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FIRST DRAFT

The function of religion in Tocqueville's theory of democracy.

“What is most repugnant to me in America is not the extreme freedom that reigns there, it is the lack of a guarantee against tyranny.” (M241)

Abstract

In part due to the conspicuous role played by religion in recent American politics, Tocqueville's theory of democracy and religion has received renewed attention. His theory is a reminder that among the American political and constitutional founders, two diametrically opposed positions prevailed on the issue of religion. One, most prominently presented by George Washington, maintained that religion in general was the crucial source and mainstay of republican private as well as public morality. The other, most aptly argued by James Madison, claimed that religious sects were no different from other forms of factions or interest groups. Far from viewing them as the underpinnings of public morality, Madison's main goal was to prevent them from “degenerating” into destructive political factions. Tocqueville's theory clearly is the peerless articulation of Washington's version. I shall argue, however, that Tocqueville's theorizing aims to show the highly ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the function of religion in democracy. Its ability to sustain republican public morality is unproven by the very logic of his arguments. Tocqueville's strong democratic individualism clashes with weak religious individualism, only to further strengthen the former. The antidote to weak religious individualism, namely public religious dogma, further enhances the dangers of democratic majority tyranny. In addition, Tocqueville omits any consideration of religion's ability to influence extreme political ambitions in democracy. My reading offers an alternative to two contemporary interpretations at two polar opposites. One, by Sheldon Wolin, argues that Tocqueville's use of religion shows him from his most reactionary and anti-democratic side. Religion is nothing more than an antiquated restraint upon the true interests and the will of modern democratic majorities. The other extreme, presented by Joshua Mitchell, argues that Tocqueville's American democracy is primarily of religious, not political or constitutional, origins, and its contemporary deterioration can only be reversed by a new religious awakening. While, paradoxically, elements of both of these views can easily be found in Tocqueville's work, neither is an adequate, let alone comprehensive rendition. In my judgment, Tocqueville was as conflicted about the future influence of religion in democracy as he was about democracy itself. The former is thus a reflection of the latter. Both, however, are ultimately rooted in and expressions of basic human needs and aspirations and all its vagaries. Thus, the issue of the impact of religion is for Tocqueville finally a question of human psychology. Hence, the perplexing logic of his arguments is a mirror image of the illogic of human passions.

Introduction

Despite its date of origin in the 1830's, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is recognizably our contemporary. The cause of this contemporaneity is to be found in Tocqueville's understanding of democracy. Completely novel and as yet undefined, historically unprecedented, it is a "vast project," whose future outlines are as if shrouded in the darkness of night.(L703) Tocqueville is not satisfied that it has fully disclosed its reality even in the America of his time. At best, its most "salient features" are beginning to be apparent to an astute observer, and some future potentials of democracy are open to informed speculation. Tocqueville's study of emergent democracy in America is futurology of the highest order. The credibility of such futurology rests entirely upon an observer's ability to discern the "shape of democracy" in the early manifestations of its "inclinations, character, prejudices and passions." It is, of course, in the very nature of this enterprise that even the accuracy of present observations will only be confirmed by the future. Thus, Tocqueville's contemporaneity, not only with the present, but most likely the entirety of the temporal enactment of democracy's story. For its denizens, democracy remains always unfinished, a "vast project" of futurity. Thus, although with our additional experience we can assess Tocqueville's analysis with a certain degree of "wisdom of hindsight," we still aren't in a position to judge his work with any degree of finality.

Regardless, Tocqueville continues to entice our interest solely by virtue of his many challenging complexities. Tocqueville's start was the profound insight that the "great democratic revolution" he witnessed was in fact a revolution in the very condition of human existence. In scope, this revolution constituted a more radical upheaval than even James Madison's claim that the new American *government* had "no parallel in the annals of human society." The new human condition issues from the "basic fact" of an evolving "equality of

condition” among men, not only and most obviously in the democratic United States, but in Europe as well. The enormity and apparent irresistibility of this revolution, suggestive of providential intent, permeates Tocqueville’s study with, in his words, “a kind of religious dread”^{L12} of not always readily apparent consequences for his view of democracy. Famously, the immense influence of the factual equality of condition upon the novel government, public opinion, culture, daily habits, maxims and principles of democracy society constitutes the heart of Tocqueville’s study of democracy.

Tocqueville’s mode of procedure (one, as his critics were quick to note, never formalized with the precision required of a methodology, much less political “science”) reflects its subject matter in its complexity. Beginning with a descriptive account of American society and democratic culture, for emphasis frequently contrasted with pre-revolutionary French aristocratic life, Tocqueville extracts from the American mores and habits of everyday life the basic motivating forces and dynamic principles of American democracy. Most prominent among these are the principles of the sovereignty of the people, the desire for individual equality and requisite equality of living conditions, both private and public freedoms, majority rule and the extraordinary predominance of public opinion. Distinguishing these basic democratic motivating principles from the influential historical peculiarities, contingencies, physical conditions and accidents uniquely American, Tocqueville proceeds to expand upon those principles he considers generic to democracy, regardless of which specific “form” it might take. Such a general theory of democracy is in fact required by Tocqueville’s fundamental thematic conviction that the “equality of condition” generating democratic society has emerged not only in the “New World” of North America, but in pre-revolutionary France and Europe as well. For that reason alone their futures are, in a sense, almost predetermined to be democratic. Determining that

future is perhaps the most controversial part of his procedure. Tocqueville is unconvinced that the America of his experience is the final form of democracy, or that a simple extrapolation of its key features as alternative futures would suffice. Rather, Tocqueville resorts to the “logic” of each of his key “ideas” or principles about democracy,” pursuing each “*to all its theoretical consequences often to the limits of the false and the impractical.*” M15 (My emphasis). This “consistency,” while in his view a basic requirement of all “words and discourse”, in this “speculative” study of future democracy invariably leaves him subject to “easy” criticism. Obviously, such criticisms would multiply as the logical elaboration of potential consequences induced by democracy’s basic principles approaches the extremities of the “false and the impractical.” Tocqueville therefore intends his work to be “judged by the general impression” it creates, not its specific and unavoidable miscalculations. I take Tocqueville’s own description of his procedure as indispensable guideline to properly grasping his varying views of religion in *Democracy in America*.

Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy appropriately begins with the primary human concern, the question whether democracy is good or bad, “advantageous or lethal” for mankind. L18 As mentioned, given democracy’s unique novelty, its essential good or bad features will only emerge in its future. Hence, Tocqueville’s initial view of democracy necessarily becomes a treatise about the future “fears and hopes” attached to this new human condition. L19 His *Democracy in America*, far from being mainly concerned with America, is a disquisition on the future hopes and fears for democracy in general. Significantly, Tocqueville’s disquisition ends with the express belief that democracy’s future fears of and hopes for servitude or freedom, wretchedness or prosperity remain subject to free decisions, not some intrinsic inevitability. L705 Hope, not fear, thus becomes the hallmark of free democracy. Indeed, one of the

permanent driving forces of democracy, invariably never complete, is continuous hope in its future. But in great part such hope is founded on the educability of democracy. Tocqueville constantly reminds his reader that without relentless enlightenment democracy's freedom and public peace is bound to perish. L528 Assuring the very future of democracy's full unfolding, then, involves more than discerning its "salient features" and emerging shape. For educational purposes, it also requires a sharp focus on its "distant perils" rather than on its obvious present benefits. An energizing knowledge and fear of such perils is essential to fulfill its future hopes. L528 Tocqueville's study of democracy thus does not only require an initial knowledge of its active principles. In addition, Tocqueville maintains that even an "impartial" assessment of democracy must include emphasis on its intrinsic need for education. Only constant "enlightenment" will guarantee its success. In the final analysis, Tocqueville entire enterprise is not inspired by exclusive love for and singular advocacy of democracy, however inevitable its expansion might appear, but active, informed interference in its future course out of love for the well-being of mankind.

With the future of democracy resting in great part on the right education in its real fears and hopes, Tocqueville invariably encroaches upon the subject of religion. Democracy's revolutionizing impact upon the basic human condition necessarily effects the nature of religion, historically the highest expression of primal human hopes and fears. Here it is important to recall that advocates of the most radical forms of "enlightenment" theory fully expected the perfection of democracy to entail the actual realization of all hopes for human welfare formerly "sublimated" in unworldly religious illusions. For Tocqueville as well, in the aftermath of the democratic revolution in the human condition the fate of religious hopes will be determined by

its relation to the hopes placed in democracy. Will the latter replace the very need for the ultimate hopes usually provided for by religious faith? Will they complement each other? Or, alternatively, can religious hopes correct some shortcomings of democratic aspirations? The answer will essentially be provided by Tocqueville's view of democracy's effect on the basic human psyche, the soul or human nature. Tocqueville sees an affinity between the natural human need for hope, and religion as its most "natural" form of expression. L296-7. As such, religious *hope*, is "a permanent state of humankind." Hence lack of religious faith is a form of "moral violence" against human nature, or against hope as an essential human need. L297

Consequently, the full depth, scope and intensity of the democratic revolution will largely be determined by the interaction between its most basic hopes and fears and those of religion, traditionally understood as the highest and most enduring human aspiration. This, in the final analysis, is the ultimate subject of Tocqueville's discussion of religion and democracy.

In my judgment, Tocqueville's arguments about their relation remain inconclusive, revealingly paradoxical and bafflingly ambiguous. As such, they are entirely in tune, however, with the inconclusive and somewhat puzzling nature of democracy's future, various potential versions of which Tocqueville unravels for us even to the point, as we said, of their logical but "false and impractical consequences." In short, Tocqueville's main purpose is to show that religious hopes must and can restrain the worst impulse of the new egalitarian democracy. That impulse is the "salient and indelible" feature of democracy, the passion of the "love of well-being" and the hope for its attainment. M 422 His argument is entirely conducted on the level of the psychological function of religion. Ultimately, Tocqueville remains undecided whether the driving passions of democracy, especially its desire for "easy successes and present enjoyments" will prove stronger than the guiding restraints of religious hopes. M 414 I am inclined to think

that “traditional” religion is up against considerable obstacles. Implicit in *Democracy in America* is a progressive deterioration of Western Christian religion, first into a new, radically simplified democratic form of religion, and finally, into the establishment of what amounts to a new religion of democracy, or, in Tocqueville’s words, a “sort of religion” based on majority public opinion as its “prophet.” L436 Such a religion of democracy would be no more than the self-aggrandizement of a democratic majority worshipping its own most common, controlling passions and ambitions.

But Tocqueville’s arguments about religion’s potential influence in democracy also contains a problem of another sort. The tyrannical power of the egalitarian majority is not the only dangerous power. In addition there is the question whether religion might restrain either excessive individual political ambition in democracy, or the rise of what Tocqueville famously calls a new form of “mild” and enervating despotism. Noticeably, because he insistently warns against the petty and mediocre desire for private well-being, Tocqueville encourages the ambitions for greatness and glory traditionally associated with political action. Acknowledging that men must have a firm sense of the final boundaries of human ambition, he argues that democracy is much less in need of “humility” than it is of increased pride. M 604 Hence, not Christian humility but pride in the “vaster idea” of human dignity ought to inspire an otherwise mediocre and materialistic democracy. Thus blatantly advocating what Christian tradition, but especially American Protestantism considers the sin of pride, one asks what kind of religion Tocqueville had in mind. What religion would both encourage greater pride in ambitious public enterprises and simultaneously provide the means for its own restraint? Significantly, despite Tocqueville’s famous advocacy of local self-government and civil associations, the main function of a generic notion of “religion” seems to be the correction of democratic materialism

and mediocrity. It has no effect at all upon those great individuals with a passion for great deeds and fame, be it in politics or in business. Are we to conclude that religion in democracy is only for mediocre average men and women, and that the possible hubris of the “megalopsyche” is in need of other restraints?

1. Tocqueville's reflections on the nature and function of religion

a. The varying referents of “religion.”

For Tocqueville, religion permeates the entire history of democracy, from its origins to its first American exemplar, and into democracy's yet to be determined future modes. In the still predominantly Christian America of the 1830's it seems to be ubiquitous. However, Tocqueville, consistent in his aim to logically pursue the future consequences of democracy's potential perils, is uncertain of even America's religious future. In his own judgment the hopes for democracy are clearly dependent upon the continued persistence of religious hopes. In fact, he categorically affirms that if man is to be free, he must believe. L444 It is inconceivable to him that a sovereign people, “master of itself,” is not to be “subject to God.” L 294 More than any other regime, free democracy is in need of religion. But it is quite conceivable to Tocqueville that in its unchallenged sovereignty a democratic people could turn oblivious to this need.

A proper understanding of Tocqueville's views of religion and its functions is initially also confounded by the term's shifting referent. We can distinguish at least three different usages of “religion,” and discern a progressively abstract and generalized definition of the word in his text. First, in the centuries-long development and expansion of the “equality of conditions” in Europe,

religion played a pivotal role in the form of Christianity. The Christian religion first taught the equality of all human beings. Essentially, Tocqueville maintains, it is democratic in nature. This despite the obvious historical fact that throughout much of its secular history, and in France until the revolutionary overthrow of the *ancien regime*, it fatefully aligned itself with aristocratic government. Evidently, Tocqueville, when contemplating the key role of Christianity in the historical rise of democracy as perhaps a providential design guided by a just God does so as a Catholic Christian, not a man of “generic” religious faith.

