

To be published in *Combining the Spirit of Religion and the Spirit of Liberty: Tocqueville's Thesis Revisited*

MacIntyre's critique of liberal modernity still resonates today and the debate seems

which dates back to the nineteenth century when the word was invented.<sup>6</sup> Individualism was then a term simultaneously used to designate the political doctrine associated with the rights of man, the economic doctrine of *laissez-faire* liberalism, and the cult of Romantic or Protestant individualism, sometimes bound up with a radical rejection of the *status quo*. Often, the three were related to each other. Some like Joseph de Maistre attributed the evils associated to political liberalism to the French Revolution and Protestantism which they took to task for furthering the atomization of society. Others like Marx denounced individualism for being the engine of economic liberalism and, as such, the main culprit for the large-scale disruption and alienation brought forth by modern capitalism. Most of these critiques shared the view that individualism is responsible for the waning of traditional social structures, values, and norms and thus is a serious threat to political and social order.

This story has already been told and it is relatively well-known. What some describe in term of a loss of traditional norms and values has been characterized by others as a step toward full individual autonomy, liberated from the shackles and constraints of an older hierarchical world. What we would like to do here is to emphasize a counter-narrative about liberal democracy's relationship to individualism by using the insights of two leading representatives of nineteenth-century French social and political thought whose writings have rarely been connected to each other. To examine the relationship between democracy, individualism, authority, and religion we focus on Abbé de Lamennais's critique of individualism and Tocqueville's analysis of democratic life between which, as we shall demonstrate, one can find a number of important affinities and differences. By juxtaposing Tocqueville's views on democratic individualism with those held by a major critic of modern liberal democracy such as



of power, the state). In the final section, we explore a tension at the heart of Tocqueville's analysis of religion in America that sheds fresh light on the original theme of this essay, the relationship between individualism, authority, and democratic religion.

## *II. Authority and individualism in liberal democratic society*

It is not a mere accident that the term *individualisme* gained wide currency in Saint-Simonian circles in 1820s France, as the country was making its belated transition from feudalism into modern capitalism. Konraad Swart traced back the first usage to an issue of *Le Producteur, journal de l'industrie, des sciences et des beaux-arts* in 1826.<sup>8</sup> Within a few years, the term “*individualisme*” came to be seen as a metaphor for the disintegration of society and was employed by a variety of authors writing from different ideological and methodological perspectives to express dissatisfaction with the post-revolutionary order. The denunciation of individualism was a major trope in the writings of many critics of democracy who claimed that its principles erode authority and produce anarchic individualism.

Due to the excellent scholarship published in the last several decades, it is now well-established that Tocqueville was quite familiar with conservative critics of the liberal democracy, including Lamenna12 02 (i)7h.8 5 (i)7h.8.3 -21pud 45.2 ( ) -165.8 (de) 8.8 ( ) -11207 (of) 0.2 (s) -0.2 (t) 0.2 (m)g

individualism is bound to create new and powerful forms of authority that restrain and limit the

Lamennais published his early and best known work, *Essay on the Indifference towards Religious Matters* between 1817 and 1824. Tocqueville certainly knew of the work and of Lamennais because he sent the latter a copy of Volume One of *Democracy in America* (1835) with a letter in which he wrote that “no one professes deeper respect or warmer admiration for your character and writings than I.”<sup>13</sup> Despite some hint of disingenuous flattery characteristic of

*raison publique*—that is, the mixture of traditions, customs, social knowledge, and precepts that govern social interaction—is destroyed, there is nothing that can prevent or diminish the confusion between truth and falsehood. This explains, according to him, the growing chaos in



This idea can be found in an important text of Lamennais from 1825 which predates and



solution to the problems of liberal democracy. They held, however, different opinions about the nature of democracy and the relationship between the democracy, individualism, and religion. A former student of Guizot whose lectures on the history of civilization in Europe he assiduously followed in 1828, Tocqueville sought to unearth the historical roots of the progress of democracy understood as a progressive equalization of conditions. In an unpublished note, Tocqueville offers the following account of this process. "In the Middle Ages," he wrote, "it was believed that all opinions had to follow from authority" and that philosophy took "the characteristics of a religion." In the eighteenth century, "the extreme of the opposite state was reached" and people

“essentially democratic” phenomenon had begun in the eighteenth century, it takes a much more radical form in the age of democracy, when conditions are becoming increasingly equal. This is important because it makes possible, somewhat paradoxically, a new form of servitude in the age

own intellect.”<sup>30</sup>

unpublished note, Tocqueville remarks that “it is to the mass alone that each individual hands over the care of forming for him opinions that he cannot form for himself on a great number of matters.”<sup>32</sup> He further writes that “as citizens become more equal and more similar, the tendency of each blindly to believe a certain man or a certain class decreases. The disposition to believe

