, sincere faith in dogmas is necessary if the "bridle of religion" is to be effective. Even the "superior classes" must accept sincerely the fewer truths that are accessible through nature and reason, although they may preserve mythological external ceremonies. Thus, while Tocqueville at this stage admitted that non-revealed religion may be useful, he nevertheless declined to recommend purely functional religion.

Third, having noted the role of substantive faith within Tocqueville's functional arguments, we should also observe the importance of his quasi-religious understanding of democracy itself. A key part of Tocqueville's appeal for religious faith, concerned as it was with suitability to modern democracy, was the fact that he claimed that democracy is providentially ordained. Tocqueville saw

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<sup>39</sup> Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, 29 June 1831; in Boesche, 52; emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

political liberty, like spiritual belief, as originating beyond humanity. He did not view human freedom as its own justification; he believed in a spiritual purpose behind the progress of liberty.

If patient observation and sincere meditation have led men of the present day to recognize that both the past and the future of their history consist in the gradual and measured advance of equality, that discovery in itself gives this progress the sacred character of the will of the Sovereign Master. In that case effort to halt democracy appears as a fight against God Himself, and nations have no alternative but to acquiesce in the social state imposed by Providence.<sup>41</sup>

Am I to believe that the Creator made man in order to let him struggle endlessly through the intellectual squalor now surrounding us? I cannot believe that; God intends a calmer and more stable future for the peoples of Europe; I do not know His designs but shall not give up believing therein because I cannot fathom them, and should prefer to doubt my own understanding rather than His justice.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, when Tocqueville advocated religion as necessary to the success of democracy, he was not choosing a functional orientation over a substantive one. Rather, he was presenting a substantive argument for religion's validity. In America, where sincere religion was stronger than in Europe, the people were in better harmony with God's plans. (Not coincidentally, Tocqueville's introduction to *Democracy* emphasized three times within the space of two pages that the modern march of democracy was occurring in "the Christian world."<sup>43</sup>) In Tocqueville's view, democracy and religion are both natural within a providential order, so the compatibility of the two illustrates the validity of both under God.<sup>44</sup>

Fourth, having recognized that Tocqueville viewed both freedom and faith as elements of a divine order, we should respect the fact that he did not believe himself to be proposing religion as an artificial, human creation. In recommending that democratic societies accept religious systems, he was not recommending that they invent an observance for their own purposes. Instead, he was encouraging them to acknowledge something that he believed already constitutes an ineradicable

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<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>44</sup> Note that Tocqueville did not merely use compatibility to argue for the acceptance of religion among democrats; he also used it to argue for accommodation of democracy among believers. See: Ibid., 16-17.

“sublime instinct.”<sup>45</sup> Repeatedly in *Democracy*, Tocqueville stressed that religion, apart from either substantive or functional considerations, is a core part of fulfilled human existence. “It is by a sort of intellectual aberration, and in a way, by doing moral violence to their own nature,” he wrote, “that men detach themselves from their religious beliefs; an invincible inclination draws them back. Incredulity is an accident; faith is the only permanent state of mankind.”<sup>46</sup> However much authority may find itself at odds with reason, in Tocqueville’s view, the impulse to recognize authority refuses to leave human hearts. This is because the impulse did not originate with humanity. “It was not man who implanted in himself the taste for the infinite and love of what is immortal,” Tocqueville assured his readers.<sup>47</sup> “These sublime instincts are not the offspring of some caprice of the will; their foundations are embedded in nature; they exist despite man’s efforts. Man may hinder and distort them, but he cannot destroy them.”<sup>48</sup> This spiritual impulse is communicated by external as well as internal stimuli: “God does not Himself need to speak for us to find sure signs of His will; it is enough to observe the customary progress of nature and the continuous tendency of events; I know, without special revelation, that the stars follow orbits in space traced by His finger.”<sup>49</sup>

This view of religion is significant for us in several ways. It helps explain Tocqueville’s own conflicted Christian observance, clarifying his rationale for identifying himself as Catholic despite a level of uncertainty approaching disbelief. It also helps explain the ease with which Tocqueville sometimes set aside distinctions between substantive and functional faith when discussing the proper role of religion in democratic society. He could insist that theological sincerity is necessary yet tolerate mutually exclusive doctrinal systems because he believed that religion is a natural part of fulfilled existence. He took for granted that humans need religion, apart from considerations of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 534-535.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 12.

content. For doubters, therefore, embracing religion does not require the construction of a synthetic, functional system; it involves only the recognition of a substantive inner need, which has been planted in the soul by God. “I have neither the right nor the intention to examine the means by which God inspires a sense of religious belief into the heart of man,” Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy*. “At the moment I am only looking at religions from a purely human point of view.”<sup>50</sup> From this perspective, as Johnston comments, “it was reasonable for people to be religious, even if their religions were not themselves always reasonable, just as it was reasonable for people to be opinionated even when many or most opinions were without reason.”<sup>51</sup>

#### TOCQUEVILLE’S CIVIL APOLOGETIC

As Tocqueville noted above, he carefully limited the scope of his discussion in *Democracy*. Although he wished to establish the necessity of religion from the human community’s standpoint, he intended to go no further. He felt himself justified in skirting the question of the truth-value of various religious systems: “Though it is very important for man as an individual that his religion should be true, that is not the case for society.”<sup>52</sup> As a social observer, he decided to refrain from addressing questions beyond his field—questions which, the American experience demonstrated, could be ignored safely. More importantly, however, he avoided addressing these questions because he had never felt comfortable with such speculation.

