Tocqueville's Christian citizen

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Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville is well known for his critique of democracy.¹ A French statesman, he was left with the legacy of the French Revolution that had torn his fatherland and had changed the course of human history for good. Tocqueville, unlike many of his contemporaries, believed that the Revolution ought not to be seen as incidental or unexpected, despite the fact that it was without precedent in human history and so tarnished with human blood. The French Revolution is part of a trend that traces the path of democracy. Living in the revolutionary France of the nineteenth century, he hoped to find out what France may expect from its course of civilization, what it may expect from its democracy. Tocqueville was a social critic: he deplored what he saw happening around him in France. He believed that France was poorly governed. He was critical of the rise of the bourgeoisie and believed that everything had become vulgar, low and mean. He rejected the rising materialism as “a dangerous disease of the human mind”,² which he found in positivism (Comte and St. Simon)³ and socialism (Proudhon and Blanc).⁴ He believed that scientific and economic determinisms were serious threats to liberty and human dignity, which he attempted to defend.⁵ He attributed the February Revolution (1848) to the rise of socialism, and held the French people responsible for voting a dictator in power – events from which he, as a Member of Parliament and a Minister of Foreign Affairs, personally suffered.⁶ Tocqueville did not believe that the age in which he lived was an age of progress: he hoped that further intellectual and moral regression could be checked.⁷

Unlike many of his contemporaries who tried “to prove that human misery is the work of laws and not of Providence, and that poverty can be suppressed by changing the conditions of society”,⁸ Tocqueville believed that Christianity has been the ground for modern civilization (that is, the democratic civilization⁹). For him, there could be no liberty and human dignity without the Christian faith. For him, the crisis of modernity is the crisis of the modern individual without religion, without hope and without faith. The only way of getting out of this misery is by reconciling the city of man with the city of God, by accepting that the norms of government ought to be no lower than those given by Christianity. Tocqueville saw the task of governments or rather, of statesmen, as that of guiding the human destiny towards the good life and preventing it from degenerating into servitude and barbarism. The great challenge for modernity was to fight against the barbarians.¹⁰ The task of the government was not so much to use the state as an instrument for the satisfaction of wants that the people happen to have, but “to make men great” – to turn persons into citizens. Tocqueville’s liberalism is not based on the right to be mediocre, but on the right to be good. His “new liberalism” is an attempt to reform the liberal state or the bourgeois state, which in his eyes is totally unfitted to act as the nation’s moral educator.

1. Tocqueville’s attempt to raise the standard for public conduct

Though Tocqueville must certainly be seen as a “child of the Enlightenment”, as he thought of himself, the most important characteristic of his liberalism is that he brings religion back to the core of thought and action.¹¹ He does not believe that religion and politics can be separated if people are to remain civilized and free. As a liberal, he certainly holds that Church and State should be separated, calling for a revivification of “the old true spirit of the Catholic clergy, which is that it should belong only to the Church [and not to the State]”,¹² arguing that “when religion clings to the interests of the world, it becomes almost

as fragile a thing as the powers of earth.”¹³ Therefore, he says: “I respect religion, but I have never been nor will I ever be a man of the clergy. I honor the priest in church, but I will always put him outside the government.”¹⁴ As a Catholic, however, he believes that religious norms, discourses and symbols are important for the regulation of public life, for the protection of liberty and dignity in the face of materialist temptations.¹⁵ Religion, like politics and ethics, is never a private affair, a matter of private choices. The Enlightenment had misunderstood the character of liberty and freedom of choice, and wrongly saw religion as an enemy of modernity and liberalism.¹⁶ According to Tocqueville, liberty is not sustained by reason, but by faith.¹⁷ With its emphasis on reason, the Enlightenment proceeds from the premise that the individual should be subject to no other authority than the dictates of his own individual reason, which it typically reduced to a calculus that is able to the validity and reliability of facts and mathematical relations but nothing more (Hobbes). As a consequence, the Enlightenment had systematically weakened the authority of institutional religion, which in turn had brought about a severe *authority crisis*, which had paved the way for the exercise of uncontrolled power.¹⁸ Since Tocqueville holds that “liberty regards religion as its companion in all its battles and its triumphs, as the cradle of its infancy and the divine source of its claims”,¹⁹ he believes that religion must again become a public concern shared by all citizens.