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In spite of the fact that a democracy that promotes individual autonomy and choice seems to be contrary to dogmatic beliefs, individuals living in democratic times have neither time nor strength of mind necessary to develop their own opinions on all the matters that are of interest to them. Hence, they are led to rely on ready-made opinions that they “receive on trust and without discussion.”<sup>36</sup> As such, Tocqueville explained, “dogmatic beliefs are supports necessary for the weakness of men. ... A belief is an instrument that you have not fabricated yourself, but that you use because you lack the time to look for something better.”<sup>37</sup> Dogmatic beliefs, necessary at all times, are also found in democracy. “So no matter what happens, authority must always be found somewhere in the intellectual and moral world. Its place is variable, but it necessarily has a place. [...] Thus, the question is not to know if an intellectual authority exists in democratic centuries, but only to know where its repository is and what extent it will be.”<sup>38</sup> Since authority is no longer found in aristocratic persons, the danger in democratic times, in Tocqueville’s mind, is that there would be no other source of authority than a monolithic and potentially intolerant mass opinion. On this view, the danger of democratic times is not, as Lamennais thought, corrosive individualism and indifference toward religion, but the fact that individualism feeds into the power of mass opinion and undermines freedom of thought, empowering the majority to do as it will, and endangering the rights of minorities. For Tocqueville, unlike Lamennais, the problem of modernity is not simply that individualism erodes authority and subverts order; it is rather the fact that it is ultimately coevil with the problem of *too much* authority and order.

### *III. Democracy as a new faith and form of “religion”*

democratic society composed of free and independent individuals who instinctively apply the philosophical precepts of Descartes to their daily choices? If so, what would be the foundation of certainty in such a society? Tocqueville's answers to these questions are derived from his views on individualism and religion and his reflections on the choice between liberty and equality facing individuals in democratic societies.<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting the type of language Tocqueville chose to describe the new authority in democratic times. He notes that the foundational tenets of democracy—the autonomy of the individual, the equality of all—are often held in ways analogous to religious belief and with the same fervor. It is not a mere coincidence that Tocqueville sometimes employs quasi-religious vocabulary to describe the nature of authority in





and the new democratic religion in which the majority enjoys virtually absolute power.

Tocqueville writes:

A religion is a power whose movements are regulated in advance and that moves within a known sphere, and many people believe that within this sphere its effects are beneficial, and that a dogmatic religion better manages to obtain the desirable



Faith in common opinion is the faith of democratic nations. The majority is the prophet; you believe it without reasoning. You follow it confidently without discussion. It exerts an immense pressure on individual intelligence. The moral dominion of the majority is perhaps called to replace traditional religion to a certain

locus of the new moral authority in democracy. There is a deep irony or contradiction here that

democratic times commanding universal respect and allegiance. He saw, however, that the gradual tendency to replace traditional faith with belief in the infallibility of the majority was not inevitable and he thought that it could be effectively countered. In the United States, he noticed that traditional religion might act as a healthy antidote to some of the pernicious tendencies of democratic life, but that, in order to do so, it would be forced to make doctrinal and pastoral accommodations to the democratic spirit. But he also realized that religion in the United States was held more or less dogmatically largely because religious traditionalism was an inherited belief held with the same dogmatism with which the Americans believed in the majority. Paradoxically, the United States had been able to use traditional religion well to counter the new religion of democracy partially because it did so unthinkingly.

Tocqueville feared that religions which have as their object eternal truths might dilute their substance if they were to give in too much to the new democratic *Zeitgeist*.<sup>55</sup> In particular, he was concerned about the rise of pantheism in democratic societies, a concern which he expressed in the (short) seventh chapter of the first part of Volume Two of *Democracy in America*



control over themselves and by contesting the liberty of having been able to do what they did.”<sup>60</sup>

As such, thirdly, pantheism tends to foster uniformity and centralization of power among democratic peoples which have seen the principle of equality triumph among them.

Religions, Tocqueville argued, must always hold firm in this regard. They must not compromise with regard to the principal opinions that constitute their fundamental beliefs but they should be at the same time flexible enough with regard to the incidental notions which are linked to them. This middle ground seems to be his recipe for reconciling religion (authority) and philosophy (liberty) and for combating pantheism:

As men become more similar and more equal, it is more important for religions, while still keeping carefully out of the daily movement of affairs, not unnecessarily to go against generally accepted ideas and the permanent interests that rule the mass. ... In this way, by respecting all the democratic instincts that are not contrary to it and by using several of those instincts to help itself, religion *succeeds* in struggling with advantage against the spirit of *individual independence* that is the *most dangerous* of all to religion.<sup>61</sup>

