

Taking Religion Seriously: Reflections on Tocqueville, Catholicism, and Democratic Modernity

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The contributions to this symposium raise several issues that extend beyond an examination of Tocqueville's Democracy in America. For example, is the conventional distinction between ancient and modern in political philosophy too simplistic? Is religion necessary to preserve democracy, and if so, what kind of religion must it be? Theological and sociological sources both suggest that the fate of democracy in the modern world is inextricably, not merely accidentally, connected with the fate of Christianity.

When Gary Glenn originally approached me with the idea for the panel on Tocqueville and Catholicism from which this symposium emerged, my initial reaction—truth be told—was less than completely enthusiastic; in fact, it was downright lukewarm. The reason was simple: Given how much has been written about Tocqueville in general, and about Tocqueville and religion, in particular, I doubted there was much new and interesting to be said. Gary talked me into it, however, and I'm grateful for his powers of persuasion because what we have here are three insightful essays that cast new light not only on Tocqueville's own thought, but, more broadly, on the subjects of both Catholicism and American democracy, and Catholicism and democratic modernity.

Since each of these papers poses far more in the way of important questions about the proper reading of Tocqueville, the implications of his analysis, and the place of his work the broader scheme of Western thought than I can possibly address here, I thought the best procedure was to highlight a couple of the bigger issues that they raise.

I

The first concerns the categories through which we interpret the history of Western political thought. I am thinking here of accounts that understand this history as a conflict between two fundamentally irreconcilable schools of thought embodying incompatible understandings of the human condition and the nature and goal of goals of political life: "the ancients" and "the moderns." Seen from this perspective, one of the first questions we have to ask ourselves when we confront a thinker or school of thought is

which side of this divide are they on. Is the Catholic vision of man and society, for example, ancient or modern? Is Tocqueville ancient or modern?

The cumulative effect of these papers problematizes this way of conceptualizing the history of political thought so as to suggest that this way of approaching things is just a bit too simple. It does so because on the showing of these papers, neither the Catholic understanding of man and society (at least as it finds expression in medieval Catholic and early modern scholasticism) nor Tocqueville's "new political science," nor perhaps (at least if Tocqueville's account is correct) America can be easily fit into either of these camps.

Take Professor Glenn's paper, for example. Bellarmine, his representative of the sixteenth-century neo-Scholastic tradition, affirms our nature as beings who are essentially, not contingently, social creatures. One can't but think here, of course, of Aristotle and the ancients. At the same time, however, Glenn reminds us that Bellarmine presents an argument in support of this claim that differs in some subtle but not unimportant ways from Aristotle's, and calls attention to how Bellarmine (in contrast to Aristotle) distinguishes between our status as naturally "social" and naturally "political" beings (and thus between society and the state). At the same time, he notes that Bellarmine (like other "sixteenth-century Catholic thinkers," including Vitoria and Suarez) speaks the "language" of "natural rights, government by the consent of the governed, and the right of the people to change both the form of government and who rules," language similar to that employed by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (even if he, like his fellow scholastics, understands these terms differently than do these "modern social contract philosophers"). Bellarmine, in short, would seem to be neither an ancient nor a modern.

Then there's Glenn's treatment of Tocqueville himself. On the one hand, Tocqueville's thought reflects "themes and concerns" reminiscent of "medieval Catholic thought" and sixteenth-century neo-scholastics like Bellarmine: for example, Tocqueville's insistence on the primacy of society and culture rather than the state, his praise of limited and decentralized government, and his insistence on the dependence of political liberty on religion. On the other hand, Tocqueville's approach to religion differs from that of Bellarmine and the medieval Catholic thinkers, and in important ways his thought dovetails with that of the moderns: for example, his insistence on the separation of church and state, his focus on religion's political utility, and his seeming approval of "acquisitiveness." In short, if Tocqueville is "closer in several important ways to the political thought of the pre-modern Catholic thinkers than to the modern social contract philosophers," his thought nevertheless breaks with the former thinkers in

some potentially important ways. (I say “potentially” here because Glenn seems to leave open the question of “whether” Tocqueville breaks with these thinkers in “a decisive” way.) Here again, Tocqueville, on the showing of Professor Glenn’s analysis, appears to be neither an ancient nor a modern.