However, Tocqueville does not believe that ecclesiastical authority is any longer able to guide *modern* persons, who do not recognize its claims. Modern, autonomous and emancipated people are critical towards hierarchy and do not participate in the tradition. In the modern era, where the Church is no longer at the core but is instead at the periphery of social life, it is the nation state that has the authority of shaping society. The great spokesmen of the Church that Tocqueville admires so much – Bossuet, Bourdaloue, Fénelon, Flechier – no longer exist and the priest can no longer be charged with the responsibility for the well being of humankind.²⁰ That is to say, in the modern world of liberalism, the Church can no longer guide people to a state of faith and liberation.

Modernity has politicized thought and action, and therefore transformation can only be brought about by political means. As he says,

When men have accustomed themselves to foresee from afar what is likely to befall them in the world and to feed upon hopes, they can hardly confine their minds within the precise limits of life, and they are ready to break the boundary and cast their looks beyond. I do not doubt that, by training the members of a community to think of their future condition in this world, they would be gradually and unconsciously brought near to religious convictions. Thus the means that allow men, up to a certain point, to go without religion are perhaps, after all, the only means we still possess for bringing mankind back, by a long and roundabout path, to a state of faith.²¹

To bring humankind back to a state of faith, from a state of unsettled reason is *de facto* the singular object of Tocqueville's political liberalism. The good life cannot be achieved without Goodness itself: it is only when people have faith, when they are personally in communion with God, that they can truly be free.²² "Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot",²³ which implies that free governments are always made up of statesmen who have the genuine will to be liberated from sin.²⁴

Being free, for Tocqueville, means having the will to go beyond one's own human nature and become how God had meant one to be in His original creation. It means striving towards the Image of God, the perfection of which has been given to us in the person of His Christ.²⁵ Tocqueville's understanding of liberty differs radically from that of the enlightenment thinkers. Liberty, for him, is not the absence of opposition, as it is for Hobbes, who argues that being free means not being hindered to do what one has a will to do. For Hobbes, being free does not mean having the will to liberate oneself from the passions that keep the soul enchained, but it means being able to do what the laws permit. Neither is liberty the triumph of individuality, as it is for John Stuart Mill, who believes that being free means having the power to develop oneself. The free person is the one who

displays his individuality, which means that his desires and projects are truly his own. In other words, for Mill, liberty is first and foremost personal liberty: a quality of the mind and character of autonomous persons who are emancipated from religious and political authority. Mill confuses emancipation and liberation. He argues that for the triumph of liberty, it is necessary that all truth claims be detached from established authority. Truth is not determined by intellectual authority (e.g., the wisdom of the ages, the Thomist tradition), but is (temporarily) established by scientific methods.²⁶ For Tocqueville, by contrast, not scientific method, but religion is the road to knowledge, to truth and to liberation.²⁷

Tocqueville's view of liberty is different from that of Hobbes and Mill. For Tocqueville, liberty is what it is for Montesquieu: the possession of the will power *to do what one should love and in no way being constrained to do what one should not will*.²⁸ Liberty is a divine gift that people are only able to receive if they have the will to receive it. Tocqueville says that "liberty is, in truth, a *sacred thing*"²⁹ and that "grace constitutes liberty".³⁰ Liberty is sacred because the free person turns himself to his Creator. The free person loves freely, loves God with his own will. Fighting against liberty is, according to Tocqueville, fighting against God Himself. Being free means being liberated from the selfishness, jealousy and hard-heartedness that keep the soul in bondage – keeps the person away from communion with God.