The example of America also taught Tocqueville another important lesson about religion in democracy: it acts as a countervailing power to this-worldly attitudes, excessive individualism, and materialism that dominate democratic times. Tocqueville noticed how Americans are melancholy amidst their material abundance in part because universal competition opens up all avenues to everyone and increases the competition at the same time. As democracy tells



unhappiness when individuals realize that they cannot, in fact, achieve everything that democratic ideals promise them. “When all the prerogatives of birth and fortune are destroyed, when all the professions are open to everyone, and when you can reach the summit of each one

tends to isolate them from one another and to lead each one of them to be interested in himself

and Montalembert and criticized the papal hierarchy of Pope Pius I. Moreover, he had no place for dogmas such as the Immaculate Conception and never spoke about original sin in his works. Personally, he was plagued by inner doubt and terrified by it (along with old age, decrepitude, and illness). “If you know a recipe for belief,” Tocqueville wrote, “for God, give it to me. ... If will alone were sufficient for belief, I would have been devout a long time ago; or rather I would always have been devout, for doubt has always seemed to me the most unbearable of the ills of the world; I have constantly judged it to be worse than death and inferior only to illnesses.”<sup>68</sup>

What is clear is that he embraced a rather nebulous form of spiritualism plagued by uncertainty and doubt. This was in stark contrast with Lamennais who was a believer and thought that Christianity was necessary for what it brought and also for the truth it contained. Tocqueville’s primary concern was with human liberty and greatness, and only secondarily with

into a debate about metaphysical truths. "I have neither the right nor the will to examine the

gatherings is that man's religious impulse is filtered through what Tocqueville calls *formes*, a word which is close to a shorthand for *formalités*, the idea that there are sanctioned rules and

solitary experience of the divine does not provide answers to “primordial questions” that are “very enduring.”<sup>80</sup> They give rise to “confused and changing notions.”<sup>81</sup>

His concern, then, is that extreme democratic forms of religiosity cannot give rise to fixed and stable ideas but “delivers all [man’s] actions to change and condemns them to a sort of

democratic movement or displaced by idiosyncratic forms of democratic spiritualism. On the latter point, Tocqueville's experience of democracy in America convinced him that mysticism,

the permanent interests that rule the mass. ... In this way, by respecting all the democratic instincts that are not contrary to it and by using several of those instincts to help itself, religion *succeeds* in struggling with advantage against the spirit of *individual independence* that is the *most dangerous* of all to religion.<sup>86</sup>

For religion to act effectively as a counterweight to the self-defeating tendencies of democracy, it needs much more than ritual and structure and must avoid the pitfalls of pantheism. In other words, it must preach beliefs that are not simply spiritual analogs of commercialism and



believed, and it is “believed” only because being religious in America is a form of acquiescence to social pressure. To the extent that democratic mass opinion in favor of religion erodes, to that very extent Tocqueville’s solution itself becomes tenuous. The conjunction of the erosion of the mechanism of religious influence in the American polity and the erosion of religious consensus gives some cause for Tocqueville to worry about the future of religion in democratic societies.

#### V. *Conclusion*

Tocqueville never relinquished the conviction that “if [man] does not have faith he must serve, and, if he is free, he must believe”.<sup>89</sup>

aristocracy none but intellectuals".<sup>91</sup> While Tocqueville recommended a form of civil religion, he was concerned that its the dogmatic and insincere character it takes in America may







<sup>9</sup> Agnès Antoine comments on the intellectual dialogue between Tocqueville and the liberal Catholics and insists on the differences among them (Antoine, *L'Impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté, et la religion* [Paris: Fayard, 2003], 208-11). For more information, on Lamennais and liberal Catholicism, see Bernard Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition. Aspects of Catholic Thought in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 62-112.

<sup>10</sup> For more details on the context, see Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 7.

<sup>11</sup> Lamennais's first volume of his *Essai* was originally published in 1817 and received wide

<sup>15</sup> This passage, taken from Lamennais's *Défense de l'Essai sur l'indifférence* (1821), is quoted in Reardon,





<sup>21</sup> The original paragraph reads as follows: “Tous les liens sont brisés, l’homme est seul; la foi sociale a disparu, les esprits, abandonnés à eux-mêmes, ne savent où se prendre; on le voit flotter au hasard dans mille directions contraires. De là, un désordre universel, une effrayante instabilité d’opinions et d’institutions” (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, x-xi).

<sup>22</sup> Writes Lamennais: “Il y a au fond des coeurs, avec un malaise incroyable, comme un immense

<sup>33</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 718.

<sup>34</sup> *DA* 2010, III: 713.

<sup>35</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 711, note a, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 712.

<sup>37</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 712, note c.

<sup>38</sup> *DA*, 2010, 716-7.

