The thought of these philosophic thinkers structures this study. Both perceive an affinity between democracy and “unlimited government.” Tocqueville’s thought sometimes reflects Catholic sensibilities and themes. Benedict’s thought reflects Catholic orthodoxy. Both thinkers, separated by 170 years, emphasize respectively “despotism” and “dictatorship,” which they think democracy is open to, endangered by, and tends towards. While Tocqueville sees the danger as “democracy,” and Benedict sees it as “relativism,” they are describing the same phenomenon. “Democratic despotism” results from attenuating the “habits of restraint” undergirding democracy; and the “dictatorship” embodies the despotism in our time.

INTRODUCTION

The thought of two philosophic thinkers forms the structure of this paper. Both perceive an affinity between democracy and “unlimited government” which is worth our while to consider, as citizens, as scholars, and as Catholics.

Tocqueville’s thought, though not generally regarded as Catholic, nevertheless sometimes reflects Catholic sensibilities, concerns, and themes. Benedict’s thought reflects Catholic orthodoxy. Both thinkers, though separated by 170 years, emphasize respectively “despotism” and “dictatorship,” which they think democracy is at least open to, certainly endangered by, and perhaps destined for. What might this commonality signify?

PART I: 
Tocqueville’s “Democratic Despotism”

Tocqueville wonders whether a “democratic social state” will, in the long run, tolerate limited government. *Democracy in America* begins with “a kind of religious dread” that the unprecedented sort of what he eventually decides to call “democratic despotism,” is somewhere between likely and unavoidable. “Society does more and the individual less. That is inevitable.” In between he praises elements in American democracy that he thinks can forestall the evils stemming from democratic “individualism”
although the relation of those elements to the tendency towards despotism is unclear. Those elements are primarily social/cultural mores (the democratic family, the role of women, the particular form of Christian religion he finds there); but also secondarily the U.S. Constitution which leaves most day-to-day government to the people in their local communities, thereby maximizing the importance of intermediate institutions rather than of central governments (either state or federal). Yet he fears that “the democratic social state” almost irresistibly forms democratic peoples to let society or government “entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living.”

Tocqueville says preservation of a “democratic social state” partly depends on religion.

“Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot. Religion is much more needed in the republic they [French free thinkers] advocate than in the monarchy they attack and in democratic republics most of all.” His reasons are rational, political, and instrumental rather than theological: “How could society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened?” Apparently the morality is preservative, not the faith.

However, he doubts that religion will survive in democratic times. “When any religion has taken deep root in a democracy, be very careful not to shake it; but rather guard it as the most precious heritage of aristocratic times.” And he predicts that “our grandchildren will tend more and more to be divided clearly between those who have completely abandoned Christianity and those who have returned to the Church of Rome.”

Worse, “as conditions become more equal” democratic nations tend toward pantheism. Still worse, democracy fosters both “materialism” and “a taste for physical pleasure” which breeds more materialism. But the strongest evidence that he fears for religion’s future in democratic time is his suggestion that “it is ever the duty of lawgivers and of all upright educated men to raise up the souls of their fellow citizens and turn their attention toward heaven.” What could be stronger evidence of desperate fear than to charge democratic lawgivers with responsibility for preserving religion?

What consequences does he foresee if religion does not survive?

Currently “while . . . the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare.” In this way, religion “should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions” because it “singularly facilitates their use” of liberty by restraining their desire (inspired by “nature and circumstances”) to “do everything.” However,
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if the spirit of the Americans were free of all impediment, one would soon find among them the boldest innovators and the most implacable logicians in the world. But American revolutionaries are obliged ostensibly to profess a certain respect for Christian morality and equity and that does not allow them easily to break the laws when those are opposed to the executions of their designs.\^{16}

If religion dies, the consequence he foresees is unleashing the Americans from their religion-inspired “habits of restraint” on their “bold” and “enterprising spirit” and their “imagination”; with the resulting unlimited government he here calls “despotism.”\^{17} Since the last holdouts against democracy’s movement towards abandonment of Christianity will be the Catholics,\^{18} their continued adherence to traditional Christian morality would be the most direct objects of the despotism following from that abandonment. It would then not be surprising to find them among the first to notice, and to speak up, when that despotism impends.

