Tocqueville’s Aristocratic Christianity

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Tocqueville, the educator, employs both Christianity and aristocracy to elevate or give soulful content to the democratic personal identity, and he even presents Christianity as a kind of combination of aristocracy and democracy. The aristocratic dimension of Christianity, he says, is America’s most precious inheritance. He also says that Jesus corrected the prejudice of even the best philosophers of Greece against the possible greatness of ordinary people. Tocqueville seems most attracted to a Catholicism purged of any connection with the prejudices of aristocratic injustice. That Catholicism wouldn’t be so different from the Puritanism he describes, transformed by a criticism based on both the purely Christian and aristocratic views of freedom. Tocqueville reminds us of St. Thomas Aquinas’ realistic corrections of the unjust and self-absorbed excesses of Aristotle’s magnanimous man, and he at least suggests to us the need for a kind of American Thomism.

The dominant theory of our nation is Lockeanism, the theory of a middle-class country. We Americans, as Alexis de Tocqueville explains, think of ourselves as basically beings with “interests” and so beings with “rights.” We are free beings who work and demand that everyone work for him- or herself. We are middle-class insofar as we’re free, like aristocrats, to work like slaves, and we’re enlightened enough to know we risk being suckered if we rely on the love or the trust of others instead of ourselves. So we pride ourselves in methodically resisting social instinct with selfish calculation. Each of us is compelled to sustain his or her being in freedom, and so we work hard to push back our dependence on nature—including our dependence on the instincts we’re given as social animals. That understanding of the “abstract” individual doesn’t do justice to the experience of free persons who love and die. It doesn’t do justice to us as either relational or properly proud beings, as beings personally privileged by the longings and capacities that distinguish each human soul.

According to Tocqueville, democrats, in their abstractions, think too generally; they don’t see particular human beings for who they are. Aristocrats, meanwhile, think too particularly; they miss the general truth that we’re all equal under God. Tocqueville himself attempts to think as God himself, to see each of us in our similarities and our differences, and so think in a way that comprehends the truth of egalitarian justice and the greatness of human
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individuality (2.1.3; 4.2.8). His educational project is to elevate the American self-understanding above being merely middle class. By leading them to know who they really are, they might know better what they’re meant to do.

Tocqueville, the educator, employs both Christianity and aristocracy to elevate or give soulful content to the democratic personal identity, and he even presents Christianity as a kind of combination of aristocracy and democracy. He goes so far as to claim that the aristocratic dimension of Christianity is America’s most precious aristocratic inheritance, even as he adds that Jesus corrected the prejudice of even the best philosophers of Greece against the possible greatness of ordinary people (2.2.15, 2.1.3).

THE POP CARTESEAN AMERICANS

Tocqueville’s most remarkable and amusing insight is that Americans are Cartesians without having read a word of Descartes (2.1.1). The Cartesian method is also the democratic method, and it’s that democratic method that keeps Americans from reading the words of philosophers—Descartes or anyone else. Democratic intellectual freedom means thinking for—and finding what one most needs—in oneself. Modern democracy, based as it is on individual rights, depends upon skepticism or Cartesian doubt when it comes to being ruled by the words of others. I see no reason to privilege any opinion over my own, over my own view of my own interests, of what’s best for me. The “I” or the self is disconnected from other “I’s” in order to be autonomous or self-determining. The “I” confuses the experience of “selfish” disconnection with the whole truth about who he is. He does so to maximize his freedom, but in such a way as to make the real exercise of freedom, of conscious, responsible choice, impossible (2.1.1–2).