Tocqueville stresses that the spiritual reality of liberty can only be sensed by unsystematic and unclear inclinations of the soul – the reality of liberty remains accordingly hidden for the unbeliever who does not yet have the will to be liberated from his mediocrity. The believer is aware of things that are inaccessible to the unbeliever; it is a form of knowledge that comes from the spiritual experience of being free. Liberty cannot be put in an intellectual, poetic or scientific form; it cannot be explained what it means to be free to those who have not experienced liberty:

Do not ask me to analyze this sublime yearning [need for liberty]; it has to be experienced. It simply comes into those noble souls that God has prepared to receive it,

filling them and setting them afire. There is no use trying to explain this to mediocre souls who have never felt it.³¹

Tocqueville reserves the word “noble” for those who have truly willed to receive the gift of grace, which Tocqueville equates with freedom. Like St Augustine, he believes that the will of the “noble” has been perfected by grace. God’s provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, choose to co-operate with Him. It is by the free will that the “noble” desire to be free and depart from their old selves, but it is by means of grace that their desire is actualized. Thus understood, to be or not to be free is always a matter of a free choice: “Man has no other enemy than himself, and in order to be happy and to be free, he has only to determine that he will be so.”³²

Just as Tocqueville argues that being free is a matter of truly wanting to be free in communion with God, through the reception of grace (and hence freedom is always a struggle with the self), he also holds that everyone is able to recognize the source of his or her freedom. The will to be free and the corresponding option to be good is open to everyone: “God has given us the capacity to recognize good and bad and the freedom of choice to chose between them.”³³ It is precisely because man can be free and good (if his will is well governed), that true statecraft, like true priesthood, is possible. It is only the one who succeeds in reconciling his free will with the good and who does not will evil, who can truly become a statesman. The statesman is charged with the responsibility of governing the citizens towards the free life, that is, the realization of self-governing community of citizens who freely obey free institutions. Statecraft is “the art of being free”;³⁴ its objective is to liberate the governed from those passions that keep the soul in bondage and unite the crowd in virtue (*pax*). Hence, statecraft is really, in part, “soulcraft”, that is, the molding of citizens to the traditional, pre-liberal standard of virtue.³⁵

While Tocqueville considers those who truly desire to be free and who hence opt for the good, as “noble”, he reserves the term “mediocre” for those who have no genuine passion for liberty (but prefer well being or comfort or autonomy) and who are rather

indifferent towards good and evil. Therefore, the mediocre person cannot legitimately govern others, because he does not make an unconditional choice for the good. In this sense, the mediocre person is his own enemy and does not have the will power to govern himself towards the good. And if he cannot govern himself towards the good, how can he govern others towards the good? Real freedom means self-government;³⁶ real freedom is *political liberty* and this freedom requires that fundamental political and moral choices be made in accord with the good (*summum bonum*) of one's eternal destiny. To make the right choice in any event, the person needs to be liberated from evil and falsehood. The mediocre person is caged in his own world. His soul is enslaved; he is incapable of governing himself, because his passions forge his fetters and his mind is intemperate. He is a slave to himself. In Tocqueville's eyes, the mediocre person is the spiritually weak soul who has not enough will, courage and principle to guide and govern himself (let alone govern others). Whenever the laws provide the mediocre person with the political liberty to govern himself, he abuses his liberty by choosing evil and falsehood to gratify his pride and his anger. The mediocre person does, not what God wants, but what his own will commands. What separates the mediocre from the noble person, that is, what distinguishes enslavement from freedom, is the will to be liberated from sin. It is the quality of the will that makes the difference: the noble and the mediocre persons have different objects of love.

It should not be concluded that Tocqueville's distinction between the noble and the mediocre person is based on some sort of a spiritual aristocracy. Though it is true that God fills the noble person with the passion for liberty, it does not follow that some sort of a determined or predestined order is established. The noble souls are not simply the "elected" and the mediocre persons the "damned". Christ has died for all human beings, including the mediocre ones. The mediocre person can *always* become free if he searches to overcome himself and truly comes to desire to be free: he must convert. It is the task of the noble person to guide him in this effort of becoming free from his old mediocre self. In the modern era, it is the task of the statesman to assist the mediocre person in becoming free by activating his will to become free. Liberty can only survive when the statesman guides the

mediocre person in his struggle against his passions for comfort. In other words, Tocqueville denies the right to be mediocre.

