# Inseparable Companions: Religion and Liberty in the Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville

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We are, in both the United States and Canada, experiencing a broad-based crisis that permeates our political, economic, social, cultural and religious lives. For people interested in speaking theologically about a "God of life" within a North American context, in using a grammar of justice, compassion, and in considering the perspective of those on the margins of society, this crisis has made such a task more challenging—and urgent.

How, for example, do we "speak of God" with theological voices within contemporary North American society? Among the items that get caught in our collective throat are the millions of homeless persons on our streets, increased poverty and unemployment, an apparent rise in racial hatred during the past decade, the continued tremendous expenditures for nuclear and conventional weapons despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the U.S. instigation of, and Canada's participation in, the destruction of Iraq and the killing of thousands of its citizens, as well as growing signs of environmental damage to our land, air, water, climate, and ozone layer owing to human pollution. This is indeed a critical moment for North American Christianity.

Why then would one with such contemporary and contextual interests wish to examine the religious reflections of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859)? What relevant insights can be gleaned from a French aristocratic social observer of the nineteenth century in developing a contextual North American theology? In his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes of the critical role religion plays in maintaining American democracy. Unlike other social observers of his day, Tocqueville saw a compatibility between "modernity" (symbolized by the French and Industrial revolutions) and religion. Tocqueville helps to demonstrate that the question of religion is not a marginal question, but may well be a central one for the maintenance of human freedoms within democratic society.

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While realizing that Tocqueville cannot successfully be considered prescriptive or directly relevant for contemporary U.S. society, some of his insights into the salutary role religion played in American democracy are germane to reflections on a contemporary, liberative and contextual North American theology. Tocqueville's notion of the Christian religion providing a "sense of restraint" for an otherwise rather "unbridled" culture, and his assertion that religion, along with public mores, helps prevent a "tyranny of the majority," especially a domination of "public opinion," may indeed be constructive in fashioning such a contextual North American theological discourse.

### *Tocqueville and the Role of Religion in a Democratic Society*

In 1831 at the age of 26, Tocqueville, with Gustave de Beaumont, made his celebrated nine-month sojourn to study the penal system in the United States. The trip formed the basis of his *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835-40), a work which received almost instant acclaim in France. The remarkable breadth and trenchant, almost prophetic, insights of *Democracy in America*, as well as the later work, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856), established Tocqueville as a major thinker in the area of political affairs.

Living, as he was, during a time framed by two revolutions, the democratic and the industrial, Tocqueville's intellectual work was shaped by these momentous irruptions, and the "tension between traditional and modern values dominated [his] life and writings" (Nisbett 90). Tocqueville, in an almost Janus-like posture, was convinced of the inevitable advancement of democracy and rather disdainful of reactionaries who wished to block this modern emergence. At the same time, as an aristocrat, he remained deeply troubled by the diminishment of traditional trappings and values such as honour, aristocracy and religion, which had formed the bedrock of European liberty for centuries (Nisbett 70).

When it came to religion, Tocqueville was a maverick among Continental and British "liberal" historians of his day. While most of these observers were indifferent or even hostile toward religion, Tocqueville's perspective was deeply entrenched in religious faith (Wach 76). As he observed in Volume I of *Democracy*, "Unbelief is an accident, and faith is the only permanent state of [human]kind" (qtd. in Goldstein 23).

***Religion and Democracy: An American Hybrid***

It is no secret that "Tocqueville came to America, not to study America, but to study an experiment in democracy and its potential implementation in Europe" (Kiewe 40). As Tocqueville conveyed to Henry Reeve, his translator, Democracy in America "is written primarily for France . . . from the French point of view." Writing to his close friend Louis de Kergolay, Tocqueville elaborates on his intended audience:

> Is it necessary to explain the differences and the resemblances between . . . two countries, or to speak only with a view of making people understand? . . . In my work on America, I almost always followed the second method. Although I very rarely spoke of France in my book, I did not write one page of it without thinking about her and without having her, so to speak, before my eyes. (*Letters* 91)

This ability to see the relevance of America for a politically and economically revolutionized France—and Europe—exemplifies Tocqueville's original and versatile approach to social commentary (Rémond 188). Tocqueville's study, in short, was intended "to be descriptive of the New World in order to be prescriptive of the Old" (Galston 500).