Something similar can be seen in Peter Lawler’s paper. On the one hand, he calls attention to Tocqueville’s effort to offer an “aristocratic” correction to democratic modernity, and thus to Tocqueville’s debt to the ancients—to the Greeks and Romans (in particular, their appreciation of human greatness)—as well to his reservations about democratic modernity. On the other hand, his analysis also acknowledges Tocqueville’s disagreements with the ancients and embrace of the truths he sees as embedded in democratic modernity, including its “egalitarian” understanding of justice and affirmation of the equal right of all human beings to freedom, an understanding and affirmation he realizes are at odds with the ancient understanding of man and society.

In situating Tocqueville intellectually, furthermore, Lawler makes a number of connections between his thought and the Christian tradition, calling attention, among other things, to the profound influence of “the Christian Pascal” on Tocqueville’s anthropology and the affinity between Tocqueville’s thought and the Thomistic tradition. Tocqueville, he writes, “comes close, in his own way, to Thomism.” Waiving the question of what exactly Lawler means by Thomism in this context,¹ his brief discussions of “Pascalian Christianity” and Thomism exhibit an awareness that they (like Christian thought more generally) differ in significant respects from both ancient and modern thought. (Thomism, for instance, displays an aristocratic character that separates it from modern thought while correcting classical thought’s “devaluing [of] the lives or freedom of most human beings.”)

Here again, on the showing of Lawler’s analysis, whether we’re discussing Tocqueville’s thought, Thomism, or Christianity more generally, the categories of ancients and moderns don’t quite work.

Finally, Paul Rahe’s paper, while ably highlighting the centrality of Christianity to Tocqueville’s account of the origins of democracy (for Tocqueville, he notes, the coming of Christianity with its affirmation of human equality “marks a political turning point in human history”) and his proposed solution to its pathologies (for Tocqueville, “liberal democracy desperately needs Christianity”), suggests that Christianity differs in important ways from both the ancient and modern traditions. If Christianity’s affirmation of human equality separates it from the ancients, its understanding of the nature, foundations, and implications of that equality

separates it from “the mainstream of modern political philosophy” (i.e., the thought of thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke).

My point is simply this: These papers implicitly raise questions about the ability of an account of the history of political theory that understands it as a conflict between the ancients and the moderns to do justice to this history in its full complexity—and, in particular, to the role of Christianity in this history. They raise questions, in other words, about the adequacy of these categories, about whether they exhaust the alternatives available to us, about whether reading the history of political theory through this binary prism necessarily distorts it in subtle ways, about whether we need a better, more nuanced set of categories to adequately understand this history.

II

The second subject I want to touch on concerns both the nature of the crisis that confronts us and the solution to that crisis. Something that has struck me more and more forcefully as I have reread Tocqueville over the years is that his analysis seems to suggest that the crisis that he believes confronts modern democracy is ultimately in some important sense a religious one. Man, Tocqueville insists, is a naturally religious creature: “unbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity.” Furthermore, religion plays a central role in human life: “there is hardly any human action, no matter how particular you assume it to be that is not born out of a very general idea that men have conceived of God, of God’s relationship with humanity, of the nature of their soul and of their duties toward their fellows. You cannot keep these ideas from being the common source from which all the rest flow.”² Indeed, for Tocqueville, as Lawler and Rahe both remind us, the democratic revolution sweeping the world seems to have its ultimate origin in the revolution in human self-understanding brought about by Christianity.

Now, from Tocqueville’s perspective, the good news is that this valid insight has survived despite the far-reaching secularization of modern culture. The bad news is that this secularization has caused this insight to be detached from the broader Christian worldview in which it had been embedded—a broader worldview that encompassed affirmations of the greatness of man, the dignity, the sacredness, of each and every human person understood as a unique and irreplaceable self, our transcendent destiny, the spiritual dimension of human existence, what Charles Taylor terms “the affirmation of ordinary life”³—and to be tethered to another anthropology profoundly destructive of human dignity. The result of the collapse of the horizon which had originally framed the discovery of human dignity and equality is the cultural pathology Tocqueville so famously identifies: an

isolating individualism, soulless consumerism, corrosive skepticism, general flattening out of human existence, and, ultimately, nihilism.

