

Symposium: Tocqueville, Catholicism, and Limited Democratic Government

INTRODUCTION

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Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, at once a descriptive history, sociological assessment, and philosophical analysis, is almost universally recognized as *the* book on democracy in America. In general, one might say it is an admiring analysis of how this first modern democracy had resisted concentrating all political power in central governments, and reserved the main day-to-day government of society to the people in their local situations. However, he also doubts whether the “democratic social state” will, in the long run, tolerate limited government.¹ This doubt leads to a description of a soft yet dangerous “democratic despotism” which uncomfortably reminds us of the increasingly all-encompassing military, regulatory, and welfare state that has developed over the last three generations. Those who resist this development today stress constitutional arguments whereas Tocqueville provides a much deeper diagnosis and proposes “new remedies for [these] new ills” rooted in religion generally, and, seemingly, Catholicism in particular. In this symposium, the contributors explore the relationship between Tocqueville's thought, limited government, and Catholicism.

Gary Glenn begins by noticing a perhaps unexpected, but appropriate, comparison and contrast between what Tocqueville calls “democratic despotism” and what Pope Benedict XVI calls (170 years later) the “dictatorship of relativism.” Glenn notes Tocqueville's view that religious belief will likely decline in democratic ages and that the subsequent undermining of religiously grounded morality will unleash “the Americans from their religion-inspired ‘habits of restraint’ on their naturally ‘bold’ and ‘enterprising spirit.’ The political consequence Tocqueville foresees is the unlimited government he eventually calls ‘Democratic despotism.’” That is, “democratic peoples are almost irresistibly drawn, by the ‘democratic social state,’ to letting society or government ‘entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living.’”

Glenn connects this to Catholicism by noting that Tocqueville thinks Catholics will be “the last holdouts against democracy's movement towards abandonment of the Christian religion.” Glenn infers from this that

Catholics who adhere “to traditional Christian morality would be the most direct objects of the despotism following from that abandonment,” and they would then be “the first to notice, and to speak up, when that despotism impends.”

This insight leads Glenn to Benedict XVI’s provocative twenty-first century notion of a “dictatorship of relativism.” This consists in both a relativism—not seeing “anything as definitive [as objectively true] and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires,” and a dictatorship—the imposition through law or through public elite opinion of these desires, which leads to an intractable intolerance towards those, like Catholics, who claim that an unchanging objective truth about human nature and the *permanent* good exists.

Glenn contends that the “the dictatorship of relativism” Pope Benedict sees emerging in early twenty-first-century democracy looks like an intensification of Tocqueville’s diagnosis of “the democratic social state[’s]” inherent tendency towards the new form of despotism. Glenn argues that Benedict situates Catholic social teaching in resisting the slide into that dictatorship by “defending ‘unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things.’” This is consistent with Tocqueville’s prediction: “our grandchildren will tend more and more to be divided clearly between those who have completely abandoned Christianity [leading to the despotism] and those who have returned to the Church of Rome.”²

Ken Grasso sets out to answer two questions: “Why has liberal modernity experienced such difficulty in checking state power despite its embrace of the ideal of limited, constitutional government? And, what are the preconditions of the successful institutionalization of the principle of limited government in the modern world?” His answers come in the form of a far-reaching analysis of both Tocqueville’s assessment of limited constitutional government and the Second Vatican Council’s assessment of the Church in relation to modern civilization. Grasso puts forth Tocqueville’s claim that the democratic social state has its root in the notion that “Jesus Christ [had to] come to earth to make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal.”³ However, he points out that “the collapse of the [Christian] horizon which had originally framed the discovery of human dignity and equality are the cultural pathologies he [Tocqueville] so famously identifies—an isolating individualism, soulless consumerism, corrosive skepticism, general flattening out of human existence, and, ultimately, nihilism—and the political pathologies that culminate in the new despotism” of unlimited and centralized government. After eloquently summarizing the diagnosis of the problem, Grasso, like Glenn, points out that Tocqueville suggests religion, and more specifically

Catholicism, to be the only known way to prevent the (almost inevitable) slide toward despotism. Grasso picks up where Glenn left off, providing a clear and succinct presentation of the Church's (via the Second Vatican Council) understanding of modern culture—both good and bad—and her desire to promote an authentic democracy of limited government by adhering to sound political principles and the formation of a Christian culture. Grasso argues that one fundamental aspect of the Church's contribution to a limited government is her holding “the state accountable to a standard not of its own making” and reminding the state of “the transcendent dignity and destiny of the person” which ultimately helps “to check state power.” In conclusion, Grasso notes the difference between Tocqueville's seemingly less hopeful predictions for democracy and the Church's more sanguine attitude, pointing out that “what is impossible for man is not impossible for God.”

Daniel Mahoney takes a very different approach to democracy and limited government by exploring Tocqueville's criticism of socialism in his 1848 “Speech on the Right to Work” given to the French Constituent Assembly. He explains Tocqueville's assessment that socialism is the worst form of despotic government, and that therefore the February Revolution “‘must be Christian and democratic, but it must not be socialist.’” Mahoney emphasizes that Tocqueville “opposes an absolute ‘right to work,’ [in the new French Constitution] because its ‘fatal logic’ makes the state the ‘sole owner of everything’ or at a minimum ‘the great and sole organizer of everything.’” Instead, Tocqueville advocates a French republic based on “Christian democratic principles” rooted in the democratic state which consists in a proper respect for human dignity, charity, and “equality in liberty” as opposed to the “equality through constraint and servitude” sought in socialism. Mahoney also stresses that Tocqueville does not hold a libertarian or laissez-faire position that denies that “the state has any obligation ‘to expand, consecrate, and regularize public charity.’”

The first discussant, Joe Hebert, affirms Glenn and Grasso's analyses of both the problem of democratic despotism and what would be the solution to it as found (not to say exclusively found) in Catholicism. Specifically, Hebert agrees that “Combating such [moral] relativism is therefore a necessary and primary component of Tocqueville's overall strategy to preserve liberty in modern democratic times,” and therefore religion, more precisely Catholicism, is necessary to overcome the relativism. Furthermore, with respect to limits on government, Hebert underscores Grasso's point about “the Church's emphasis on the responsibility of citizens to participate in self-governance and the importance of subsidiarity (what

Tocqueville would call administrative decentralization) in providing maximum opportunity for and encouragement of such participation.”

The second discussant, Adam Seagrave, primarily offers a critique of Mahoney’s defense of Tocqueville’s “middle way” between socialism and libertarianism as presented in the “Speech on the Right to Work.” Seagrave thinks that the Tocqueville of *Democracy in America* actually suggests that middle ways or half-measures might not be enough to stem the tide of increasing government. Rather, Seagrave questions whether it is prudent even to have the government engage in the kind of public charity Tocqueville advocates, thinking that it might lead to placing “a democratic political society on a slippery slope toward ever-greater concessions to equality at the expense of liberty,” which is what socialism does. Underlying this prudential concern is Seagrave’s principled contention that providing for others through acts of charity is not a task for government but for individual persons, because alleviating the misery of others is primarily about the spiritual growth of the person doing the good, rather than about the actual material improvement of the person who is helped.

The contributors hope that readers will be stimulated to reflect more deeply upon Tocqueville’s democratic social state and its effects, the tendency of our government to increase continually its scope, size, and centralization, and the remedies which might be found in not only Constitutional structures, but primarily in religious, and specifically Catholic, sources.

Notes

1. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, part 4, chap. 7, p. 666; also chaps. 6 and 8.

2. *Ibid.*, part 1, chap. 6, p. 425.

3. *Ibid.*, chap. 3, p. 413.