**PART II:**

**POPE BENEDICT’S “DICTATORSHIP OF RELATIVISM”**

On 18 April 2005, one day before he was elected Pope Benedict XVI, the then-Dean of the College of Cardinals stated what would become a theme of his pontificate: “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”\^{19} In 2010 he stated that “a dictatorship of relativism threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man’s nature, destiny and ultimate good.”\^{20} In the same speech, Benedict proposed “The evangelization of culture . . . [to witness that] . . . religion is in fact a guarantee of authentic liberty and respect, leading us to look upon every person as a brother or sister.” In particular, he appealed “to you, the lay faithful, . . . not only to be examples of faith in public, but also to put the case for the promotion of faith’s wisdom and vision in the public forum.”

Benedict is not the first philosophic thinker to argue that relativism tends in this direction. Almost a half-century before Cardinal Ratzinger’s 2005 speech, a well known non-Catholic thinker argued,

Generous liberals . . . appear to believe that our inability to acquire any genuine knowledge of what is intrinsically good or right compels us to be tolerant of every opinion about good or right or to recognize all preferences . . . as equally respectable. . . . Liberal relativism has its roots in the natural right tradition of tolerance . . . ; but in itself it is a seminary of intolerance.\^{21}
Six years later this scholar explained how liberal relativism turns out to be a “seminary of intolerance.” He wrote, “But absolute tolerance is altogether impossible; the allegedly absolute tolerance turns into ferocious hatred of those who have stated clearly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things.”

The thought of philosopher-pope Benedict XVI and secular philosopher Leo Strauss were separated by 50 years. They were separated also by their respective methods of inquiry, in that Benedict’s combines revelation and reason while Strauss’s is reason unassisted by revelation. This suggests that the connection of relativism and dictatorship does not presuppose revelation. Whether “all truth is one,” or “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth,” the salient point is that relativism’s affinity for “dictatorship” and “ferocious intolerance” is visible from both unassisted reason and revelation.

Strauss noted relativism’s view “that our inability to acquire any genuine knowledge of what is intrinsically good or right compels us to be tolerant of every opinion about good or right or to recognize all preferences . . . as equally respectable.” So it is not obvious why he and Benedict should see relativism issuing in something called “intolerance” or “dictatorship.” For relativism seems to deny that it knows what is “good” for those who differ from others about what is good. And, lacking such knowledge, it seems to deny the rationality of imposing its values on others. For example, those who view abortion as morally wrong should not impose that view on those who do not think it so. This is “toleration.”

So what is Benedict’s evidence that relativism actually is leading to dictatorship?

In his 2005 homily he introduced this idea without elaboration. He restated it in his 2010 speech in Britain and in a 2010 book, and elaborated the meaning of dictatorship and the evidence which supports its coming into being in a 2010 interview.

A new intolerance is spreading. There are well-established standards of thinking that are supposed to be imposed on everyone. These are then announced in terms of so-called “negative tolerance.” For instance, when people say that for the sake of negative tolerance [i.e., “not offending anyone”] there must be no crucifix in public buildings. With that we are basically experiencing the abolition of tolerance, for it means, after all . . . that the Christian faith is no longer allowed to express itself visibly.
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When, for example, in the name of non-discrimination, people try to force the Catholic Church to change her position on homosexuality or the ordination of women, then that means that she is no longer allowed to live out her own identity and that instead, an abstract, negative religion is being made into a tyrannical standard that everyone must follow. That is then seemingly freedom—for the sole reason that it is liberation from the previous situation.

. . . This development increasingly leads to an intolerant claim of a new religion, which pretends to be generally valid because it is reasonable, indeed, because it is reason itself, which knows all and, therefore, defines the frame of reference that is now supposed to apply to everyone.

In the name of tolerance, tolerance is being abolished; this is a real threat we face. The danger is that reason—so-called Western reason—claims that it has now really recognized what is right and thus makes a claim to totality that is inimical to freedom. . . . No one is forced to be a Christian. But no one should be forced to live according to the “new religion” as though it alone were definitive and obligatory for all mankind.

So, it only seems to be true that relativism does not imply a claim about what is good for others. It is not true in the final analysis (as Strauss and Benedict agree). In the final analysis, relativism implies that it is good for others to be tolerant and nonjudgmental (as relativism understands these things); and that it is not good for others to be “tolerant” as Benedict understands “tolerant.” The dictatorial implication of relativism emerges when relativism is confronted with others (like Benedict) who are not relativistically tolerant or nonjudgmental because they state “clearly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things.” Relativism then has to choose between tolerating them and suppressing their “intolerance” in the name of tolerance.