So the Cartesian self, untethered from others, turns out to have no content beyond the ineradicable experience of its “leftover” existence. I refuse to be ruled by other persons—to be suckerized out of love. But public opinion, being an anonymous, unerotic force that envelops us all equally, doesn’t involve the same sort of undemocratic submission. The “I,” by rejecting all personal authority—the authority of beings with names—ends up submitting to anonymous self-surrender. My particular being becomes filled up with opinions that come from no one in particular. The individual, by regarding the social passions of love and hate as dangerous threats to his own self-sufficiency, becomes unerotically locked up in his petty self, unable to be moved to thought or action on his own (2.1.2, 2.2.2)

The democratic Cartesian has no intellectual or emotional point of view—no spirit of resistance—with which to display the unique and irreplaceable individuality characteristic of real or whole human persons. Doubt that animates resistance to personal rule by others is turned on one-
self and eradicates the possibility of proud self-rule. The good modern, egalitarian news, Tocqueville observes, is that I can say nobody is better than I. The corresponding bad news is that I have no reason to say I’m better than anyone else. And so I—in particular—can’t say why I shouldn’t submit to public opinion, just like everyone else. Public opinion provides ready-made answers to the questions anyone needs answered in order to live well, answers I’m in no position to discover for myself (2.1.2).

That’s why, Tocqueville explains, the modern democratic tendency is to replace the egalitarian and personal religion of Christianity with the egalitarian and impersonal religion of pantheism. There’s no better relief for the anxiety of being an isolated “I,” it would seem, than the thought that we’re all alike (everything is alike) and we’re all God (lacking in nothing). Pantheism, of course, extends the anonymous rule of public opinion to a vision of a cosmos that has no room for anyone in particular, even God. The individual aims to lose himself in a whole in which he is a perfectly indistinct part by drawing upon the mind’s desire for a unified vision that admits of no irrational or accidental exceptions (2.1.17). The truth about human particularity offends the mind. But pantheism, the most general of ideas, is a futile and degrading denial of what we can’t help but know about our personal identities.

Tocqueville explains that the reason poetry will never fade away, even in the seemingly most unidealistic or unadorned of democratic times, is that our most true experience is of the particular, contingent individual existing for a moment between two abysses, stuck, as it were, mysteriously between ignorance and knowledge when it comes to himself. Tocqueville sometimes echoes the Christian Pascal in describing the greatness and misery characteristic of particular members of our species alone, which will always be fit subjects for the poetic imagination. The most wonderful thing we can know—if imperfectly—is the being who wonders and wanders, whose very being is mysteriously contingent or displaced (2.1.15).

Tocqueville agrees with Pascal that God knows man, or sees each of us as the “who”—not just the “what”—each of us really is. And that is why he defends personal religion—religion that distinguishes between Creator and creature and sees each and every particular creature in his or her uniqueness—against every alternative, ancient or modern, superstitious or seemingly scientific. That’s not to say that for Tocqueville, Pascal’s unadorned Christianity expresses the whole truth, maybe even about Christianity. Pascal is too much about anxious misery, the absence of God and the experience of personal contingency, to account for the joy that we’re given as beings who can know something, if not everything, about ourselves, each other, and the world we share in common. So our anxiety and joy and proper pride all are inseparable, and we’re much more than miserable accidents (2.1.10).
Instead of wondering about who he is in his irreducible particularity, the Cartesian too readily defers to yet another anonymous authority: materialistic science. To say you should do what I think is my attempt to rule you. So you—the Cartesian “I”—won’t defer to allegedly reasonable words of intrusively personal philosophers like Socrates, especially if I display my personal wisdom by recommending them to you. But if I recommend that you do what “studies show,” we both defer to the impersonal, objective authority of science. Science becomes objective by abstracting from the “I,” by displaying material or “objective” or impersonal reality as the whole of reality. But the impersonality here, of course, is partly deception; it’s just not completely true that it’s not the scientific expert but only his studies that are claiming authority over me.