Secondly, regarding American democracy specifically, the denotation of religion is mainly restricted to radical Protestantism and Puritanism. Albeit denominations within the Christian religion, American Protestantism is uniquely responsible for the distinct fusion of its religious freedom of individual conscience with the political freedom of self-government. From the beginning, radical Protestantism supported freedom and democracy. Thus not a political revolution, as in France, but a religious and “cultural” process of transformation constituted the origin of American democracy. Ultimately, Tocqueville found, even American Catholicism was affected by this profound change, thus reaffirming the original democratic nature of Christianity as a whole.

Thirdly, and most relevant for the future of democracy generally, Tocqueville increasingly speaks of its relation to “religion” rather than Christianity or even American Protestantism. In this context, not the historical or theological form of Christian religion, but religion as a need or aspiration of the “human soul” and human nature, religion from the human point of view rather than its specific theological articulation predominates. From then on, not the theology of religion, but its psychology matters. Presumably then, even as Tocqueville continues to speak of false and even “very ridiculous” religions, warns of democrat’s proclivity towards pantheism,

and expresses astonishment at the common occurrence of “religious follies” in America, all such notions and phenomena are to be identified and explained not in theological, but psychological terms.^{L443,451,534} Most importantly, this historic transition is caused by the democratic mentality itself, as it tends to reduce all Christian theology to its basic psychological functions. The average democrat has little use for the finer distinctions of theology, matters of ceremonial forms, the meaning of symbols and the rituals of worship. What matters are personal beliefs expressing the experience of basic needs and hopes.

b. The psychological roots of religion and democracy

But what are the features and functions of the psychological roots of religion? How do they relate to the psychological grounds of democracy? Are these roots mutually compatible and supportive, or are they perhaps contradictory?

To judge by the few and widely dispersed remarks Tocqueville devotes to the subject, the roots of psychological needs for religious faith are easily identified. Men have a basic need for certainty and stability, including a sense of the wholeness of life, and a hope for an immortal future beyond life. In fact, as we noted above, the hope for immortality as expressed through religious faith is basic, and nothing more than a manifestation of hope as a “constituent principle of human nature.”^{L 297} Hope, however, is also required by a fundamental paradox at the heart of being human: men “show a natural disgust for existence and an immense longing to exist: he scorns life and fears annihilation.” *ibid* To resolve this existential paradox, men through the power of imagination compensate for this life’s dissatisfactions through the contemplation of another, more perfect world. Religious faith is thus as natural as is the urge to resolve this human paradox through a hope for its ultimate solution.

But in this life men must act in order to live, and even hope of immortality doesn't provide sufficient guidance for everyday living. Clearly for Tocqueville such guidance is not provided merely by freedom, issuing in aimlessness induced by a sensation of unlimited independence. The very ability to act requires a degree of order, purposiveness and stability not provided by the "perpetual agitation" of things, or even by daily needs. Consequently, for Tocqueville "There is almost no human action," however particular, which does not "arise" from some "very general idea" men have of God, his relation to men, and the nature of their souls. M 417 Moreover, because the "tendency" of the human mind is toward wholeness and uniformity, it will attempt to "harmonize" earth and heaven. M275 Politics and religion must somehow be brought in accord to satisfy the soul. Passages such as these tempt the conclusion that even democracy issues from such religious ideas. However, most men are incapable of providing their own truths about such ideas without falling into doubt, uncertainty, contradiction, paralyzing their souls into inaction. Accordingly, the weakness of the isolated individual soul, especially in times of growing enlightenment, and the strength required by freedom of action demand that in religious matters not merely private needs, but public dogma must reign. This is true especially under the generally accepted principle of the separation of church and government, which Tocqueville endorses. Without such public support the individual human soul, enervated and debilitated by doubt will lapse into a passivity conducive only to servitude. *ibid.* Paradoxically, without the "salutary yoke" of public religious dogma, sustained by majority public opinion, the active and energetic citizens required by free democracy couldn't exist. Mainly for this reason Tocqueville calls religion "the first of ... political institutions," not only of Americans, but of all democracies. M280

However, such reflections are not Tocqueville's only pronouncements on the topic of public religious dogma. Modern European nations, including newly democratic America, has for several centuries been subject to philosophical and religious teachings acting quite counter to any alleged human need for public guidance through general religious ideas. Hence, when describing the basic democratic mentality from the perspective of the "philosophic method of Americans," Tocqueville emphasizes not the need for public religious dogma, but its persistent weakening by the modern tendency, beginning with Luther and Descartes, to subject all matters of belief and thought to individual examination. Here Tocqueville claims that, accordingly, all men are encouraged to judge for themselves on the basis of personal experience and the common sense required of daily life. One result is the development of an "almost invincible distaste" for the supernatural. Everyone, wanting to be entirely self-sufficient, "finds his glory in making for himself beliefs that are his own about all things." M 406 Men "are no longer bound except by (private) interests, not by (public) ideas." (My add.) While this description is in accord with one of the central arguments of his work, namely that the distinctly democratic virtue consists of "self-interest rightly understood," it directly conflicts his arguments for the need of public religion. Moreover, Tocqueville here strongly suggests that the American perpetuation of public (Christian) religion, even if only supported by habitual, unreflective majority opinion, is an accident of American history rather than an expression of universal human need. M405 Not human nature, but America's historical origins in Puritanism are its cause.

This leads me to perhaps the central paradox in Tocqueville's arguments. We recall that the individual soul is said to be weak and confused into passivity in the absence of a publically enforced religious dogma. But when discussing individual democratic man or the democratic

soul independently of religion, solely on the basis of its own passions and desire, he consistently underscores its enormous strength and seemingly boundless energy. What strikes us most forcefully is not the weakness, but the vitality of the “interested” democratic individual. The basic democratic passions, desires and principles of action are singularly powerful, disturbingly single minded and overwhelming, difficult to control and dangerous in their consequences. Without exception, they are traceable to one passion, namely the universal, “natural and instinctive” desire for *material* well-being. M 506-7 It is the driving obsession of democratic societies. Not only is it the “dominant taste,” but it is “the great current of human passions...that carries everything along in its course.” M508 The passion is particularly conspicuous under the democratic “equality of condition.” Unlike aristocratic society, where material possessions are the inherited accumulation of centuries, in democracy each individual, not born into status and property, is quite literally a self-made man and woman. Hence the ubiquity of the struggle for one’s own welfare and sense of accomplishment. In addition, Tocqueville notes the overwhelming power of the passion for material well-being over political action and public opinion. What “agitates” Americans more than anything else, Tocqueville observes, are not political but “commercial passions.” Americans “carry the habit of trade into politics.” M273 In fact, they carry it into most every facet of daily life. The first and foremost determinant of democratic majority opinion thus is simply a consensus about the primacy of its materialistic desires.