2. Tocqueville's reform of Enlightenment: transforming the passions

When Tocqueville says that “a new science of politics is needed for a new world”,³⁷ he not only asserts that the “old science of politics” has lost its legitimacy with the birth of a new world (that is, the world of democracy), but he also suggests that the “old science of politics” has lost its legitimacy in the modern era of crisis. Tocqueville’s “new science of politics” is a direct reference to the “old science of politics” of Hobbes, as he had announced it in his *De Cive*. Tocqueville considers Hobbes as the initiator of the political modernity and sees in his “science of politics” several elements that must be rectified in order to bring humankind back to a state of faith. Hobbes had provided humankind with a “science of politics”, which was able to pacify the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century. Hobbes had introduced a science that grounded knowledge in laws of (human) nature, which dictate people to live in peace for the sake of their own self-preservation. Hobbes had argued that the standards for human action had to be lowered if people were to live in peace – the only thing that human beings could possibly achieve in this world. For the sake of peace in the Christian community, Hobbes had argued that all Christian dogmas are merely prescripts of political obedience. For the sake of civil peace, Hobbes had argued that religion is not about serving God and His creatures on earth, but that it is a matter of private choice, opinion, and taste, like the choice of a political party. For the sake of peace, Hobbes had broken the unbreakable bond between God and humanity and had replaced it by the “commonwealth”.

Without denying the merits of civil peace,³⁸ Tocqueville points at the *unintended consequences* of Hobbes's “science of politics”. Though it is true that Hobbes’s science had managed to pacify religious conflict and de-politicize religious differences, so that people

have accordingly been able to stop barbarous violence and live in peace, the price that has been paid for the peace agreement has been far too high. Tocqueville holds that the price that had to be paid for peace was liberty. The modern world of peace and pacification is the world in which the so-called mediocre person – which Tocqueville identifies as “the bourgeois” – has become victorious. Tocqueville sums up the misery of the modern condition with a sense of rhetorical despair:

Do you not see that religious belief is shaken and the divine notion of right is declining, that morality is debased and the notion of moral right is therefore fading away? Argument is substituted for faith, and calculation for the impulses of sentiment. If, in the midst of this general disruption, you do not succeed in connecting the notion of right with that of private interest, which is the only immutable point in the human heart, what means will you have of governing the world except by fear?³⁹

What had brought modernity into a deep authority crisis, according to Tocqueville, is the substitution of the unifying notion of absolute morality (obedience to God’s will, that is, serving others) by a notion of right derived from a calculus of private interests (that is, obedience to one’s own will, that is, serving one’s own passions). The most urgent private interest is, of course, the maintenance of the civil peace treaty, which is necessary for fulfilling one’s most pressing need, namely, self-preservation.⁴⁰ Hobbes had substituted the passion for being free and being good by the collective need for civil peace, and accordingly, he had lowered the standards for human action: the spiritual struggle for virtue or excellence is replaced by the calculus of interest. It is in the interest of civil peace that the individual must transfer his right and virtues to govern himself to the state in order to secure his self-preservation. This dogma has weakened the passion for liberty: people lost their will to be free when they lost their desire to govern themselves to God.

The object of Tocqueville’s “new science of politics” is to re-establish the Christian principles that Hobbes had sacrificed for the sake of civil peace. Whereas Hobbes places

morality within everyone's reach, Tocqueville places the objects of human actions far beyond man's immediate range.⁴¹ Tocqueville does not satisfy himself with anything less than virtue: responsibility, decency and mutual respect are not good enough for being free. Virtue is the free choice of what is good.⁴² Like Aquinas, he defines virtue as the free choice to obey God's will that can be recognized by natural reason.⁴³ Virtue is precisely that quality of the soul the possession of which will enable a person to obey God's will and the lack of which will frustrate his effort. To act virtuously is not to act against inclination, but it is to act from the inclination towards God. Virtue, accordingly, encompasses more than moral sentiments: it requires the voluntary sacrifice of self-love, of one's own inclination, to the will of God, through the cultivation of the virtues. It is not enough to be decent and tolerant: to be free we must be charitable, patient, pitiful, simple and enduring. These are moral aspirations that are much harder to fulfill than the moral aspirations that prevail in modern democracies. In the modern world, people are guided to become autonomous and actualize their own will, but virtue requires that we detest our own will and desire, against ourselves, to actualize the will of God and hence become free and good.⁴⁴