The religious ambience of the United States, and its political purport, were of immediate interest to Tocqueville. He explains, "the religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States. The longer I stayed in the country, the more conscious I became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation" (*Democracy* 295). While Tocqueville notes that in France he had observed religion and politics "marching in opposite directions," in the United States he "found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land" (*Democracy* 295). He further comments that his yearning to comprehend this phenomenon "increased daily." Tocqueville perceived an historical affinity between politics and religion in America, partially owing to English America's settlement by people who had "shaken off" papal authority. As a consequence, having no acknowledged religious hierarchy, "they brought to the New World a Christianity which I can only describe as democratic and republican." "From the start," he concludes, "politics and religion agreed, and they have not since ceased to do so" (*Democracy*

288). Tocqueville concludes that there is not a single religious group in the United States that is antagonistic toward democratic and republican institutions: "all the clergy there speak the same language; opinions are in harmony with the laws, and there is, so to say, only one mental current" (*Democracy* 289).

For Tocqueville, however, the indirect influence of religion on U.S. democracy surpassed its direct impact: "It is just when it [religion] is not speaking of freedom at all that it best teaches the Americans the art of being free" (*Democracy* 290). While claiming that some might assume that many Americans may be following their "habits" rather than their "convictions" in their religious worship, Tocqueville claims that "America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest power over [hu]man's souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to [humanity], since the country where it now has widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest" (Democracy 290). The "city on the hill" still shines, faithful because of its freedom, and free because of its faithfulness.

For Tocqueville, free societies are built upon public morality. Such a morality can only be effective, moreover, if it is undergirded by religion (Galston 501). In an emblematic passage, Tocqueville reveals his deep conviction concerning the unity of religion and liberty in a democratic state:

> Liberty regards religion as its companion in all its battles and triumphs as the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims. It considers religion as the safeguard of morality, and morality as the best security of law, and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom. (*Democracy*, qtd. in Wach 89)

Tocqueville was the first to argue that unless democracy was reinforced by a more transcendent ideal, it would be liable to devolve into an ideology. Tocqueville thus summoned Christianity to demolish the "idols" of the period—and to check the inclination of the majority to garner for itself absolute authority (Lamberti 162).

Moreover, Tocqueville observed that American clergy were assiduous in avoiding any direct political involvement or endorsing any single political platform. They took the separation of church and state seriously. Thus, according to Tocqueville, "one cannot . . . say that in the United States religion influences the laws or political opinions in detail, but it does direct

mores, and by regulating domestic life it helps to regulate the state" (*Democracy* 291). While the melding of ecclesiastical and political power in Catholic European countries often resulted in a partnership between aristocracy and Catholicism, the separation of church and state in America helped prevent such an elite alliance in the United States (Wach 84).

### *A Sense of Limits*

In a particularly lucid moment, Tocqueville argues that religion played a salutary, delimiting role in American society. Americans are limited in their imaginations and innovations owing to religion—the Christian morality to which everyone is supposed to ascribe—and hence the American revolutionary spirit is tempered. The nation thereby eschews the gross excesses of political upheaval and moral decline characterizing European nations. In one of many prescient statements, Tocqueville comments, "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" (*Democracy* 292).

Thomas Alva Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Wilbur and Orville Wright, and Henry Ford (not to mention Albert Einstein) are but a few of the myriad bold "innovators" and "logicians," who, a little over a half century after the publication of *Democracy in America*, would irrevocably change the face of the United States and the world. Whether such innovations were made possible by a decline in Christian consensus in the United States is debatable, but these developments, in light of Tocqueville's prediction, would constitute an interesting inquiry. "Thus," Tocqueville claims, "while the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare" (*Democracy* 292).