In the light of this dominant passion religion’s “principal business” in a democracy is to weaken its predominant passion. It is “to purify, regulate, and restrain the too ardent and too exclusive taste” for material well-being. M422 Religion performs this regulative task primarily due to its “natural” tendency to direct the soul towards those “regions” superior to the sensual world and, we should add, hope for a greater happiness. M 419 (Although in this context, religion does so

not to compensate for the intrinsic failings of this material world, but because of its enormous and all absorbing attraction!) Needless to say, the first and most obvious question raised concerns religion's capability to perform such a task. Tocqueville's arguments about the fundamental strength of the human need for religion notwithstanding, the evidence of the case made for the overwhelming passion for material well-being puts its restraining power into doubt.

To begin with, religion, if it intends to purify and restrain materialism, cannot afford to "subdue it entirely" or destroy it. M 422 Religion must give this human need its due. First and foremost, this requires compromise with public opinion, or the "moral empire of the majority." M237 Dominated as it is by the mediocre pursuit of immediate pleasures, its basic opinions must perforce be the initial point of orientation for religious leaders. Not the pursuit of material pleasures, but its "excesses" are religion's legitimate concern. Identifying such excess is not facilitated by Tocqueville's conviction that democratic materialism, expressive of the mediocre aspiration of the "average" man, is in itself a "contained passion" avoiding the "brilliant vices" of aristocratic exuberance. M508 On the contrary, Tocqueville claims that the democratic passion for material well-being contains the very "order" required for its satisfaction, and indeed the "regular mores" and public tranquillity needed by industry. M509 Finally, the good mores accompanying the pursuit of moderate well-being can even be said to issue in "a sort of religious morality." Hope for success in this world is not incompatible with the hope for "chances" in the next. Ibid.

But given these circumstances, and materialist passions generating their own sense of moderate conduct, what further kind of "regulation" is needed of religion besides the built-in self-regulation of mediocre materialism? Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, what

independent criteria for judging excessive materialism are left for religions devoid of most of their independent theological moral imperatives, and constantly under the influence of the “moral empire of the majority”? If materialistic democracy even develops what amounts to a “sort of religion” of its own, and this religion is deemed sufficient to satisfy the democratic individual, what prevents genuine religion from being inundated and finally suffocated by what I have called the “religion of democracy?” Does spiritual religion have any defense of its own against this self-worship of the democratic pursuit of material well-being? And, more devastating yet, what is to prevent a democratic individual from using religion not to *restrict*, but rather *enhance* his basic drive for material well-being? What if he or she were to assert that their worldly success, based on their industriousness, was not only condoned but rewarded by divine grace? Max Weber was not alone in pointing to the import of this possibility for the future of modern materialistic culture. Or, as yet another possibility, would it be too outlandish to assume that the self-pride resulting from successful material pursuits might well defeat any religious self-doubts allegedly caused by lack of social reinforcement of religious truth?

True to form, Tocqueville provides at least a partial answer, even at the expense of the consistency of his arguments pursued in other contexts. Despite his observation that mediocre materialism provides its own restraint and even order, democratic materialism can, he warns elsewhere, manifest a “feverish ardor,” even an “insane ardor” if left to itself. M 511,519 Moreover, material pursuits alone produce, at least in the souls of “some,” an “enormous” reaction issuing either in a “fierce spiritualism,” if not the religious “follies” with which America abounds. Or, it may simply cause a basic sense of the utter futility of (material) life, leaving men in a state of “unceasing trepidation.” M 512 What are we to make of these various observations and claims about “the” democratic soul? Are we to infer that perhaps a

majority will be quite content with their mediocre pleasures and sense of well-being, living under the authority of the moral empire of the majority? And, are those not content with this state of affairs free to pursue their more “eccentric” religious needs without disturbing the rest? Wouldn’t this necessarily create the diversity of religious practices and cultures prohibiting the reign of a shared and unifying public dogma of faith?

The difficulties are further confounding by yet another task attributed to religion. For, in addition to restraining mediocre materialism, it is to lift individual men above it. If religion, especially in its Christian form, was instrumental in creating the equality of condition and thus ambition, it is now called upon by Tocqueville to expand men’s horizons, inspire them to undertake grand enterprises literally larger than (their) life, plan into the far future, and aspire to a greatness contrary to the democratic passion for immediate petty pleasures. Once again, it is religion as the source of the grandest notion of human futurity that is to inspire even democrats to undertake those glorious tasks sustained by religious hopes for immortality. Most likely this inspired Tocqueville to assert in a private correspondence that he discerned some basic affinity between religious belief and political freedom. On this circuitous route the human desire for greatness brings them “by a long detour” back” toward faith.” M524 The ultimate democratic obstacle to this greatness, however, is the “spirit of individual independence” it fosters. To this problem we must turn next.

2. Religion’s meliorative effect on the great “perils” of democracy

a. Religion and the problem of individualism

One of the greatest perils of democracy is what Tocqueville was one of the first to call individualism. For Tocqueville, it denotes a dangerous form of isolation by the democratic citizens, first into the “little society” of family and friends, and ultimately into “the solitude of his own heart.” M482-4 Its most immediate effect is the diminution of public virtues and the abandonment of the larger society to its own designs. Based on the accomplishment of partial material self-sufficiency, individualism is founded on a false sense of total self-reliance and control over one’s “whole destiny.”

However, individualism is to be distinguished from egoism. The latter is a depravation of the heart and an age-old vice ineradicably entrenched in the human psyche. Individualism is, instead, a “reflective and peaceful sentiment” based on an “erroneous judgment” of the democrat’s condition within egalitarian democracy. The equality of condition is mistakenly assumed to imply that the individual, as the equal of all other citizens, is therefore his own self-sufficient authority and source of his own successful life. Unlike the depravation of egoism, then, individualism is open to corrective judgment, especially if guided by Tocqueville’s distinctly democratic virtue of “self-interest well understood.” M500 Hence, again, the basic need for democratic “enlightenment” (*des lumiere*).