More recently, several Catholic scholars have attempted to reconcile modernity and Christianity in their own ways, arguing that modernity is either a damning or liberating force. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that modernity is a damning force because its antagonism towards tradition makes that people have lost their theoretical and practical understanding of the virtues. MacIntyre believes that "there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition in which we inherit them and our understanding of them from a series of predecessors in which series heroic societies hold first place."⁴⁵ Because modernity emancipates the self from tradition and hierarchical authority, morality loses its authoritative content, and morality becomes "individualized" and detached from one's *telos*. MacIntyre ties virtue to the authority of tradition (intellectual tradition) rather than to liberty. People need the virtues to take control of their own lives, to become responsible not just for their habits, but also for their will. In contrast, for Tocqueville, the problem of modernity is not that it has created the autonomous person who is emancipated from the

religious and political community and from hierarchical authority, but that the Enlightenment has incorporated an “erroneous notion of liberty”. It is liberty rather than virtue that is misunderstood. Modern man does not understand liberty as self-government towards the good, but as *autonomy*, which, as Richard Sennett rightly observes, Tocqueville understands as “authority without love”.⁴⁶ The problem of autonomy is that it is not inspired by the passion for liberty, but by the passion for the self. Tocqueville stresses that in order to be free, man needs virtue – otherwise man falls victim to “individualism”, which is the retreat into the self. Individualism (the preference of the autonomous self to the public self of citizenship) is responsible for the loss of the virtues:

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling, which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends....

Individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness.⁴⁷

In contrast with MacIntyre, Charles Taylor argues that modernity is a liberating force, because it liberates Christians from narrow mindedness.⁴⁸ Taylor does not mourn the loss of the passion for liberty and virtue but emphasizes that the passion for autonomy generates a hatred of oppression, which is beneficial to humanity. According to Taylor, this modern, liberal hatred of oppression has constituted a regime of human rights. For him, Amnesty International is an association that is characteristic of modernity: it fights against the violation of human rights, against dehumanizing forces that were previously tolerated. Taylor neither suggests that Christians are called to accept the bourgeois dogmas of modernity nor does he propose a modernization of Christianity. Rather, he argues that Christians are called on to take “our modern civilization for another of those great cultural forms that have come and gone in human history”.⁴⁹ Taylor calls on Christians to engage themselves in current problems, in a contemporary idiom. He does not propose a christianization of modernity. He does not propose to establish Christian standards for

human action and to guide the unbeliever back to a state of faith. He advises Christians to partake in the gentle conversation with humankind, rather than setting the standard for such conversation. By contrast, Tocqueville insists that, for the sake of modern civilization, for the sake of democracy, a synthesis has to be brought about between modernity and Christianity. Christians must fulfill their apostolic role in the modern democratic age as well, and inspire the “love of true liberty and regularity, respect for dignity of the individual, the wish to preserve the noble heritage of the Christian civilization we have been passed on”.⁵⁰ He insists that “we believe that Christianity contains the principal element of modern civilization and the necessary condition for social progress.”⁵¹