This notion of religion placing healthy limitations upon U.S. society, of preventing it from "imagining" and "daring" certain endeavours, seems to have a particular appositeness for twentieth-century America. The creation and detonation of the atomic bombs over Japan, and the continued production of nuclear weapons despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, prompts one to wonder what "sense of limits" the United States currently holds? The decline of constructive, non-political and solidarity-promoting religious values in the United States, Tocqueville averred, could lead to dire consequences.

One such tragic consequence, it could be argued, is the recent American-initiated military devastation of Iraq. Emboldened, perhaps, by the weakened (and now dissolved) Soviet Union, the United States was able to bomb a Third World nation lacking in air defenses for 42 days without major international opposition. Where was a sense of limits in Operation Desert Storm? While almost all mainline churches in the United States spoke against a military response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, once the "war" commenced January 16, 1991, these same religious voices were strangely muted. If faith traditions (and faltering superpower adversaries) do not supply a sense of restraint for the United States, Tocqueville's question remains: who, or what, will?

A sense of limits that emerges from our cultural tradition, as identified by Tocqueville, would be an important element in developing a liberative, contextual North American theology. If, for example, such a sense could also be explored in relation to North America's consumption patterns in which roughly six percent of the world's population consumes approximately forty percent of the world's resources, it could be fruitful both from an ecological and social justice vantage.

A theologically-developed sense of limits may also be of use as we in North America specifically re-examine our use of environmental resources to sustain our living patterns. What are the religious limits placed on lifestyle? What further limitations should be encouraged? Interestingly, with the exception of the Southern Baptist Convention, when the plurality of mainline religious leaders spoke against U.S. instigation of the Gulf War last January (before the bombing started) some even argued that the need for resources and economic security was no justification for war. Religious voices speaking of limits--a critical element, it seems, of a North American liberative theological consciousness.

### *A Bulwark Against Despotism*

According to Tocqueville religion should actually be considered the *first* U.S. political institution. Although it does not directly involve itself in the affairs of the state (at least it did not in the 1830s), nor originate the idea of liberty, it facilitates the state's use of liberty (*Democracy* 292). This is pivotal for Tocqueville, since for him, liberty is at the core of his concern as a social observer and critic. It is for this reason that, for Tocqueville, the Christian religion is a deterrent to despotism:

> Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot. Religion is much more needed in the republic they [French liberal critics] advocate than in the monarchy they attack, and in democratic republics most of all. How could society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened? And what can be done with a people master of itself if it is not subject to God? (*Democracy* 294)

Tocqueville seems keenly aware of the need for a type of social humility, as it were, to prevent tyranny and self-destruction from overrunning a nation. Christianity, for Tocqueville, is the antidote to this social hubris, for it places a person and a nation under the guidance and judgment of the biblical God, who always reminds the human of his or her insignificance in comparison to the divine.

While Tocqueville looked with approval upon the civil liberties afforded by American democracy, he also perceived the underside of these developments, namely, individualism, ambition and a culture permeated by entrepreneurial values. Religion, for Tocqueville, is bound up with mores, or social customs. Joined together, religion and mores help buttress a democratic society against individualism and greed. They establish community, friendship, and solidarity in a highly competitive social and economic environment (Baum 1975, 145-146).

Several times in *Democracy* Tocqueville mentions that mores are one of the salient elements in the support-structure of a U.S. democratic republic. Tocqueville used the term "mores" broadly to encompass the "habits of the heart,"[1] "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people." Hence religion "powerfully contributes" to the continuation of the democratic society in the United States (*Democracy* 287). In a letter to his friend Eugene Stoffels, Tocqueville writes of *Democracy*: "I undertake to show . . . that the democratic government . . . can only be maintained on certain conditions of intelligence, private morality, and religious faith, which we [in France] do not possess" (qtd. in Mayer 30). Thus a balance of mind, morals, and faith—an inculcation of "habits of the heart"—is essential for a democracy's survival. In Tocqueville's view, public morality is a prerequisite of free societies because it is that which shields modern democracies from the vitiating influences of materialism, egoism and revolutionary fanaticism (Galston 501).