Individualism is thus prevented by the well-considered interest one has in interacting with fellow citizens not only for the public, but simultaneously for the private good. More importantly, public involvement especially at the local community level eliminates the arrogant and mistaken feeling of self-sufficiency and the deprivation accompanying selfish desires. Instead, even the ambitious public pursuit of self-interest, in part dependent upon “attracting the esteem and affection of others,” will lead to a “public benevolence” sustaining mutual support, perhaps a degree of “self-forgetting,” and even a sense of duty to the public. M486,488

However, notwithstanding most accounts of Tocqueville's theory of democratic virtue, defeating individualism also requires additional reflections of a religious nature. The passions invigorating and reinforcing materialistic individualism are sufficiently powerful to render even a thoughtful reflection upon one's own true self-interest an insufficient restraint. In addition, Tocqueville claims, self-interest must include a consideration of the "immense inheritance" promised by a hope in the rewards of eternal life. M505 As evidence Tocqueville points to the religious motivations in America: it is not the heart, but calculating, methodical reason that appears to inform most religious practices. In fact, he observes, when listening to American preachers it is "difficult to know" whether the principle goal of religion is "to procure eternal felicity in the other world or well-being in this one." M506 Indeed, democratic man might reason, why not get both, if neither precludes the other? Furthermore, religious hopes, even if inextricably intermingled with hopes for worldly success, infuse those worldly ambitions with a regard for one's neighbors and communities otherwise absent. Religion, by placing even the most isolated individual into the larger community of neighbors and indeed God's whole creation, is the final inducement to escape individual isolation.

What is most frequently ignored in discussions of Tocqueville's individualism, however, is the fact that it is also effected, and quite paradoxically so, by modern religious individualism. Not only individualism as an erroneous inference of democratic equality, but also the individualism implied by the Protestant notion of free conscience is quite detrimental to democracy.

Paradoxically, while Protestantism played a pivotal historical role in the rise of political freedom, its extreme form of individual religious freedom does not serve to sustain that political freedom.

American history has been fundamentally strengthened by the fact that from its very inception in radical Protestantism, religious freedom has adamantly supported political freedom. But for Tocqueville, as democracy prospers, Protestant individualism sows doubts and religious skepticism into far too many individual souls. Weakness, confusion, and religious schisms finally issue in religious indifference. In response, as we noted before, Tocqueville defends the notion of religion as a public dogma (*croyance dogmatique*) rather than an inspiration of a (typically Protestant) free individual conscience. Commentators have largely ignored the consequence that for Tocqueville not only democratic individualism, but the more radical religious individualism poses the greatest threat to democracy. Worst by far would be the amalgamation of the two. Curiously, this is a possible result Tocqueville himself never addresses directly, although it clearly is implicit in the logic of his argument.

This is indeed the most surprising facet of Tocqueville's view of religion in democracy, especially its American variety. Although he clearly subscribes to the separation of church and state, praising its proven success in America, he nevertheless insists that religion can only function as public religious dogma of faith:

“General ideas relative to God and human nature are therefore...the ones it is most fitting to shield from the habitual action of individual reason and....there is most to gain...in recognizing an authority.” M418

This is above all true in free countries. To repeat, In his chapter on individualism, we are presented with a person's withdrawal into isolation from a sense of self-sufficiency, independence, indeed arrogant self-reliance, however fallacious. In stark contrast, the destruction

of public religion in free democracy throws an individual into debilitating self-doubt and paralysis. Tocqueville's psychological view insists that unless a person has "fixed ideas" about the primordial questions about the nature of God and man, as well as the purpose of life, he or she will be left in a state of disorder, meaningless chance events and ensuing personal impotence. Circumscribed by incomprehensible perpetual agitation, the individual will react with inaction. With the destruction of public religion, increase in freedom and limitless independence will not issue in exultation and energy, but frightful instability without ready response. Collective actions for mutual benefit would cease. Egalitarian individualism, Tocqueville warns, leads to restricted private but still purposive activities. Far worse, however, is a religious individualism leaving the democrat vulnerable to the self-destruction induced by doubt about life itself. Freedom of human action would be the main victim, inviting political subservience and the demise of popular sovereignty.

As a result, Tocqueville's gives no credence to what became an American commonplace, namely the likelihood that religion, deeply anchored in the individual psyche, would be determined by the free conscience and the subsequent free choice of a religious denominational community. This is of course the alternative defended ever since William Penn in the 1690s, and most prominently by the early liberal John Locke and his progeny among the American revolutionaries. Tocqueville does not see the individual inner strength such writers postulated as necessary for free religious choices. Nor is it clear whether in the case of innumerable competing religious dogmas Tocqueville's individual would be able to freely decide which religious sect to adopt. Religious diversity within Christianity already enjoyed free reign in his America of the 1830s. Instead, he turned his attention to the relation between the necessity of public religious dogma and its true democratic rival, public opinion, and the "intellectual empire

the majority exercises” in democracy. M423 Surprisingly, democratic majority opinion constitutes both a real threat to religion while it is at the same time its necessary public basis of support.

b. Religion and the power of public opinion

A greater threat to democracy than even radical individualism is posed by the power and influence of majority opinion. With individualism the task is to overcome its weaknesses, while in the case of majority opinion the task is to delimit its dangerous strength. Alternatively identified as common opinion of the mass, or the moral and intellectual “empire of the majority,” this “tyranny of the majority” is far more powerful than isolated individuals because less subject to restraint. The public reign of majority opinion, legitimated by its derivation from the sacred source of democracy itself, the sovereignty of the people, is as omnipotent as that sovereign. Even if presumed to be guided by a higher principle of justice, it is in fact the majority’s *opinion* of justice which determines its actions and judgments. Individual isolation from the larger society is, as we saw above, an erroneous judgment of human equality’s consequences for personal conduct. Majority dominance, on the contrary, appears to be truly intrinsic to popular sovereignty. But even if one agrees with Tocqueville that omnipotence is a “dangerous thing in itself,” how does one escape its influence without relinquishing democracy?

Tocqueville’s insistence on public religious dogma further exacerbates the problem. His dilemma results from the fact that in order to defeat the ravages of individualism he invariably increases the dangers of the “moral empire of the majority.” If, as we saw above, the dangers of individual

isolation from larger society are further magnified by doubts instilled by freedom of conscience, then the even greater peril of oppressive majority power is further strengthened by the supposed need for authoritative public religious opinion. For Tocqueville, The only escape from this paradox is by way of resorting to another, even more perplexing one. It is the argument that religion should also encourage greater individual ambitions and the strength to confront the pressures of democratic mediocrity. Hence, enormous demands are made of individual strength and courage: an individual must be able to overcome both the isolation of democratic individualism and avoid the debilitating effects of individualistic, private religious inclinations. Once he, out of reasoned self-interest, interacts with the larger community, he or she must then resist pressures to conform with reigning majority opinion. Except, of course, in the matter of religious faith, where public dogma necessarily protects him from the profoundest existential weakness and isolation. However, with increasing incidents of great individuals breaking through such restraints, aiming to realize their greater public ambitions despite the leveling effects of democracy, the reigning stability and order Tocqueville claims was created by democracy would inevitably be disrupted by disorder and the ensuing unpredictability. While this increase in freedom and even ensuing disorder is indeed Tocqueville's laudable intent, it would in effect further weaken the hold of public religious dogmas and increase the temptation for many individuals to escape into the illusive security of their own private realms. The logic of his argument shows that in Tocqueville's theory of democracy there is no easy religious escape from the paradoxical relation between individual freedom and majority "tyranny."