Simone Weil establishes the link between the modern human rights regime and the virtues.⁵² For her, virtue comes prior to right, because, as she believes, all social progress stems from the fulfillment of our obligations to our Creator. The duties that we have to our Creator and His creatures generate the establishment of a human rights regime. That is, the human rights regime is established by the recognition of the obligations that we have towards humankind in general and to our nation in particular. While working for Free France, Weil argues that the patriotic duties to regenerate France are grounded in the most vital need to reconcile the human will with divine will. It is for the sake of the personal soul that the French people are called on to fight against the enslaving forces of greed and ambition which are generated by the fascist, socialist, capitalist and communist domination – not only against foreign domination but also against the internal domination of the French bureaucratic state that has come to existence precisely through the domination of destructive passions. Liberation from the French bureaucratic state would mean getting rid of a sinful part of the soul so that all energies can be concentrated on other and better parts of the soul. For Weil, such liberation demands a transformation of our notion of “greatness”. If man is to become free, he must free himself from “the false notion of greatness”, which Weil associates with the pagans (particularly the Romans) and the barbarous imperialists of her own days. According to her, the possibility for liberty depends on the notion of greatness, which we internalize. She emphasizes that the only true notion

of greatness that can set us free is the virtue of charity, for it, alone, wears the Christian badge of humility. While Weil argues that modernity is a liberating force if modern people come to recognize that only Christ and his genuine followers are great, Tocqueville cannot hide his admiration for the so-called greatness of the pagans (including the Romans, though the Greeks are the greatest), the French Revolutionaries and the European empires. He admires the great passions of a Robespierre who, even though he may have been a spokesperson of the French bourgeoisie, had aspired to be a genuine republican citizen. He admires the personal greatness and imperial designs of Napoleon, who, though had a bad bourgeois taste and brought France to ruin, was a great courageous personality:⁵³ “I reproach it [the Napoleonic Empire] for the non-liberal side of its institutions, but at the same time I do full justice to the personal grandeur of Napoleon, the most extraordinary being, I say, who has appeared in the world for many centuries.”⁵⁴

Tocqueville argues that some high and noble passion, difficulty or danger is necessary to inflame the passion for liberty and revivify the human spirit in the modern era so as to prepare the way to conversion.⁵⁵ The greatest shortcoming in the emotional life of modern democratic people, in particular the middle classes, is that they lack the feeling of greatness: “What strikes me the most in our days is not that we do so many small things, but that we do not conceive any better the idea of greatness. The feeling of greatness is missing, and one would say that the imagination of greatness is dying away.”⁵⁶ Modern people prefer a peaceful existence, free from care, to the dangers of political life. Tocqueville finds that the people of the modern world are more honest and more humane than the ancients, but that they lack the feeling of greatness that the ancients had. The ancients are the teachers of greatness. They were great, because they set themselves higher political tasks than pacification, peace and prosperity. They were great because they had the will to sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of the good of their fellow citizens, who in turn gave them their due honor. The ancients teach the potential nobility of man, they have taught man how to govern himself: “the historian of antiquity taught how to command; those of our time only teach obedience”.⁵⁷ Of Plutarch’s *Lives*, he says that it is a book that

makes him sad and gets him attached: “These men of Plutarch, especially the Greeks, are remarkable where we are vulgar.”⁵⁸ The life of the commanders has “a peculiar charm” that “does not exist in our times and I fall flat on my face when I get out of my dream to confront reality”.⁵⁹

Tocqueville's admiration for the great passions of the ancients goes hand in hand with his rejection of the indifference that, according to him, characterizes the moderns. Hobbes believes that the human intellectual and practical orientation is perverted by the feeling of greatness – a kind of perversion that threatens the civil order. Tocqueville, by contrast, argues that the feeling of greatness *sustains* the civil order: the great passions urge statesmen and citizens to combat foreign threats and resist private indulgence. He believes that the same powerful passions that motivated the great commanders can be revived in the modern era. It does not mean that he believes that it would be desirable to adopt the standard of action of the ancients. On the contrary, he admires their great passions, but he does not consider them as virtuous. Tocqueville conceives “virtue in a thousand other ways than the ancients”.⁶⁰ Virtue, for him is, not pagan but, Christian virtue. What the pagans praised as virtue (such as, prowess, courage and toughness), Tocqueville condemns as impure. The ancients placed “the harsh and half-savage virtues” at the top of the list, while “the soft virtues, such as humanity, pity, indulgence, self-forgetting were last”.⁶¹ Christianity promoted equality, unity, human brotherhood; and it placed the purpose of life after life itself, and hence gave life a purer character, more immaterial, more disinterested, a higher morality than the ancients ever had. The ancients seemed to have reduced virtue to a matter of political passion and thus acted according to their own desires. Plutarch's great commanders showed character, but often applied their will in the cause of evil rather than of good, which made them sometimes fall below humanity. Their desire for glory was often stronger than their sense of duty to humanity.