If the crisis that threatens us is religious, the solution—or at least an essential part of the solution—has to be religious: the preservation and/or reinvigoration of religious belief. Well-designed political institutions, a richer understanding of politics, the right matrix of habits, etc., alone will not suffice.

At this point, however, a host of complicated questions suggest themselves. To begin with, assuming that Tocqueville is correct that democratic social conditions act, in a variety of ways, to erode religious belief, is it possible for democratic societies to sustain high levels of religious belief? Is a far-reaching religious revival a plausible possibility in light of his account of the cultural effects of democratic social conditions? Given democratic social conditions, in short, can religion exercise sufficient cultural influence to address the cultural crisis of modern democracy?

Then there's the question of what type of religious belief is necessary to address this crisis. On the one hand, Tocqueville clearly suggests that not all religions will be equally capable of getting traction in the age of democracy. Religions, for example, which reject the principle of human equality, will have difficulty thriving in the age of democracy. Likewise, as Lawler reminds us, for Tocqueville, even independently of the question of their ability to gain cultural traction, not all religions are capable of addressing democracy's pathologies. Pantheism, for instance, would seem to only exacerbate democracy's pathological tendencies. Tocqueville's discussion of Catholicism—in particular, his observations about Catholicism's possible ability to appeal to democratic man and to resist the cultural pressures fostered by democratic social conditions—seems to hint that Catholicism might be in some sense uniquely equipped to address the needs of a democratic culture. (One cannot but think here of Lawler's characterization of Tocqueville as seeking “a kind of American Thomism.”)

In this context, it would be interesting to try to explore in a systematic and sustained manner Tocqueville's brief discussion about the prospects for Catholicism in the age of democracy, and the resources it might offer to address the characteristic pathologies of democratic societies. It might also be interesting to try to bring Tocqueville's account of democracy's pathologies into conversation with the work of a thinker like Christopher Dawson, who has explored the role of Christianity in Western civilization, the relationship of secularization to the crisis of the modern West, and more broadly, the relationship between religion and culture.

III

This, in turn, suggests two brief reflections. The first is that Tocqueville's appreciation of religion and its role in human culture contrasts vividly with what the great historian of American religion, Perry Miller, once described as the "the strain of obtuse secularism" that looms so large in contemporary American intellectual life.⁴ In the world of political theory, this refusal to take religion seriously finds expression in the tendency of the standard histories of political thought to give short-shrift to Christian thought (hence the neglect of the whole tradition of neo-Scholastic thought to which Glenn's paper so ably calls our attention) or to see it through the prism of categories which prevent us from doing justice to it (of which the aforementioned tendency to see this history as ultimately reducible to a conflict between "the ancients" and the "moderns" is an example).⁵ More broadly, this refusal creates massive gaps in our intellectual, social and political history by obscuring not only the central role played by religion in human culture, but also the distinctiveness of Christianity and its revolutionary impact on Western life and thought. Indeed, it prevents us from really understanding the origins and nature of Western modernity or even modern thought. (As John Paul II reminds us, after all, without "the stimulus" provided by Christianity "a good part of modern and contemporary philosophy would not exist."⁶)

The second is suggested by a question raised in Paul Rahe's paper, namely, whether, in "the absence of Christianity," the principle of equality would ever "have been discovered." This question, of course, can be approached sociologically. It can also be approached theologically, however, insofar as it raises the question of the relationship of faith and reason. In this context, it is well worth reflecting on something that John Paul points out in *Fides et Ratio*. Revelation, he argues, not only opens vistas closed to human reason but plays an indispensable role in purifying and perfecting human reason. Inasmuch as reason is "wounded and weakened by sin," faith enables it to work properly within its sphere by liberating it both from "presumption, the typical temptation of the philosopher," and from a "false modesty" which leads it to distrust or deny its own capacity "to know the truth"—in particular, metaphysical truth—and to reach "the absolute."⁷