This necessity to choose reveals that relativism cannot be the universal or absolute in practice that its principle of toleration sounds like. For when it cannot persuade its opponents (e.g., Catholics who follow Benedict) to agree to relativism’s understanding of toleration, relativism has to choose between its form (which can be stated as “equally respect all opinions about right and wrong”) and its substance (namely that relativism cannot tolerate the opinion that not all opinions about right and wrong are equally respectable). The dictatorship that concerns Benedict develops from relativism’s choosing its substance over its form.
This “dictatorship” is not the older, *Oxford English Dictionary* meaning of “a system of government by the absolute rule of a single individual.” Since Marx dictatorship had been expanded to include collective absolute rule by a particular social class.

Benedict’s use of dictatorship follows Tocqueville’s observation that democracy suppresses freedom through an unprecedented kind of “use made of thought in the United States. . . . Thought is an invisible power and one almost impossible to lay hands on.” And because “the power of the majority goes beyond all powers known to us in Europe . . . I know no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.”

Tocqueville acknowledges that there was “public opinion” before the new “democratic social state,” but it had nothing like the power over thought that he sees in America. Previously, the “manly independence of thought” bred by aristocracy moderated “public opinion.” Since this is absent in the “democratic social state,” he calls this new social power “tyranny” or “despotism.”

Pre-figuring Benedict, he says that formerly, “under the absolute government of a single man, despotism, to reach the soul, clumsily struck at the body . . . but in democratic republics that is not at all how tyranny behaves; it leaves the body alone and goes straight for the soul.” It does so by controlling thought through “public opinion.”

The master [i.e., public opinion] no longer says ‘Think like me or you die.’ He does say: you are free not to think as I do; you can keep your life and property and all; but from this day you are a stranger among us. You can keep your privileges in the township, but they will be useless to you, for if you solicit your fellow citizens’ votes, they will not give them to you, and if you only ask for their esteem, they will make excuses for refusing that. You will remain among men, but you will lose your rights to count as one. When you approach your fellows, they will shun you as an impure being, and even those who believe in your innocence will abandon you too, lest they in turn be shunned. Go in peace, I have given you your life, but it is a life worse than death.

Tocqueville and Benedict see democratic despotism in this “Power Exercised by the Majority in America Over Thought.” It doesn’t need to kill dissenters or put them in jail. The majority has “enclosed thought within a formidable fence.” Those who go beyond the limits set by public opinion must face all kinds of unpleasantness and everyday persecution. A career in politics is closed to him, for he has offended the only
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power that holds the keys. He is denied everything, including renown. Before he goes into print, he believes he has supporters; but he feels that he has them no more once he stands revealed to all, for those who condemn him express their views loudly, while those who think as he does, but without his courage, retreat into silence as if ashamed of having told the truth.

Tocqueville/Benedict’s expanded meaning of “dictatorship” means that the ruling power (whether constituted by controlling state institutions or only by controlling thought) does not allow (“tolerate”) those who propagate ideas of right opposed to the dictatorship. Non-dictatorship, for Benedict, tolerates such dissent.

The foregoing explains Benedict’s analytical meaning of “dictatorship.” Rhetorically, Benedict’s use of dictatorship both alerts his audience to its threat and fosters their “nonconformity” to it.\(^3^2\) Evidence that his example has had this effect comes from a 2011 *Spiegel* commentary on Benedict’s then forthcoming visit to Germany. The reporter says “Protestants like Bundestag member Kober and the Christian Democrat Erika Steinbach . . . speak of the pope with the utmost respect and admire him for being one of the last great non-conformists. It is a message that one can hear frequently from Protestants.”\(^3^3\)

**PART III:**

**WHAT DO THESE SIMILAR DIAGNOSES SUGGEST?**

Both these diagnoses have a perceptible affinity for Catholic thought and sensibilities, though Tocqueville’s thought presents itself as a sociological and philosophic perspective while Benedict’s presents itself as orthodox, though philosophic, Catholicism. Both care about the relation of democracy and Catholicism, though Tocqueville’s main focus is democracy while Benedict’s main focus is Catholicism.

But what might be learned by comparing their arguments that democracy tends towards unlimited government?