For Tocqueville, then, the standard for human action is set, not by the ancients but, by Christ.⁶² God has given or revealed to humankind the standard of good and evil, by which it can be proven that those who reject those standards do evil. Tocqueville's criticism

of the Enlightenment is precisely that it has introduced its own human and thus mediocre standards so as to make civil peace possible. He seeks to reform the Enlightenment by a return to the Christian principles and norms,⁶³ without renouncing the liberal ideas (in particular of Montesquieu and Rousseau) that the Enlightenment has introduced.⁶⁴ He embraces the liberal ideas that the Enlightenment has introduced, but he rejects the passion for autonomy that it has legitimized. For autonomy not only makes man indifferent to virtue and vice, but it also blurs the vision of the greatness of the ancient commanders. Simone Weil argues that Plutarch offers a false notion of greatness and therefore modern people have nothing to learn from the great commanders, but for Tocqueville, this notion of greatness may well trigger the passion for the public pursuit of the virtues.

3. Tocqueville's political theology

Tocqueville argues that the Christian religion is the mediator between the city of man and the city of God. The proper function of religion is to suffuse all secular life, public and private, with its light, without ever dominating it. For him, religion, rather than philosophy or science, is the road to enlightenment. It is for this reason that religion cannot be relegated to the private sphere. Religion is not a set of intellectual propositions, but a way of private and public life in which understanding, believing and loyalty emerge in a single act entered upon as a result of an actual initiation into communal worship.⁶⁵ Religion has a public function, namely, to “regulate both the relations of the individual with his Creator and, his rights and duties towards his fellow men on a universal plane, independently, that is to say, of the views and habits of the social group of which he is a member”.⁶⁶

Tocqueville's conception of religion is Catholic.⁶⁷ He grants the secular world a relative autonomy under the surveillance of the eternal world and aims at “a perfect accord between the religious world and the political world, private and public virtues, Christianity and liberty”.⁶⁸ He recognizes no contradiction between secular and religious moralities: a

well-integrated harmony between Heaven and Earth is “indispensable to the daily practice of men’s lives”.⁶⁹ He searches for a practical balancing of conflicting elements taken from the political ideal of self-government and the religious ideal of the perfection of the soul, which are in a perpetual tension with, and yet, in need of one another. As he says:

Where politics are concerned, the attitude that comes naturally to the Christian is one of indifference; though an excellent member of the Christian *civitas*, he is but an imperfect citizen in the mundane sense. Such sentiments and convictions when they obtain in a group of men called on to shape the minds and morals of a country’s youth are bound to have a debilitating effect on the mores of the nation as a whole in matters touching on public life.⁷⁰

Tocqueville seeks to harmonize the secular and the eternal world in the modern world through the reconciliation of the Christian and the citizen. For him, being a good Christian is very close to being a good citizen. There is no way to be excellent as a Christian which does not involve Christian virtue as a citizen, since citizenship, for him, is defined as the assistance offered to the fellows for the love of God.⁷¹ Hence, true citizenship is always charitable.