From early on, Tocqueville’s philosophical method had been supremely practical and down-to-earth. Although he was intellectually inclined, he had turned his attention to the visible effects that abstract ideas have in human experience, avoiding overly theoretical endeavors. “Like you, my dear friend,” he wrote to Claude-François de Corcelle in 1855, “I have never had much taste for

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>51</sup> Johnston, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Tocqueville, 290.

metaphysics, perhaps because I never seriously devoted myself to it, and because it has always seemed to me that good sense led to the goal it contemplates as well as metaphysics.”<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, he admitted that he did recognize “the influence that metaphysical opinions have had on things that seemed the most distant from them and even on the condition of society.”<sup>54</sup> To Gobineau two years earlier, he had written, “I did not become sufficiently German in studying the German language for the novelty or philosophical merit of an idea to make me forget the moral or political effect that it can produce.”<sup>55</sup> For Tocqueville, philosophy was a practical field first and last.

The explanations given above for that approach, however, mask the real origins of Tocqueville’s pragmatism. His 1831 letter to Stoffels, written while the memory was still fresh, reveals a more important (and painful) cause. The epistemological crisis Tocqueville endured as a youth had transformed his intellectual life:

When I first began to reflect, I believed that the world was full of demonstrated truths; that it was only a matter of looking carefully in order to see them. But when I sought to apply myself to considering the objects, I perceived nothing but inextricable doubts. . . . I can say that then I fought with doubt hand to hand, and that it is rare to do so with more despair. Well! I ultimately convinced myself that the search for absolute, *demonstrable* truth, like the quest for perfect happiness, was an effort directed toward the impossible. . . . That is why I have always considered metaphysics and all the purely theoretical sciences, which serve for nothing in the reality of life, to be voluntary torment that man has consented to inflict on himself.<sup>56</sup>

The young man had emerged from this trial with a disinclination to trouble himself with the unsolvable problems of philosophy—including religious questions. Nevertheless, he had persisted in his intellectual activity, merely turning his attention to more concrete matters. “It is certain,” writes Antoine, “that his philosophy of action, and more particularly his concept of politics . . .

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<sup>53</sup> Tocqueville to Claude-François de Corcelle, 16 October 1855; in Boesche, 320.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Tocqueville to Arthur de Gobineau, 20 December 1853; in Boesche, 303.

<sup>56</sup> Tocqueville to Charles Stoffels, 22 October 1831; in Boesche, 64; emphasis in original.

constitutes a response to this existential malaise, just like his own involvement in public life after 1839.”<sup>57</sup>

For Tocqueville, the substantive truth of religion, beyond a minimal theism, was largely inaccessible to human inquiry. He managed the distress this caused him by focusing his efforts on what was accessible: the state of humanity on earth. His inquiries in this field led him to the conviction that religion is a universal human need, and that this need is especially acute in modern democracies.<sup>58</sup> He never gave up his personal desire for Christian faith, though, and at times tried to set aside his doubts.<sup>59</sup> “When I have a decision to make,” he told Stoffels, “I weigh the pros and cons with great care, and instead of despairing at not being able to arrive at complete conviction, I proceed toward the goal that seems most probable to me, and I proceed toward it as though I did not doubt at all.”<sup>60</sup> In *Democracy*, he even described the process by which a disciplined mind seeks contentment in religion:

Even if he does feel some doubt about the object of his hopes, he will not easily let that hold him back, and he will think it wise to risk some of the good things of this world to save his claims to the immense inheritance promised in the next.

“If we make a mistake by thinking the Christian religion true,” Pascal has said, “we have no great thing to lose. But if we make a mistake by believing it false, how dreadful is our case.”<sup>61</sup>

According to Tocqueville, this is as close as a questioning mind can come to substantive faith. He found himself able to identify the need for and the advantages of religion, and he could even argue that humanity has no choice but to embrace religion if it wants fulfillment in life, but he could do little to erase doubts about the content of theology. His helplessness to do that distressed him.

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<sup>57</sup> Antoine, 175, my translation.

<sup>58</sup> Tocqueville, 294: “Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 434: “No philosopher in the world, however great, can help believing a million things on trust from others or assuming the truth of many things besides those he has proved.”

<sup>60</sup> Tocqueville to Charles Stoffels, 22 October 1831; in Boesche, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Tocqueville, 529.