Moreover, according to Tocqueville, religion performs an unexpected and novel role in America. An important peril of a democratic, egalitarian milieu is the power it invests in public opinion. Tocqueville held that religion preserves freedom and liberates people from the coercive force of commonly held notions and biases (Baum 1975, 145). Religion, therefore, contributes to maintaining freedom by uniting democratic citizens to a wisdom tradition that represents a counterbalance to the "tyranny of the majority."

Tocqueville paints a rather bleak picture of such a tyranny in a rhetorical "case study":

> When a man or a party suffers an injustice in the United States, to whom can he turn? To public opinion? That is what forms the majority. It represents the majority and it obeys it blindly. To the executive power? It is appointed by the people and serves as its passive instrument. To the police? They are nothing but the majority under arms. A jury? The jury is the majority vested with the right to pronounce judgement; even the judges in certain states are elected by the majority. So, however iniquitous or unreasonable the measure which hurts you, you must submit. (*Democracy* 252)

For Tocqueville, democratic societies run a greater risk of degenerating into tyranny than do aristocratic ones. In a revealing passage of *Democracy*, he writes, "the public has . . . among a democratic people a singular power, of which aristocratic nations could never so much as conceive . . . for it does not persuade to certain opinions, but it enforces them, and infuses them into the faculties by a sort of enormous pressure of the minds of all upon the reason of each" (qtd. in Fields 51). This notion of religion as strengthening social morality and representing a defense against the dangers of public opinion appears critical for a contemporary, liberative North American theology.

As intimated earlier, the gauging of "public opinion" has reached a level of sophistication that would probably both astound and alarm Tocqueville. Public opinion polls, some contend, have a deep influence on U.S. political elections, as well as policy decisions of politicians. In addition, the "science" of measuring (and manufacturing) public opinion is applied faithfully and strategically in corporate marketing and advertising. Moreover, opinion poll results on various topics often constitute front-page

and headline news in North America, and frequently assume not the quality of "representing" but of "constructing" political reality. Many of these public polls function in a subtly (but insidiously) coercive fashion, and have hence become powerful and coveted political tools. Are we experiencing—through this "manufacturing" of opinion, this manipulation of democracy—the type of tyranny which Tocqueville described? What are the negative (or sinful) attributes of the contemporary enterprise of public opinion? What role does Christianity play in the "creation" of public opinion? What role *should* it play? As a reading of Tocqueville suggests, a contemporary North American theology would have to address critically such specific tools of U.S. cultural domination.

Rather than being anathema to modern, democratic society, religion was, for Tocqueville, its social "cement," as it were.[2] It was the principal support for public morality; it represented a countervailing trend in the face of the egoism, materialism and ambition engendered in U.S. society; and it checked the potential domination of public opinion over the freedom the citizenry. In addition, religion provided a sense of limitation, of humility perhaps, serving a "pinch hitting" role for absent social legislation that characterized the emerging U.S. democracy. Religion was not a marginal sidelight to democratic society, but a central beacon.

### *Limitations of Tocqueville's Religious Reflections*

Perspicacious as he was, Tocqueville's vision of America, and his conceptions of its Christian creeds, have several salient lacunae and limitations. Noticeably limited was his depiction of America as being—and remaining—a "classless" society. The allegedly shared cultural tastes of the powerful and "un-empowered," the rapid fluctuations of fortunes, and a popular spirit of equality and government legislation, led Tocqueville to make such an assertion (Baum 1991). He did not foresee the rise of an upper class industrial elite in the United States, and the problems such economic and class distinctions would portend for civil liberty and Christianity.

Moreover, although Tocqueville appears to suggest that almost any religion is better than none in Democracy, this interpretation is belied by his treatment of Hinduism and Islam, which he proclaimed to be socially "dangerous" religions. He based this pronouncement on his belief in the superiority of the Christian value system (Goldstein 125).

