Our focus is not on whether Tocqueville was a believing Catholic, the explicit evidence concerning which is ambiguous. Our focus is on whether, to what extent, and how Catholicism specifically (and Christianity more generally) recognizably influenced his analysis of American democracy—that is, of democracy in general.

Paul Rahe begins by defending Tocqueville against those of our contemporaries who regard his silence concerning the Declaration of Independence (the founding document which acknowledges a creator as the source of universal human rights), as evidence that Tocqueville rejects the Declaration. Against these “who harp on the Declaration” and seem to think that heritage has little to teach “our contemporaries,” Rahe defends Tocqueville’s emphasis on “our colonial heritage.” Rahe further stresses Tocqueville’s purpose to “reconcile . . . the French Roman Catholic Church to the new democratic order.” To this end, he argues that equality, democracy’s pre-eminent principle, is such a break from classical political thinking that “Christianity marks a political turning point in human history.”

Rahe’s argument that Tocqueville “finds the first unequivocal assertion of the natural equality of man” in “the Church fathers” (citing Augustine) will, I think, be news to many students of political thought. Rahe’s take on how modern political philosophy (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and their progeny) establishes equality on a non-Christian, even anti-Christian, basis is also most interesting, original, and instructive. That basis is that all men are equal because all men are evil, that is, equally enslaved to their appetites. This emphasis helpfully clarifies Tocqueville by suggesting that he “emphasizes the Christian argument almost to the exclusion of” the “equally evil” argument. Rahe’s clarification explains more clearly, deeply, and persuasively than I have seen anywhere, why “democracy desperately needs Christianity.”

Peter Lawler balances this drift of Rahe’s analysis by stressing that Tocqueville’s Christianity is “a kind of combination of aristocracy and democracy” of which “the aristocratic element” is America’s most precious Christian inheritance. Nowhere have I read a more helpful analysis of the inner dynamic by which democracy’s egalitarian good news that “I can
say nobody is better than me” is also the “bad news” that “I have no reason to say I’m better than anyone else.” The consequent democratic tendencies 1) to unprecedented deference to “public opinion,” and 2) to replace Christianity with pantheism, suggest it is insufficient to view democratic equality as owing to Christianity. Perhaps Christianity first taught human equality but perhaps also that teaching, as instantiated in modern democracy, tends to replace Christianity with frank unbelief or pantheism. The latter possibility is important for those who care about the relation of democracy to religion, for it opens up an entirely unexplored perspective on that relation. It may even suggest an answer to this puzzling question. Tocqueville attributes American democracy’s existence to Puritan Christianity. So why does he think “our grandchildren will tend more and more to be divided clearly between those who have abandoned Christianity entirely, and others who have returned to the Church of Rome”? I have seen no obvious explanation why democracy is more likely to undermine Protestant than Catholic Christianity.

Gary Glenn (the present author) argues that Tocqueville’s focusing his analysis on “the democratic social state” carries forth into modernity “a Christian-Aristotelian view of society as constituted by inter-generational moral obligations.” I find its antecedents in the sixteenth-century neo-scholastics, particularly Robert Bellarmine. I connect this to Tocqueville’s famous argument that “administrative decentralization” enables the Americans to preserve democracy against the dangers to which it is otherwise prone. I contrast this medieval Catholic view of society with the centralizing tendencies of the modern Hobbesian/Lockean “state.”

I also show Tocqueville’s view of Christianity’s utility in preserving democracy to be equivocal. Stressing religions’ political utility resembles Machiavelli, and I wonder whether this could be a religious view. I also note Tocqueville’s explicit unconcern with the “truth” of Christianity and wonder what it might mean that political utility is independent of truth. I further note Tocqueville’s seeming unconcern about the extent to which the American version of Christianity has made its peace with what medieval Christianity would have called avarice.

Both Kenneth Grasso and Carson Holloway perform splendidly the discussant’s task to raise serious questions, to bring out aspects of the papers that are important, and to make relevant criticisms. Grasso thinks that both Glenn and Lawler, in different ways, undermine the ancients/moderns distinction for understanding the history of political thought. The validity of this distinction, from the point of view of Catholic thought, is a long-running controversy in the Society of Catholic Social Scientists and was the theme of an earlier symposium in these pages. Grasso also presents a
thoughtful explication of the sense in which he thinks Tocqueville regards the crisis of modernity as a religious crisis requiring a religious remedy. Finally, he calls attention to Rahe’s important doubt whether human equality would ever have been discovered without Christianity. Grasso brings to bear John Paul II’s argument that this discovery is made far more difficult by modernity’s “exaggerated rationalism” consequent to its radical separation of “faith and reason.”

Holloway thinks that the three papers “all explicate, in different and helpful ways, Tocqueville’s ambiguous relationship to the modern, democratic world.” Unlike Grasso, Holloway does not find that the papers undermine the ancients/moderns distinction. Instead, he finds in Tocqueville “an almost unique, but nevertheless eminently defensible, position in relation to modernity.” Since Tocqueville is neither a wholehearted defender, nor a “reactionary critic” nor a visionary radical looking beyond modernity, Holloway wonders whether he is a political philosopher at all. Holloway’s striking contribution is to show that the answer to that question does not matter because “one can learn as much or more of the truth about human beings from him as from many other thinkers who are [undoubtedly] political philosophers.”

Holloway also usefully develops Rahe’s defense of Tocqueville’s ignoring of the Declaration of Independence. And he corrects Glenn’s view that Tocqueville “is completely at peace with the spirit of unlimited acquisition.” He finds evidence that Tocqueville implicitly warns of the dangers of acquisitiveness in his criticism of democratic man’s excessive love of physical comforts.

The contributors hope that you will find the symposium to reflect that relation of faith and reason that John Paul II characterized as “like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” That, at any rate, is our aim.

Notes