We have seen that Tocqueville's philosophical approach limited his options as an observer of religion. We have also seen that he cherished faith as a core human experience, but was unable to settle his own opinions, let alone propagate his observance effectively. His intellectualism prevented total silence, yet he scrupulously avoided metaphysical speculation, not least because his own beliefs were so tenuous. As a European liberal thinker, however, he faced a form of religious skepticism that flourished in soil he did feel comfortable tending: political philosophy. Returning from his American tour, Tocqueville finally found himself in a position to do away with at least one objection to the faith he admired. This is the heart of *Democracy in America's* approach to religion.

Tocqueville's introduction to the book explained that he felt himself to be reacting to troubling developments in French public life. "I search my memory in vain, and find nothing sadder or more pitiable than that which happens before our eyes,"<sup>62</sup> he wrote. Mired in political disputes, religious people repudiated the democracy their faith should have been nurturing:

Christianity, which has declared all men equal in the sight of God, cannot hesitate to acknowledge all citizens equal before the law. But by a strange concatenation of events, religion for the moment has become entangled with those institutions which democracy overthrows, and so it is often brought to rebuff the equality which it loves and to abuse freedom as its adversary, whereas by taking it by the hand it could sanctify its striving.

Meanwhile, French democrats repudiated the faith that would have protected their social ideals:

I think these latter should hasten to call religion to their aid, for they must know that one cannot establish the reign of liberty without that of mores, and mores cannot be firmly founded without beliefs. But they have seen religion in the ranks of their adversaries, and that is enough for them; some of them openly attack it, and the others do not dare defend it.<sup>63</sup>

Both parties were posing a threat to the exercise of religion in the modern world. Tocqueville desired to show them that the American example proved the compatibility of faith and freedom, contrary to the opinions of many in Europe.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

“Though I seldom mentioned France,” Tocqueville explained in a letter, “I did not write a page [of *Democracy*] without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me.”<sup>64</sup> It is significant that his introduction to the book contains an explanation of “the last seven hundred years” of French history—a history lending itself to Tocqueville’s providential view of democracy.<sup>65</sup> He wrote the book about the United States in order to address the concerns of French thinkers, particularly French thinkers hostile to religion.

The eighteenth century, Tocqueville believed, had given rise to a dangerous kind of radicalism, in which religious skepticism was “an all-prevailing passion, fierce, intolerant, and predatory.”<sup>66</sup> This anti-religious radicalism, intent upon destroying a Church it perceived as hostile to human liberty and happiness, had drowned out the remaining voices of belief in France, and while the atheistic fervor of the Revolution had died down by Tocqueville’s time, it had spawned “revolutionaries of a hitherto unknown breed: men who carried audacity to the point of sheer insanity.” These revolutionaries had spread out from France to the rest of the world and were continuing to influence the development of modern democracy.<sup>67</sup> Against this generation of thinkers, Tocqueville defended the viability of Christianity in the democratic world by presenting the example of the United States, where “the boldest political theories of the eighteenth-century philosophers are put so effectively into place” yet where every citizen viewed religion as essential to the state.<sup>68</sup> His goal in all of this was not to institute religion but to defend it; his functional arguments in favor of religion were reactions to functional objections.

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<sup>64</sup> Tocqueville to Louis Kergolay, n.d.; quoted in Cynthia J. Hinckley, “Tocqueville on Religion and Modernity: Making Catholicism Safe for Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Church and State* 32.2 (Spring 1990): 325.

<sup>65</sup> Tocqueville, 11.

<sup>66</sup> Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 149.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

“I seek to discover,” Tocqueville wrote in the second volume of *Democracy*, “how [religions] can most easily preserve their power in the democratic centuries which lie before us.”<sup>69</sup> Part of his program was to persuade liberals of not only the validity but even the necessity of faith in a democratic context; another was to convince religious leaders to adapt to the sensibilities of free people; another was to persuade political leaders to help their people look beyond the concerns of the present day. Tocqueville explained that his ultimate aim in all of this was to bring modern humanity “back, by a long and roundabout path, to a state of faith.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, we see in Tocqueville’s work an appeal neither for personal acceptance of the tenets of Christianity nor for the perpetuation of religious functions in the absence of real faith—although the author pointed out that either could be useful. It was not substantive belief in an organized religion that inspired Tocqueville’s plea; he argued that external observances should be changed as necessary. Neither, however, was he inspired solely by the general need of democracy for religious support; he believed that democracy, like religion, was merely another instrument in the hands of Providence. Instead, it was the intellectual viability of a condition of belief, so important to the human spirit, that Tocqueville felt he was defending. Unable to resolve his own doubts about the truthfulness of Christianity, yet conscious of a divine impulsion to believe, Tocqueville included in *Democracy in America* the only sort of apologetic he could write. This was not enough to remove his own uncertainty, but it did dispose of the most immediate objection to the faith he longed for. Tocqueville had other doubts, but he was convinced that misgivings about religion’s compatibility with democracy should not be among them.

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<sup>69</sup> Tocqueville, 445.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 549.