In addition, his depiction of U.S. religion has been persuasively critiqued for being "homogenized." John Higham has argued that Tocqueville, in his attempt to demonstrate how religion "stood sentinel" over American values and stability, has overlooked the fact that the very exuberance and idealism of the Christian sects could—and would—foster social conflicts as well as social integration (Higham 1959). Cryptically, Tocqueville virtually ignores the revivalist movement in the U.S. The revivalist presence in the 1830s was more significant than that of Catholicism, and its authoritarian tendencies seem to challenge Tocqueville's conclusions concerning the affinity of U.S. religion and democracy. Tocqueville's interest in enhancing religion's image for French liberals seriously coloured his observations of the varieties of American religious experience.

It would be both fatuous and unfair, of course, to expect Tocqueville's view of American religion in the 1830s to be prescriptive or directly relevant to our own contemporary situation. The volume of change between his time and ours is dizzying. Writing at the time of the U.S. bicentennial, Norman Graebner catalogued some of the differences between Tocqueville's America and the United States of the late-twentieth century:

> Those inescapable issues which now plague the Republic scarcely occurred to that age at all: crime and domestic insecurity, racial tension and unemployment, poverty and even hunger, ghettos and slums, pollution and urban decay, environmental destruction, the use of hard drugs, public and private corruption an a massive scale, inequitable taxes and waste, inflation and soft currency, a government that returns very little to the nation commensurate with its vast expenditures. Tocqueville assumed a consensus which would determine the direction of policy, a consensus shared by ministers of the Gospel. But in the absence of consensus—and today there is no clear consensus on any issue before the nation—the church can no longer find that comfortable identification with mass opinion which Tocqueville lauded so unstintingly. Should the church remain silent as the nation drifts without direction toward some unperceived disaster, or must it pay the price of unpopularity, against which Tocqueville warned, by embracing issues aimed only by some concerned minority? (Graebner 273)

It seems that the U.S. church, and indeed, the entire North American Christian community, is still grappling with this question of "popularity." How can the churches be effectively critical of their governments and societies without completely alienating or enraging their membership? Is a type of Niebuhrian, "Christian realism" a viable option in the face of the entrenched evil in North American political and economic culture, or is a more radical and unpopular "witness" approach what is demanded by the Gospel in these difficult, almost graceless, days?

Despite the plethora of changes and the dissolution of religious consensus in America, Tocqueville's portrait of U.S. religion contains several seeds which, when properly tended, could add to the budding literature on a contextual, liberative, North American theology. His prescient warning about the tyranny of public opinion, and the countervailing role religion can play in this regard, appears to be more germane today than it was in 1835, particularly in light of the power of contemporary media and sophisticated technological methods for gauging and constructing public opinion.

Moreover, Tocqueville's call for a "sense of limits" for the American people, a restriction of the imagination in a legislatively unrestrained society, seems particularly apropos in light of an egregiously bellicose U.S. foreign policy, North America's patterns of consumerism, and its support of global economic policies such as those of structural adjustment, which in effect maintain an opulent lifestyle for the privileged at the expense of livelihood for the majority of the world's population.

There have been few voices, however, especially from more progressive perspectives, highlighting aspects of Tocqueville's thought that may be useful for a liberative, transformative North American theology. It is fruitful for Americans to probe their *own* religious and political traditions in developing a meaningful and contextual theology, and Tocqueville offers some useful tools for waging such an expedition. While his insights must be taken *cum grano salus*, they should nonetheless be taken, for they incorporate important points of reflection for a North American society increasingly rapacious and far from "kinder" or "gentler" in pursuit of its goals.

*Notes*

1. Robert M. Bellah adopts this phrase for his co-authored book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), a study of white, middle-class individualism and the problems it poses for U.S. society.

2. Here Tocqueville differs from Marx, who also argues that religion is a form of social cement, but one which oppressively controls. Tocqueville is more in line with Durkheim's view of sociology which attributes a positive function to religion. Unlike Durkheim, however, Tocqueville does not perceive society as "deifying" itself (see Lamberti 161-162).

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