There are truths, moreover, that, although in principle accessible to reason, are extraordinarily difficult for it to arrive at without the aid of faith. "Revelation," John Paul writes, "clearly proposes certain truths which *might never have been discovered by reason unaided*, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason" including the affirmation of

“human dignity, equality and freedom.” In fact, he insists that the crisis that has engulfed Western modernity has to be understood against the backdrop of modern culture’s “fateful separation” of faith and reason. If modern thought has proven over time incapable of sustaining the affirmation of “human dignity, equality and freedom” introduced into Western culture by Christianity, he maintains, the reason is to be found in modern thought’s “exaggerated rationalism” which has found expression in “a philosophy which was separate from and absolutely independent of the contents of faith.” Issuing in “an ever deeper mistrust with regard to reason itself,” in an ever more corrosive skepticism, this philosophy has culminated in a “nihilism” involving “a denial of the humanity and very identity of the human being” which obliterates “the very ground of human dignity.”⁸

Just as unaided human reason failed to arrive at the truths of human dignity, freedom, and equality, so it has proven incapable of sustaining a commitment to these truths in either theory or practice. One cannot but think in this context of John Courtney Murray’s characterization of modernity’s claim that these values—and the revolution in social and political life they launched—can be sustained on a purely secular basis as “a mirage projected by prideful human reason.”⁹

There are, in short, theological as well as sociological reasons for believing that the fate of democracy in the modern world is inextricably, not merely accidentally, connected with the fate of Christianity.

Notes

1. Lawler certainly isn’t suggesting that Tocqueville embraces the existential metaphysics that are arguably Thomas’s most original contribution to human thought or that he accepts Thomas’s theology. (“There is no evidence at all,” he writes, “that Tocqueville thought Jesus was God, that the resurrection actually occurred, that the Trinity is credible.”) By Thomism Lawler seems to mean nothing more than a form of philosophy showing that “aristocratic Christianity or classical Christianity or philosophic Christianity isn’t an oxymoron.” One might wonder whether this does justice to the nature of Thomism as a distinctive intellectual tradition.

2. *Democracy in America: Bilingual, Historical-Critical Edition*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schliefer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), vol. 2, book 1, part 2, chap. 9, p. 482; and vol. 3, book 2, part 1, chap. 5, p. 743.

3. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 211.

4. Perry Miller, “From the Covenant to the Revival,” in *Religion in American Life*, vol. 1, ed. J. W. Smith and A. L. Jamison (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 336n.

5. With the exception of perfunctory (and out of context) treatments of Augustine and Aquinas, these histories tend to jump straight from the classics

to Machiavelli. Treating Augustine and Aquinas as mere footnotes to classical thought, moreover, they tend to view Augustinianism and Thomism, respectively, as idiosyncratic variants of Platonism and Aristotelianism rather than rich and distinctive intellectual traditions in their own right.

6. *Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media), sect. 76, p. 87.

7. *Ibid.*, sect. 51, p. 68; sect. 76, p. 87; sect., 5, p.15; sect. 82, p. 103; and sect. 33, p. 45.

8. *Ibid.*, sect. 76, p. 96 (my emphasis); sect. 45, p. 61; and sect. 90, p. 111.

9. *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960; reprint, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 198. One also thinks here of Nietzsche's warnings that Christian morality could not long survive the modern West's apostasy from the Christian faith: "If you give up Christian faith, you pull the *right* to Christian morality right out from under your feet. . . . Christianity is a system, a view of things that is conceived as a connected whole. If you break off a major concept from it, faith in God, you break up the *whole* as well. . . . If the English actually believe that they know on their own, 'intuitively' what is good and evil, if they consequently think they no longer need Christianity as a guarantee of morality, this is just the consequence of the domination of Christian value judgments." *Twilight of the Idols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), sects. 5–6.