Tocqueville says that what offends him about materialistic theoreticians is that they proudly turn themselves into gods by reducing those they study to brutes. They understand themselves as pure minds orbiting a cosmos of pure bodies. They describe people as organisms-in-an-environment and then exempt the experience of themselves as minds—meaning their intellectual, social experience of the joy of shared discovery—from that description. The experience of being pure mind isn’t that of the Cartesian “I.” For the scientist, consciousness is consciousness with other scientists, and truthful discovery that’s not self-discovery is a social experience not shared with other social animals. But when the ordinary pop Cartesian turns to the scientific expert for help, he finds only what the scientific studies show without the experience of the scientist (2.2.15).

The scientist, by thinking in terms of minds and bodies, offers no insight into the connection between mind and body, and he thinks of both himself and non-scientists too simply. That’s why Tocqueville says that “aristocratic science”—which is all about the pleasures of the mind—is too proud, and “democratic science”—which is all about satisfying the pleasures of the body (i.e., technology)—is too humble. We’re not essentially either minds or bodies, although both the minds and the bodies give us pleasure. Pascal’s relentless pursuit of the truth took him beyond the self-deceptions that made human beings rest content with either aristocratic contemplation or democratic technology as based on complete accounts of who we are (2.1.10).

What the allegedly pure minds offer the isolated, displaced “I” is the relief from anxious, dislocated human misery. That program of expert self-help through self-denial, contrary to its intention, mainly makes at least lots of people more anxious and restless than ever. They try to lose themselves in materialistic or consumerist diversions, sometimes, as Tocqueville says, with an insane ardor. The seemingly decent American materialists are actually loony; they don’t know why they’re doing or what
they’re doing. Their material calculation only diverts them quite imperfectly from what they think they really know. So the methodical calculation of the Americans is, on one level, a kind of surrender of reason or willful self-destruction (2.2.13).

Tocqueville seemed to worry that unerotic individualism would make American materialists so decent or herd-like that they would surrender any thought about their futures (including, of course, about their mortality) to a providential soft despotism of meddlesome, schoolmarmish bureaucrats. But he also said that religious madness was the inevitable result of the attempt to divert oneself from the needs of the soul (4.2.6; 2.2.12). The Americans are too active or too passive. They don’t know how to be moderate or truthful; they really don’t know what beings like themselves are supposed to do. They lack education, and so Tocqueville begins by reminding them of their enlightened, religious founders’ concern for the education of beings with souls.

**TOCQUEVILLE AND THE EGALITARIAN IDEALISM OF THE PURITANS**

The first Americans, Tocqueville reminds us, showed up in New England and Virginia. The New Englanders were the pilgrims; they left their homeland in the service of an idea that’s both religious and political. They were enlightened family men and women, out to found an egalitarian city in accord with Christian, Biblical principles. And so they did. New England was the most democratic place in the world since ancient Athens. It was, more precisely, the most democratic place ever. The Puritan “idea” wasn’t like the Platonic “city in speech.” It was intended to and did become real, and it was based on an “idea” that extended equally to all human beings. The Puritans’ idea of justice was far more universal or non-exclusionary than the one found either in Athenian practice or Socratic theory, but it still remained political or embodied in a real place in this world (1.1.2).

The ancient democracy, of course, was composed only of citizens and depended on slaves; equality was merely political or conventional and didn’t extend beyond the gates of the city or to all people living within those gates. So even ancient democracies, Tocqueville observes, were really aristocracies, and even their best thought was distorted by aristocratic prejudices (2.1.3). But the Puritan city included, in principle, all human beings, and it was based on the Biblical principle that all human beings are equally ensouled creatures under God. On that faith-based idea the Puritans built, in this world, in the direction of universal civic participation and universal education. No creature rules another by right, and every such creature, to avoid being seduced by vain or satanic frauds, has to read the
world of God for himself. On that egalitarian insight, the Puritans’ political
theory, Tocqueville observes, was amazingly free from prejudice (1.1.2).