Ironically, Tocqueville hints at one point at a possible escape of sorts, but not to be found in religion. Instead, Tocqueville appeals to general "enlightenment" to balance the relation between

individual freedom and majority rule. Once, and never again, he appeals to the public influence of the notion of “rights.” For democratic citizens, “the idea of rights is nothing other than the idea of virtue introduced into the political world.” M227 The concept of rights can define the distinctions between “license and tyranny,” provide “independence without arrogance,” as well as “submission without baseness.” Ibid. Insistence upon one’s own rights necessitates the respect for other’s. And, quite contrary to the predominant spirit and thrust of his arguments throughout *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville hints at one point that, when “religions are weakening” and any notion of divine rights is disappearing, the only substitute could be provided by binding “the idea of rights to the personal interest” of the individual. Does this perhaps point to the possibility of democratic faith ultimately resting on a “religion” of individual rights? M 228. Self-interest rightly understood, rather than majority religious consensus, would rule interactions in the public realm. Or, rather, they would blend into one. Unfortunately for us, Tocqueville never connected these brief reflections of an early chapter with his more general theory of religion and democracy elaborated in the later parts of his work. This also prevents him from considering the possibility of a “civic religion” based on respect for fundamental rights, as propounded by A. Lincoln. Blending reverence for the “divine” rights of the Declaration of Independence and the political republican principles of the Constitution into an amalgam of “patriotic individualism,” such a civic religion, especially if habitually sustained by majority opinion, might well take the place of “traditional” religion. But aside from raising a host of other problems, considerations of this question would fall outside Tocqueville’s basic purview.

3. Conclusion

Seven years after the completion of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote in his private correspondence that the question of the relation between religious passion and political liberty is “insoluble,” and that the only “absolute truth ...in this matter is that there is no absolute truth.” I consider this neglected but suggestive passage a very apt conclusion for his entire discussion of the issue of religion and democracy. Overall, Tocqueville’s varied reflections on the subject neither support a general theory that democracy inspires religion, nor that it destroys it. Nor does Tocqueville provide reliable evidence that, even if a free republic is in need of religious guidance, religion is capable of giving it. Even the politically felicitous religiosity Tocqueville admired amongst the Americans, while perhaps exemplary, was evidentially inconclusive, and certainly not universally applicable. By his own admission, too much depends upon such contingent circumstances as fluctuating intensity of religious passions, growing pride in modern commercial success, fortuities of historical time and place, or even the cycle of religion’s “natural” growth and decline. Finally, Tocqueville doesn’t resolve his paradoxical claim that the freer a democracy, the greater its need for religious faith: his own argument implies that the greater freedom he so fervently advocates for conformist democracy would render the future of its religiosity not more but less reliably predictable.

In sum, Tocqueville leaves no doubt that his main preoccupation is the various perils egalitarian democracy poses to public freedoms. On this pivotal issue, religion is unable to perform its preassigned tasks, either in the prevention of excessive private equality, or freedom’s total extinction. At the end, religion fails to prevent, or is not shown to prevent, two forms of ultimate threat to democratic freedom, namely the rise of a new type of ‘benign’ despotism, or the emergence of great ambitious political men. The new despotism is depicted as a highly active central government, which in the name of the people’s interest (in security and well-being)

reigns over a politically inactive “sea” of private individuals devoid of any desire the problems shared by the community. The illusion of private independence, encouraged by a caring government, has taken the place of active public self-government. In this fateful development no mention is made of any possible preventive role of religion. Furthermore, even if one were to partially agree that his scenario of a politically passive, largely privatized citizenry is suggestive of our current democratic societies, we would still be left to our own devices in grasping the multiple roles of religion today. If anything, and contrary to his suggestion, in American history Tocqueville’s democratic individualism was strengthened first by protestant religious individualism and subsequently and more recently, by religious individualism inspired by purely psychological, “individual needs.” The latter in turn was in little need of support by Tocqueville’s “public religious dogma.” And, although religion still serves as a major impetus for group sociability, religious sects are increasingly chosen on grounds of individualistic “spiritual needs.” Participation in religious groups, for most more meaningful today than political activism, also does not unavoidably encourage political citizenship. In addition, religion has indisputably failed to limit growing concern for “material well-being,” as the preponderant individual, social and political goal. Finally, the increasing hostility of so-called “fundamentalist” religious groups towards expanding modern individual freedoms, especially those legally protected by novel constitutional doctrines such as “the right to privacy,” were still unknown in Tocqueville’s America. But it clearly undermines the tradition of mutual support between Protestant religious, and political and social freedoms he understood to be a unique factor of American history. Today’s result is a multifarious society beyond the scope of his vision. Similarly, Tocqueville assigns no recognizable function to religion in preventing the rise of a new elitist aristocracy of industry, his brief but penetrating premonition of modern industrial corporate capitalism. Although this new disruption of democratic equality is by

traditional standards clearly a blatant manifestation of the most excessive materialism, no clue is given for whether religion could have or ought to have prevented this basic threat to democracy.

Finally, in focusing exclusively on the prevention of democratic mediocrity as the greatest threat to its freedoms, Tocqueville neglected to consider the function or place of religion in a more politically active, adventurous and powerful democracy, the future of which he himself foresaw and indeed advocated. Tocqueville occasionally did envision an increasingly prodigious and ambitious America. But as part of these futuristic speculations he never considered the possible need for restraint exerted upon great political ambitions, grandiose public enterprises, and the arrogance of power. Nowhere is it suggested that religion could perform the regulation of individual political aggrandizement, or, as one of the American constitutional founders put it, the “love of fame, the ruling passion of the noblest minds.” The mutual control of politically ambitious religious factions, among others, while it was a central concern of the American revolutionaries, is not treated in *Democracy in America*. Utilizing for public rather than private purposes the office holder’s urge for self-aggrandizement and satisfying their “pride and vanity” for public distinction was indeed one of the main concerns of the American constitutional founders. From Tocqueville’s vantage point, however, great men had vanished with the spread of democratic majority rule and the fading of the revolutionary spirit itself. He did not consider that the rising power of democracies might cause their reappearance. In a democracy far less egalitarian than conjured up by even his most ominous speculations, the consequences of such reappearance might weigh more heavily upon the public than any damage wrought by excessively mediocre equality. Or, worse, what if democracy must simultaneously deal with both. Is there a religion which at one and the same time can encourage the individual strength and pride to resist the leveling effects of majority opinion *and* instill the humility to

avoid arrogant self-aggrandizement and avoid immoderation in the use of public power? I, for one, wonder what under such conditions Tocqueville's response would have been to James Madison's claim that "neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as adequate control" of both individual and group passions for domination. Fed.10 For a discussion of restraining the *hybris* of great political ambition in newly powerful democracies we need to return to the American constitutionalists, or perhaps even to the political thinkers of Greek antiquity.