Well, both stand within, but are not entirely of, “the democratic social state.” Tocqueville had lived in the remnant of aristocratic society, which provided him with a perch from which to view what democracy is from a perspective at least somewhat outside democracy. That “extra-democratic” perspective enabled him to see some things in aristocracy that he thought worth trying to preserve, for instance, that Christian “religion [is] the most precious heritage from Aristocratic times”\(^3^4\) because of its decisiveness for preserving the democratic social state.\(^3^5\) Did it also somehow lead him to foresee that the last form of Christianity to endure, while the others with-
ered away as democracy developed in the direction of “unbelief,” would
be “the Church of Rome”?36

Benedict’s intellectually and spiritually serious Catholicism gives him
a similar perch partly outside of democracy. His belief in the endur-
ing, trans-historical truth of Catholicism’s moral teaching, alerts him to de-
mocracy’s relativist affinity for each generation defining for itself how
they choose to live. The “sovereignty of the present generation” was the
theme of the eighteenth-century philosophers of democracy, made explicit
in Paine and Jefferson.37 How far that sovereignty extended into defining
morality we may only now be seeing.38 Benedict’s grounding outside of
democracy alerts him to the incompatibility between transcendent moral
truths and democracy’s historical relativism.

Benedict describes the problem not as “democracy” but as “relativ-
ism.” But he knows, as did John Paul II before him, that there is a kind of
democracy that explicitly rests on a rejection of relativism. Welcoming the
new American Ambassador to the Vatican in 1997, Pope John Paul II said,

The Founding Fathers of the United States asserted their claim to
freedom and independence on the basis of certain “self-evident”
truths about the human person: truths which could be discerned
in human nature, built into it by “nature’s God.” Thus they meant
to bring into being, not just an independent territory, but a great
experiment in what George Washington called “ordered liberty”:
an experiment in which men and women would enjoy equality
of rights and opportunities in the pursuit of happiness and in
service to the common good. Reading the founding documents
of the United States, one has to be impressed by the concept
of freedom they enshrine: a freedom designed to enable people
to fulfill their duties and responsibilities toward the family and
toward the common good of the community. Their authors clearly
understood that there could be no true freedom without moral
responsibility and accountability, and no happiness without
respect and support for the natural units or groupings through
which people exist, develop, and seek the higher purposes of life
in concert with others.39

Benedict’s understanding of the moral principles justifying government
“deriving its just powers from consent of the governed” would be “ordered
liberty” not dictatorship. But Benedict’s interpretation of the Declaration
of Independence has not been restated by any recent American statesman.
So his non-relativist democracy is more an articulation of the kind of
American democracy to which Catholics could assent, than it is a descrip-
tion of the self-understanding of American democracy as lived, say, from the last third of the twentieth century onward. To the extent that American democracy is increasingly lived as relativist, and understood on relativist grounds, Benedict’s warning remains relevant.

Absent a Lincoln to defend the Declaration’s transcendent moral claims against the historical moral relativism of latter day Stephen A. Douglasses, the most explicit and authoritative articulations of American democracy and liberty today come from the Supreme Court, which follows Douglas’ relativism rather than Lincoln. To wit: “These matters, involving . . . choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” This is surely relativism. And how can it not be dictatorship if the humanity of others depends on each of our personal definitions of their humanity?

That Tocqueville sees the danger in “democracy,” while Benedict sees it in “relativism,” might appear to be a distinction. But they are describing the same source of danger. The “democratic despotism” Tocqueville foresees results from attenuating the “habits of restraint” undergirding democracy; and the dictatorship Benedict sees emerging is the consequence of that attenuation. The latter is the visible embodiment and intensification of the former in our time.

**CONCLUSION**

This symposium asked whether Tocqueville would have thought today’s common reliance on constitutional restraints for resisting the tendency towards unlimited government was in any way helpful. He thinks that the American governments are constitutionally unlimited: “the law allows the American people to do everything.” That the Constitution does not give all power to the government is of considerable importance for combating another defect of the democratic social state, namely “individualism”; but he makes little of its usefulness for combating democratic despotism. The religion-inspired “habits of restraint” are of far greater importance for resisting the “everything” the American people are permitted to do by law.

These moral restraints mattered in 1835, because “the law allows . . . everything.” But perhaps today, when “the bill of rights” has taken on legally enforceable meaning, he might find such legal restraints more useful. But today (as he foresaw) is also a time of the weakened power of religion over both men’s imaginations and their actions. So it would still seem that the relentless expansion of democratic man’s desires makes it “inevitable”
that “Society does more and the individual less”; and hence also makes doubtful the ultimate efficacy of merely legal restraints for resisting democratic despotism.

Still, if we democratic peoples have lost our innocence in regard to what religion formerly prevented us from imagining or daring, legal restraints may be all that effectively remains. Despite Tocqueville’s prescience in perceiving the need for “new remedies for [these] new ills” of democracy’s greatly expanded and intensified social power, I am not able to see any “new remedies,” which we might propose on the basis of Tocqueville’s analysis, which might restore that innocence. Forgetting what one was once prevented from imagining is not a promising project.