In middle-class America, universal literacy was caused by the require-
ments of earning a living for oneself. For the Cartesian, individualistic,
egalitarian American, nobody is above—and nobody is below—having in-
terests (1.1.3; 2.2.8). The Puritan agrees that everyone has a duty to work
for himself and in service to others, and so education, contrary to what
aristocrats believe, isn’t all about the cultivation of some leisure class. But,
not sharing the Cartesian skepticism about the spiritual dimension of our
existences, the Puritan adds that each of us is more than a being with inter-
ests—and so universal education is about much more than techno-utility.
The Puritan finds content and so social duties and an eternal destiny in the
irreducible, irreplaceable “I” each of us knows ourselves to be. So for the
Puritan, egalitarian education is also liberal education or “higher” education.

Tocqueville, it’s true, didn’t call the Puritans Calvinists, but he de-
scribes them as much like the idealistic citizens of Calvin’s Geneva, about
whom Tocqueville knew much, at least, through his reading of Rousseau.
The downside of the Puritans, in his eyes, was their ridiculous and tyran-
nical legislation, their attempt to draw their law from the Old Testament
books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and their attempt to crimi-
nalize every sin (1.1.2). Tocqueville himself didn’t regard such legislation
as properly Christian, but peculiarly Puritanical or Calvinist.

Tocqueville explains that the Gospels themselves don’t contain any
specific political teaching and so are compatible with a variety of politi-
cal orders, including easygoing liberal modern democracy. Tocqueville
emphatically distinguishes Christianity from Islam insofar as Christianity
isn’t about the “law” in the sense of political legislation. It’s Christian-
ity—by teaching the equal freedom of all human beings from enslavement
by any particular political “cave” and its degrading civil theology—that
freed every particular individual from political domination. That’s what
Tocqueville means when he says that Jesus Christ had to come to earth to
show us the ways in which all human beings are equal. What Jesus shows
us, he believes, is true—even if what Jesus claims about being God isn’t.2

The aristocratic philosophers, Tocqueville does say, were blinded by their
class insofar as they accepted slavery as inevitable (2.1.3; 2.1.5).

The Christian teaching concerning equality differs from Cartesian
skepticism in not being focused on the isolated individual. It is, as Toc-
queville explains, the main antidote to American self-obsession. Christian-
ity, like every religion, teaches creatures that they have duties they share in
common. They have such common duties because their souls have some
shared content, a foundation in their Creator through which they can know
and love one another (2.1.3). Christianity teaches Americans that they are more than empty or self-contained “I’s” — psychologically self-sufficient yet dependent for their very being on their contingent and ephemeral bodies. American preachers, Tocqueville explains, speak about humility, and so officially are against pride. But by telling people each of their lives has a unique and irreplaceable immortal destiny, and that there are pleasures far higher than the pleasures of the body, just as there are duties that go far beyond mere material utility or deference to the rights of others, Christian preaching actually inspires the pride connected with any form of irreducible individuality or moral responsibility or experience of soul (2.2.15).

Tocqueville does find what can be called secular justifications for some residually Puritanical American legislation—which has to be taken as evidence that he sees Christianity’s personal “anthropology” as true even in the absence of revelation. He praises how seriously the Americans take the virtues of chastity and marital fidelity, as well as the ways in which they exempt women from rigors of middle-class productivity. The American women calculate that religion serves their true interests as beings born to be wives and mothers, and they, in a seemingly Christian way, surrender many of their claims for justice to sustain personal love. Tocqueville displays the alliance of American priests and American wives and moms against the ridiculous claims for the unerotic self-sufficiency of American men (2.3.8-12; 1.2.9).