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Endnotes

Cf my book chapter on Religion in American Democracy in *The Secular and the Sacred*, Nation Religion and Politics, ed. William Safran (London: Frank Cass, 2003)

Cf. Washington's Farewell Address: "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle">"

Cf. Madison's Federalist Paper no.10 and private correspondence to Edward Livingston, 1822, in which he warns of the "danger" of the "old error" that "some sort of alliance or coalition between govt. and religion ought to exist. In no.10 he also argues that "neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on" as adequate controls of majority interest or passions. The latter is of course Tocqueville's dominant theme.

The last sentence of his introduction to volume One ends in the claim that "I have tried to see not differently but further than any party; while they are busy with tomorrow, I have wished to consider the future." L20

Dem. L19

6.

Tocqueville's position is entirely in accord with the American constitutional federalists. Madison emphasizes the utter novelty of the American constitution, without "parallel in the annals of human society," and a government "without model on the face of the globe." Fed.14 It is left to successive generations to "perpetuate" and "improve" that model. Ibid. Madison's task did not include detailed speculations about such future improvements. Hamilton, in Fed. 1, merely pointed out its guiding principle: it was left to the future American people to decide, by "conduct and example," whether government by reflection and choice would finally supercede political constitutions "forever destined" to be based on accident and force. Fed.1 In point of fact, Tocqueville provided the first elaborate design of the democratic culture (rather than just its constitutional structure) required for government by reflection (or "enlightenment") and free choice. The last sentence of *Democracy in America* confirms his conviction that the choice between freedom and servitude, enlightenment or barbarism, "depends on them," the people of modern democracies. M676

Federalist 14

To my knowledge, the first to consider Tocqueville's "method" of procedure was J.S. Mill in his famous reviews of both Vol 1 and II. In the latter, Mill emphasizes that democracy, "a fact at once so great and so new" necessarily requires the careful examination of "innumerable properties" from "many aspects" before even "modest and conjectural judgments" about its future can be made. Mill suggests that Tocqueville "succeeded in connecting with Democracy by deductions *a priori*" their "natural influences" in the light of "mankind" and "the world" as "we know ours to be." My reading of Tocqueville's procedure appears to be in agreement with Mill's version. Cf 216 *Essays on Politics and Culture*

To be sure, in his influential reviews, Mill never discusses Tocqueville's theory of religion and democracy. It is mentioned only a few times in passing, very briefly and without commentary. Presumably this is a reflection of Mill's severe criticism of Calvinism's influence in England. It also initiates a long tradition in modern liberalism to neglect the subject of religion in modern liberal democracy.

Evidence for this inclination is found everywhere. Nearly all of the major "perils" Tocqueville detects for future democracy are either not yet present in America or they have in fact been successfully prevented by American democrats. This is true for the danger of individualism and isolation in private life, for majority tyranny (counteracted by American's respect for rights and constitutional law and patriotism), for the excesses of materialism unrestrained by religion, and for the benign despotism he fears most of all, as well as the ill effects of an "aristocracy of industry."

Interestingly, the view I develop is corroborated by a contemporary political theorist. In her recent *Democracy on Trial*, Jean Bethke Elshtain asks "Is the drama of democracy in its final act on the stage of the West? ...Democracy may be in peril, but it remains vibrant and resilient, the great source of political hope...Hope, as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt insisted, is the human capacity that sustains political *being*. Should hopelessness triumph, then and only then will it be rightly said that

democracy is forlorn.” p.118 *In other words, the hope even today is that democracy will be realized in its future.* The obvious question to be answered is respecting the source of this hope. The origin of hope lies in the Christian demand for faith, hope and charity, denoting a hope for salvation intrinsic to faith in God. It is not clear what it means to say that hope is a political capacity if it is derived from religious faith. For American founders like Madison any hope for a democratic future was the offspring of confidence in the capacity of men for self-government. Tocqueville’s notion of hope is closer to Madison’s view than it is to the vaguer concept conjured up by Elshtain.

Tocqueville only mentions in passing that 18th century philosophers expected religious “zeal” to be “extinguished” by freedom and enlightenment. CF M282

Tocqueville admits as much, claiming only to be considering the psychological and social functions of religion. This purely “human” perspective on religion excludes consideration of a theological nature: not God’s actions but men’s needs are seen as religion’s origin. Consequently, any attempt to reconstruct and decide Tocqueville’s complex arguments on religion on theological or doctrinal grounds is an exercise in futility. Compare this with William James’ famous *Varieties of Religious Experience*, recently applied to the contemporary scene by Charles Taylor. See my remarks below. Tocqueville would have said “its own most vulgar and petty immediate concerns for material pleasure.”

On this issue Tocqueville is not only in agreement with Benjamin Constant, but, more interestingly, with J.S. Mill and his attacks on Calvinistic stress on humility and his praise for pagan “self-assertion.” Characteristically, Madison in Federalist 55 argues that it is esteem of and confidence in men’s virtue for self-government, not religion, that is presupposed by republican government “in a higher degree” than any other form.

...”and 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.” M 413

Historians of early American religion appear to agree that the period between the revolution and the Jacksonian era was the time of “the democratization of American Christianity.” It was marked by the “individualization” of conscience, the refusal to defer to learned theologians and traditional orthodoxies, the praise of the virtues of “ordinary people” and their deepest personally experienced spiritual impulses, the rise of popular preachers, and the use of vernacular in word and religious song. CF. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale 1989

Especially in the first volume of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville is full of admiration for America’s adherence to Christianity. Most striking is of course the mutual support between freedom and religion. However, in an 1831 letter from New York, Tocqueville was strikingly skeptical and even pessimistic about American’s religious practice. He doubted the real “power” of religion, as well as the inertness of its faith, manifesting itself in the fact that not religious dogma but conformist “morality” dominated Protestant services. American democrats are no longer “moved” by religion. He took “so-called tolerance” for a “huge indifference” toward matters of religious faith. Finally, Tocqueville’s early American personal experiences convinced him that Protestantism had brought nothing but “inextricable doubt” to America. He found the “sentiment” of doubt “ruling in the depths of almost everyone’s soul. Protestant ministers had become “businessmen of religion.” Nevertheless, even here Tocqueville was already persuaded that Christianity “still remains” a larger foundation here than “in any other country,” with great political consequences. CF letter to Louis de Kergorlay, in *Selected Letters*, p. 45ff.