Does Catholic social thought offer any assistance in resisting democratic despotism? Well, by focusing on relativism as an incubator of “dictatorship” within democracy, Benedict situates Catholic social thought in support of that part of the resistance that requires defending “unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things.” Benedict shows that a sound resistance to the “building” dictatorship depends on social affirmation of, and commitment to, those standards. So while the restoration of innocence is not promising, the restoration of belief in such unchangeable standards might still be both possible and efficacious at least for forbidding men to dare what is harmful to human well-being.

Catholic social thought might be of further use like the canary in the coal mines of old. The canary was most sensitive to the mine gas and so reacted first to its presence. If it stopped chirping, its death warned the human beings of danger before harm was done to them.

Similarly, because Catholic social thought is on the front lines of challenging the relativism, that thought might detect relativist modernity’s “mine gas” before others do. By so doing, Catholic social thought might rally those others to the defense of those standards. That is apparently Benedict’s goal, for his argument is couched partly in rational, philosophic language accessible to non-believers. But, if that fails, perhaps Catholic social thought can still serve those others even after the dictatorship, in the name of tolerance, has put a stop to its chirping.

Notes

1. Both thinkers utilize traditional categories of analysis. Tocqueville uses “despotism” and “tyranny.” Benedict uses “dictatorship.” “Unlimited government” language is my attempt to capture the commonality in the direction both language’s point.

2. The “democratic social state” category is decisive in Tocqueville’s “new political science” which “is needed for a world itself quite new.” Alexis de Tocque-
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3. Ibid., “Author’s Introduction,” 12.

4. Ibid., vol. 2, part 4, chap. 6, but also chaps. 7 and 8. The phrase “democratic despotism” occurs once in chap. 6 (p. 693), which is entitled “What Kind of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear.”

5. Ibid., chap. 7, 696.

6. He uses “central government” or “centralization of government” to refer both to state governments, which are “central” in relation to local self-government; as well as to the federal government, which is “central” in relation to the states. See ibid., vol. 1, chap. 5, pp. 87–89.

7. Ibid., chap. 7, 692.

8. Only partly. Active citizenship and local self-government are also important conservators of democracy as Tocqueville finds it in America.


12. Ibid., 451.


15. Ibid., 543.

16. Ibid., vol. 1, part 2, chap. 9, “Indirect Influence of Religious Beliefs upon Political Society in the United States,” 292

17. Ibid., 292, 294.

18. Ibid., 541. See note 13 above and text.


25. And perhaps “discovered.” I know of no thinker of rank who had noticed the affinity of relativism and intolerance before Strauss.


29. DIA, 258. Though he initially uses both “tyranny” and “despotism” to describe the phenomenon (see, e.g., 254–55), he is explicit that these ancient words of political analysis are inadequate. “I have myself vainly searched for a word which will exactly express the whole of the conception I have formed. Such old words as ‘despotism’ and ‘tyranny’ do not fit. The thing is new; and as I cannot find a word for it, I must try to define it.” DIA, vol. 2, part 4, chap. 6, “What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear,” 691. When he has sufficiently defined it, he seems to settle on “democratic despotism,” which is distinct from the old merely political “despotism.”

30. Ibid., 255. The two long quotes that follow are also on 255.

31. Ibid., 254.

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34. DIA, 544.

35. Not necessarily for preserving a liberal democratic government. “I have always thought that this brand of orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery which I have just described could be combined, more easily than is generally supposed, with some of the external forms of freedom and that there is a possibility of its getting itself established even under the shadow of the sovereignty of the people.” Ibid, vol. 2, part 4, chap. 6, “The Kind of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear,” 692–93.

36. See above, notes 12 and 13 and text.


38. The view that government by consent of the governed implies that the governed are bound by a moral law that they did not create and cannot change (but may of course disobey) distinguishes medieval Catholic thought from modern political philosophers. Orestes Brownson is particularly helpful for understanding the difference between these two teachings both of which seem “democratic.” The latter more radically authorizes the people to create and consent to their own idea of right rather than to be bound by either pre-existing divine or natural law. See Gary D. Glenn, “Are There Catholic Antecedents of the Declaration of Independence? A Conversation Between Archbishop John Ireland, Orestes Brownson and the Twentieth Century,” Catholic Social Science Review 11 (2006): 120–22.


41. DIA, 292. See above, note 17 and text.

42. See above, note 20 and text.