**CHRISTIANITY AND THE GREATNESS OF HUMAN INDIVIDUALITY**

Tocqueville’s final discussion (2.2.15) of religion in America moves away from any concern about political utility toward the cause of sustaining the sublime qualities that distinguish human individuality from all else that exists, and that keep it from being absorbed into some homogeneous, materialistic account of the world. There, he calls the Americans’ religion their most precious inheritance from aristocratic times, and the way they have known the aristocratic truth, found in the philosophic doctrine of Socrates and Plato, that we are beings capable of transcending our biological limitations in the direction of immortality. Tocqueville praises the rest commanded by American law and belief on what might be called the Puritans’ Sunday. That leisure is for beings who know their longings to be more than mere bodies that can be satisfied, and for reflection on who they are in light of their true destiny. Without Sunday, Americans could easily lose themselves in the frenzy of restless diversion. They could easily, by thinking of themselves as less than they really are, become less than they are meant to be.
Christians believe, against the pretensions of the materialistic experts, they are more than material beings, and so they're inspired to have thoughts and perform deeds that stand the test of time. Christianity also curbs their restless materialism by giving them a view of humanly worthy leisure (which they enjoy on Sunday), by keeping them from believing that they need to be constantly diverted from the ephemeral insignificance of the isolated “I.” Tocqueville, in evaluating Christianity’s effect on the individual, divides the philosophers into pre-Socratic and Epicurean materialists on one hand and the Platonists serious about the soul’s immortality on the other. Christianity originally emerged, he explained, as part of the soul’s rebellion against the Epicurean excesses of the Romans. The pre-Socratic claim about the transience of everything human was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. None of the pre-Socratics’ writings were preserved intact over time. Meanwhile, the works of Plato, attuned as they are to the true longings of the souls, remain with us as wholes (2.2.12; 2.2.15).

According to Tocqueville, Christianity functions for Americans as a kind of Platonism for the people, a kind of aristocracy that includes everyone: the egalitarian aristocracy of the Puritans. For Nietzsche, Platonism for the people suggests that Christianity is a religion for slaves being diverted from living well now by illusions about their true home in some other world. Christianity is a diversion or opiate for the weak. For Tocqueville, the suggestion is that only if people believe that they’re more than the biological beings scientists describe or the empty leftovers the Cartesians describe can they live well—or achieve their true greatness—in this world. As Walker Percy puts it, only if we have some credible explanation for our experiences of homelessness can we be at home as well as can be with the good things of this world. Christianity is the antidote to materialism, which is what Tocqueville calls the probably untrue and certainly pernicious theoretical diversion that makes the weak—the displaced “I”—weaker.

Tocqueville, by connecting magnanimity and humility, or pride and the anxious experience of personal insignificance, comes close, in his own way, to Thomism—meaning a way of showing that aristocratic Christianity or classical Christianity or philosophic Christianity isn’t an oxymoron. His Platonic or aristocratic affirmation of the truth about the soul or the sublimity of the highest forms of human thought and action isn’t meant to negate the distinctive contribution of Christianity to the whole truth about who we are. We can say that Tocqueville offers a Platonic criticism of Pascal on behalf of the thought that our true greatness includes some justifiable pride in who we are, but he also offers a Pascalian criticism of the absolutely self-sufficient and elitist pretensions of classical magnanimity and Socratic philosophy. We can see, in fact, that Tocqueville’s talking up
of both the aristocratic and the egalitarian Christianity corresponds to the measured approach he takes to more pure or complete displays of aristocracy in America.

**TOCQUEVILLE AND AMERICAN ARISTOCRATS**

Tocqueville reports that he found aristocrats in America among both the Indians and the southern slaveholders. In each case, men prided themselves on not working, and they regarded their leisure as noble. They ranked their own beautiful and useless activity over the productive lives of most men. They regarded themselves as more free than those whose lives were dominated by work, material desires, and slavish fear. Both the Indians and the southerners regarded the tasks worthy of men as hunting, fighting, and giving speeches about hunting and fighting (political life).