<sup>39</sup> On this issue, see Antoine, *L'impensé de la démocratie*, 148. The claim to originality must be taken, however, with a necessary grain of salt, since in this regard, as Lucien Jaume amply demonstrated in his magisterial book, Tocqueville drew upon a number of past and contemporary authors. They also argued that the religious sentiments or instincts are constitutive of human nature and that faith represents, as it were, the “permanent state of humanity.” This is Tocqueville’s phrase, but its spirit can also be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the writings of Joseph de Maistre and René de Chateaubriand.

<sup>40</sup> For a more extensive discussion on this sacralization of democracy, see Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 87-90. Also see John Dewey’s description of democracy in his essay, “Christianity and Democracy” (1892).

<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville was uneasy about this phenomenon and was far from endorsing it.

<sup>42</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 742, note a. Tocqueville was aware that in the ideal case-scenario, it would still need to be religion, not just the authority of the majority *in nomine*.

<sup>43</sup> It is revealing that, after arguing for the need to have a fluid type of religion, Tocqueville adds: “Necessity of gaining the favor of the majority” (*DA*, 2010, III: 742, note a).

<sup>44</sup> Walt Whitman, “Perpetuity of the Democratic Spirit,” in *The Gathering of Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rogers and John Black (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), I, 7.

<sup>45</sup> *DA*, 2010, II: 633-34.

<sup>46</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 720; all emphases added.

<sup>47</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 721, note r; all emphases added.

<sup>48</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 711-12, note b.

<sup>49</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 713, note e.

<sup>50</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 724, note s.

<sup>51</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 720, note p; all emphases added.

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<sup>62</sup> *DA*, 201, III: 946.

<sup>63</sup> See Peter A. Lawler, *Tocqueville: The Restless Mind* (Rowman and Littlefield: 1983); Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy and the American Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 745.

<sup>65</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 693, note f.

<sup>66</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 958.

<sup>67</sup> On Tocqueville's civil religion, see Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 249-58.

<sup>68</sup> Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XV: 2. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Francisque de Corcelle. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Madame Swetchine*, ed. Pierre Gibert (Paris: Gallimard 1983), 29; an English translation can be found in the Nolla-Schleifer critical edition of *DA*, II, 480, note t. On Tocqueville's view on religion, also see Alan S. Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 957.



<sup>77</sup> It is worth noting that after 1840, in all of his writings on America and especially in his correspondence with his American friends, Tocqueville no longer mentioned religion as a pillar of democracy. While Tocqueville earlier believed that religion properly practiced could provide the foundation for sound mores and a virtuous form of materialism in an age of individualism and skepticism, by the mid- to late 1850s this belief appeared to have waned. Tocqueville no longer made mention of America's originality in combining liberty and religion. On this issue, see Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings's introductory study, "The Third Democracy," in *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, eds. and trans. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26-33.

<sup>78</sup> *DA*, 2010, II.ii.12.

<sup>79</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 743.

<sup>80</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 744.

<sup>81</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 745.

<sup>82</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 743.

<sup>83</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 744.

<sup>84</sup> *DA*, 2010, III: 940.

<sup>85</sup> “J’ai toujours cru qu’il y avait du danger même dans les passions les meilleures quand elles devenaient ardentes et exclusives. Je n’accepte pas la passion religieuse; je le mettrai même en tête, parce que poussée à un certain point, elle fait, pour ainsi dire et plus qu’aucune autre disparaître tout ce qui n’est pas elle et crée les citoyens les plus inutiles ou les plus dangereux au nom de la morale et du devoir. Je te confesse que j’ai toujours considéré un livre comme *l’Imitation de Jesus-Christ* par exemple, quand on le considère autrement que comme un enseignement destiné à la vie claustrale, comme souverainement immoral. Il n’est pas *sain* de se détacher de la terre, de ses intérêts, de ses affaires, même de ses plaisirs, quand ils sont honnêtes, au point que l’auteur l’enseigne et ceux qui vivent de la lecture d’un semblable livre ne peuvent guère manquer de perdre tout ce qui fait les vertus publiques en acquérant certaines vertus privées. Une certaine préoccupation des vérités religieuses n’allant pas jusqu’à l’absorption de la pensée dans l’autre monde, m’a donc toujours paru l’état le plus conforme à la moralité humaine sous toutes ses formes. C’est ce milieu dans lequel on reste plus souvent ce me semble chez 0.2 e

<sup>88</sup> For those who see Tocqueville's account as problematic, see Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967) and Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). For those who see it as consistent, see Catherine Zuckert, "Not by Preaching Alone: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy"



<sup>92</sup> On the general issue of civil religion in America, see “American Civil Religion Revisited,” Hammond, Philip et. al., *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter 1994): 1-23. Several scholars such as Sanford Kessler (*Tocqueville’s Civil Religion:*