In an important article the Tocqueville scholar James T. Schleifer shows how, upon the advice of early readers of his manuscript, Tocqueville deleted passages praising the superiority of Christianity. Instead, he increasingly tended to accentuate that democracy needed religion, and consensus on morality, rather than Christianity. Schleifer also stresses the “paradoxical if not contradictory positions” T. Entertains, and agrees that they are intrinsic to the subject matter itself rather than the blemishes of the author Cf. James T. Schleifer, Tocqueville and Religion: Some new perspectives. *The Tocqueville Review*, La revue Tocqueville, v.2, Fall-Winter 1982, 303-21 In his indispensable study *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America* Schleifer also shows that one early plan for the work was to consist of separate sections on political, social and religious society, the latter part of which was

drastically reduced in size in the actual work. Cf. Schleifer, p. 9-10

In a profound theological disquisition on the roots of Tocqueville's views in the "irrationalities of the Augustinian self," Joshua Mitchell builds his case that "the paradox of freedom" is that it requires "an obedience, a passivity, before God." 206 The "right relation between religion and politics" includes the insight that politics raises certain hopes and "longings" that politics can never fulfill. 227 Today, only "habit" sustains democracy, as the "permanent alliance between Christianity and democracy" is disavowed. 249 The "void" left by this disavowal can only be filled by a return to "biblical" religion. 257,249. I have argued throughout that the uniformity of this argument can only be sustained if one ignores the many ambiguities and perplexities Tocqueville himself sees both in the roots of religion as well as its varied relations to democratic passions and political freedoms. Besides, Mitchell imposes upon Tocqueville a theological disposition not elaborated in *Democracy in America*. Focusing exclusively in the internal logic of the latter, as I have attempted to do, leaves us with a rather different result. Furthermore, I try not to interpret his main work by reference to merely his own private faith. I am persuaded by the evidence of his main biographer, Andre Jardin, that Tocqueville, although Catholic, was not a believer. Cf. Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom, Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy and the American Future*, U of Chicago Press, 1995 ; Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville*, Johns Hopkins, 1988, p. 528ff.

Once Tocqueville calls it "essentially a middle class passion," quite likely a nod in the direction of J.S.Mill, who in his review of *Democracy in America* noted that it fairly describes the life of the British middle class.

This point is apparently missed by Sheldon Wolin's view of Tocqueville's theory of religion. Wolin describes it as "revisionist" 237 and essentially serving a repressive role.³²⁵ However, while Wolin correctly sees religion's role in "concocting an antimaterialist ideology for the demos," he is wrong in asserting that Tocqueville's entire argument aimed 'not to prepare democratic man for political action but to neutralize him.' 336 To the contrary, and as I tried to show, Tocqueville wanted to restrict materialism in order to free men for political action. Cf. Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between two worlds*, Princeton 2001

Tocqueville does say that he is aware of Christians doing good to others out of love of God rather than a hope for rewards. However, he does maintain that "interest is the principal means religions themselves make use of to guide men," as their way to gain popularity. M505

Here we have a concrete example of Tocqueville's method of argument. In light of the fact that, in his judgment, Americans have successfully defeated individualism by virtue of their love of civil and political associations, M486, he might effectively conclude his discourse on the subject. However, and characteristically, he continues to pursue the logical potentials of individualism to its conclusion, namely the peril of a new democratic despotism. Such a despotism, clearly not visible in American democracy, nevertheless follows as the logical consequence of the fact that the isolation of individuals in democracy is essentially similar to the isolation of subjects required by all forms of despotism.

Hence Tocqueville's fear of such despotism as a possible future of democracy.

It would be too facile a response to attribute Tocqueville's argument to his Catholicism. It was, by all accounts, a tepid faith at best, riven by scepticism and doubt. Much more important is the logic of his argument, that even regarding religious faith, only public action and beliefs can inspire to public interaction, the true human freedom.

M 418 Even as Tocqueville underscores the mutual support between religion and freedom by the Puritans, he characteristically cites Cotton Mather's speeches emphasizing the fact that civil and moral liberty, and the liberty for that only which is just and good, is "the proper end and object of authority." L46 From Tocqueville's perspective religion guards the basic mores and habits of democratic life, which in turn supports the laws maintaining freedom. However, however true, this perspective makes him oblivious to the increasing impact of religion as based on *individual* freedom of conscience independent of any religious authority.

In a letter written in 1847 Tocqueville claims that "the march of time" and the "development of well-

being” alone have already “taken away from the religious element three-quarters of its original powers.” Letters, p. 193

Interestingly, when describing American conditions, Tocqueville at times notes elements of such a civic religion, blending individual interests with strong patriotism. But it does not substitute for or even enter into his considerations of religion’s functions.

Letters p.191

Cf Letter ibid

This is in agreement with Charles Taylor’s recent argument concerning the state of religion today. Taylor, revisiting William James, persuasively reads the contemporary status as one of diverse attitudes: much of religion is tailored to modern expressive individualism, much still supports small religious denominational communities, and to a certain extent even patriotism is still amalgamated with religious faith. Except for the probably predominance of “private” religiosity, no one trend excludes the other. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today, William James Revisited*, Harvard 2002
Cf Lawrence v Texas 2003 and earlier cases

John Stuart Mill was the first to rightly point out that Tocqueville’s concept of the “equality of condition” made little if any sense, unless it referred to or implicitly included the broader modern emergence of a commercial civilization undermining traditional aristocratic society.

L 412, where he conjures up a future America of 150 million people, competing with Russia for a spot among the “leading nations,” having the world take notice of their “greatness.” It seems to me that His discussion of democratic virtue and religion does not fit this new phenomenon “which the imagination cannot grasp.”

Fed. 72

To be accurate, once, in volume one, Tocqueville hints that at least in America, Christian religion also reins in the “audacity” of Americans, as well as its impulses for “boldest innovations.” Unlike in France, the “impious maxim” that “everything is permitted in the name of society” has not succeeded due to respect for Christian morality. For this reason and others, few if any men in America regarded republican institutions “the temporary instruments of their greatness.” Here, at least, it is strongly suggested that Christianity restricts both the modest many and the ambitious few. On balance, however, and since Tocqueville advocates a spirit of pride over humility, he is more concerned about the restraints imposed upon the many than those required for the (few) great. M245,280,281

Cf Fed. 51 etc.