The southern aristocracy—although based on the monstrous institution of race-based slavery—was still in some ways a worthy alternative to the middle-class, democratic way of life of most Americans. Each alternative, Tocqueville makes clear, has its distinctive virtues and vices, and the southerners basically had the virtues and vices of any aristocracy. They were both more spontaneous and more spiritual than the northerners, and so they had a better sense of how to enjoy life. They found joy in leisurely self-contemplation, and they didn’t work themselves to death in a futile attempt to transform themselves or their world. They were distinguished by their proud senses of who they were and what they were supposed to do in ruling themselves and others as members of a particular class in a particular time and place. But they were also lazy, selfish in the sense of privileging their class over humanity in general, and so unjust (1.2.9; 2.2.10).

In some ways, Tocqueville presents the southern aristocracy as the result of an impulse opposite to that which animated the Puritans. New England was founded on selfless, egalitarian idealism. Its Puritanical vice was taking the idealistic formation of every human soul through political legislation far too seriously, or at the expense of individual liberty. Virginia, Tocqueville presents as founded in pure selfishness. The first Virginians were “classless” in the precise sense: They lacked the manners and morals—the decency—that come from being formed according to moral code. They were solitary adventurers—coming to America without family or friends—in search of easy money. They lacked the self-discipline that came either from being a Christian or from being productive members of the middle class. They unjustly wanted to have plenty of everything with very little work. They were pretty much pirates. It’s hardly surprising that slavery so readily took root in Virginia and the rest of the South (1.1.2).
That founding selfishness was transformed into an aristocracy through generations of experience with slavery. The Virginians began to take pride in their noble leisure, and they began to take on the habits and opinions of cultivated gentlemen. They began to think of themselves as members of an aristocratic class, and they developed both the virtues and vices of any such class. They were both better and worse than the Puritans. They were better insofar as they displayed a kind of intellectual and political greatness not characteristic of either Puritanical or later middle-class America. But that really meant that their selfishness was sublimated or elevated, and it continued to depend on the monstrous, increasingly spiritualized, despotism of race-based slavery. They attempted to degrade a whole class of human beings to subhuman servitude, to reduced beings without the longings that flow from their freedom. The Puritans idealistically devoted themselves to displaying the qualities of soul of everyone through political and religious life, and they thought that no creature was above working both for himself and for the service of others. The Virginians, in the name of a certain vanity about their own souls, worked harder and harder to deprive other men of their souls, to turn them to beings fit for nothing more than working for others.

The Virginians’ criticism of the Puritans is their repressive moralism. They regarded “abolitionism” as one example of many of the fanatical tendency to both criminalize every sin and to judge the diverse choices of others as sins. Aristocratic manners and morals, there are—there’s class! But it can’t be required by law. The Virginians weren’t about outlawing sin, and they had a sophisticated tolerance when it came to diverse displays of individuality. So it was a Virginian who wrote the unforgettable words about the inalienable rights of individuals and established in our country the principle of pure religious liberty. When the classical or Epicurean (or basically Greek and Roman) Jefferson thought about a free display of one’s individuality, he wasn’t thinking at all about the decent “bourgeois” materialism of members of the middle class. For him, religious liberty was primarily about protecting the cultivated gentleman and his refined skepticism from those who would use popular piety as a political tool. Tocqueville rightly never describes the leading men—the aristocratic class—of the South as fundamentally Christian. When he says that it was a lucky accident that our Framers—the men who came up with the Constitution—were basically aristocrats, he was thinking in some large part about southerners (1.1.8; 1.2.2).

EDUCATION FOR CIVILIZATION

The Puritan and the American aristocrat are, when it comes to justice and moral legislation, opposite extremes. But they unite in opposing the materialism of the solitary “I” or self-obsessed individual that is the purely mid-
dle-class American. They were clear on who they were and what they were supposed to do as members of a class or community. And they agreed that education is, most of all, about the soul—for the cultivation of a being not determined by the impersonal forces that surround him or defined merely by the requirements of earning a living. The Puritans and the Southerners were about, in different ways, civilization. Restlessly opposed to civilizing influences, Tocqueville shows, were middle-class Americans who thought of education as merely indispensable for acquiring technical skills, and who identified philosophy and science with technology or the transformation of nature with bodily need in mind. The American individualist is constantly running from civilization to some solitary place on the frontier. The individualistic or emotionally self-absorbed American, on his own, resists having his heart and soul enlarged by a particular “city” or political and religious society.

Tocqueville recommends that, in democracy, those following literary careers should read the Greek and Roman authors in their original languages. That way our writers will acquire aristocratic habits of mind, and they’ll learn how to read books written with care for a small audience that has the leisure to read closely. The danger is that metaphysics and theology will lose ground in democratic language, and words will become more exclusively technical, commercial, and administrative. A corresponding danger is that people will lose confidence in being able to rule themselves and others, and so the very words they use will suggest their passive, fatalistic dependency. One antidote to this abstract and shallow impoverishment of democratic language is elevation by the best aristocratic books. They can be expected to infuse democratic language with words that express the distinctions and longings democracy can’t help but neglect. Democratic prejudices or partial truths will be countered by aristocratic prejudices or partial truths (2.1.15). The truth is, Tocqueville says, that aristocrats unrealistically exaggerate, for example, the effect of great men on historical change, just as democrats—with their impersonal theories all about “forces”—unrealistically or dogmatically deny that effect (2.1.20).

Tocqueville doesn’t recommend close study of the Greek and Roman authors for most Americans. It will arouse in them longings that can’t be satisfied in the routine of middle-class life, making them more restless and more dangerous than they need be. In most cases, it appears, Tocqueville, in democratic times, favors technical education supplemented by religion and some involvement in local politics. He’s with the Puritans insofar as he notices that everyone has the needs of the soul, which get distorted and disoriented when they’re ignored. That doesn’t mean that, on education, he was as idealistically egalitarian as a Puritan. Because the Puritan idea was radically Christian, it couldn’t distinguish between a class suited for what we call liberal education...
and a class suited for work in the ordinary or technical sense of the term. Both liberal education and work—truth and justice or leisure in the aristocratic sense and productivity in the middle-class sense—are for everyone. From Tocqueville’s view, the Puritans expected too much of ordinary people.

Tocqueville, insofar as he criticizes Americans for their lack of great literature and free thought (1.2.7; 2.1.13-14), is for the development of some higher education in America. He seems to be close to the suggestion that American higher education, outside of the sciences, should be some combination of aristocratic and Christian books. What’s best about the greatness of proud, aristocratic individuality should be tempered by Puritanical devotion to egalitarian justice, and vice versa. Surely American education, in his eyes, wouldn’t be merely some combination of aristocratic prejudices and democratic technology. The Christian element, surely, would have to be somehow more than mere dogma; otherwise the educated American would only embrace Christianity for its political utility, with no sense of why he or she should be devoted to the proposition that all men are created equal. Surely he makes it abundantly clear that the Lockean/Cartesian defense of that proposition is inadequate.

So Tocqueville seems, from this view, most attracted to a kind of Catholicism purged of any connection with the prejudices of aristocratic injustice (2.1.5-6), which wouldn’t be so different from the Puritanism he described, purged of a kind of un-Christian political fanaticism, a Puritanism transformed by criticism based on both the purely Christian and aristocratic views of freedom. Tocqueville would be most for a religion that corrected classical magnanimity—with its devaluing of the lives or freedom of most human beings—without obliterating it. He’s for preserving the real truth it teaches about human greatness and the real, if quite imperfect and finally ambivalent, pleasures of political life. He reminds us of St. Thomas Aquinas’ realistic corrections of the unjust and self-absorbed excesses of Aristotle’s magnanimous man, and he at least suggests to us the need for a kind of American Thomism.

Notes

1. *Democracy in America*, volume 2, part 1, chapter 3; volume 2, part 2, chapter 7. Subsequent citations to the same work will be made in parentheses within the main text of the article.

2. There’s no evidence at all that Tocqueville thought Jesus was God, that the Resurrection actually occurred, that the Trinity is credible, etc.