Tocqueville recognizes an intimate relationship between citizenship and being a true Christian, and argues that, in democratic society, it is via active citizenship that solidarity or public morality is generated. Ecclesiastical authority has lost its influence over the human minds and hearts; it is no longer able to appeal to people’s conscience and bind them to the community of saints. Though Tocqueville, differently from the enlightenment thinkers, always praises the spirit of the clergy of the past and considers himself to be a proud member of the Roman Catholic Church, he nevertheless believes that the old institutional forms of religious life are no longer effective. In modern societies, secular authority must assume the religious task of liberation and renewal. Tocqueville does not charge the government with the task of announcing “the good news” of Christ’s

resurrection, but he does argue that governments ought to apply “the practical means of teaching men the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.”⁷² He further explains that “the sole effectual means that governments can employ in order to have the doctrine of the immortality of the soul duly respected is always to act as if they believed in it themselves”.⁷³

In other words, governments should always behave as if God is watching them. Then, the governed may imitate their behavior and perhaps acquire a genuine faith and discover that in giving up their old habits, they have in fact lost nothing. Tocqueville believes that the citizen’s passion for liberty can be triggered when the governors show them that it is in their own interest that they govern themselves for the sake of their eternal destiny. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is a crucial element of Tocqueville’s political theology. For him, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is the most powerful idea that ties the supreme interests of life – God, virtue, and immortality – to human actions. The doctrine has primarily a *moral* function: “the inclusion of the idea of another world and the innate taste for the good [is necessary] to keep human beings honest.”⁷⁴ The moral function of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is that it promises reward for the faithful and virtuous life and punishment for the faithless and vicious life.⁷⁵ Immortality is a distinction won by *personal* efforts. Tocqueville does not believe that it is possible for ordinary people to be virtuous without the belief that their efforts will eventually be rewarded in the after world; and therefore he stresses that “it is God who recompenses virtue, it is God who gives it.”⁷⁶

When the government is called on to put the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in action by setting the standard for virtuous action, the citizen is meant to conform his actions to that standard. Tocqueville attaches the notion of dignity to that of virtue, and argues that, for Christians, it is no longer enough to participate in the community of saints: they must also participate in the polity. For, the apostolic duty that all Christians share is no longer to be fulfilled within the context of the Church, but they now have to govern their fellow citizens in the context of different worldviews. The transformation of Christians into

citizens implies that Tocqueville makes some serious concessions to the Christian tradition and the old forms of religious life, which, for him, were valid for a different, that is, aristocratic world. The dilemma is that in the modern era, pride and humility must be subject to revaluation. It is impossible to be a Christian if one does not know humility; yet, it is impossible to be a citizen if one does not know pride. If the Christian is to become a citizen in order to govern, he must be motivated by pride and desire for greatness to get out of the Church and into the polity. If the Christian knows no pride, or condemns pride *tout court*, there is no reason for him to participate in a public life where he cannot feel at home. In the modern world, pride, which is a vice, can no longer be condemned to harshly.⁷⁷

The necessary synthesis between the Christian and citizen involves a concession to the Christian orthodoxy that holds that pride is so much a universal defect in human nature (original sin) that it belongs to the constitutive cause of the human predicament. In this tradition, the true Christian has no interest in this world, shows neither sorrow nor ambition, nor the desire to interfere in political affairs. The true Christian only seeks the truths that are necessary to his own salvation as well as that of his fellows, and prays that the good of the government may accord with the will of God. St Augustine quotes from the Holy Bible that “God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble” and comments that “this is God's prerogative; but man's arrogant spirit in its swelling pride has claimed it as its own, and delights to hear this verse quoted in its own praise: to spare the conquered, and beat down the proud”.⁷⁸ Bossuet holds that “it is pride that disunites us, because each seeks his own good”⁷⁹ and urges us “not to lead a life that is half holy, and half profane; half Christian, half *mondaine*”.⁸⁰ Fénelon argues that “the great obstacle is the mad wisdom of the century, which wants to entrust nothing to God, which wants to do everything by its own industry, arrange everything by itself, and to admire itself constantly in its works”.⁸¹ Pascal insists that liberty and virtue within the city of men is an illusion, because pride prevents the unbeliever from receiving grace.⁸² It is not the person who does not truly desires to be free, but the one who disdains and is too weak to bear his simplicity who is mediocre for Pascal. By making people acutely aware of their own mediocrity, their mortality, of the

corruptibility of all temporal matters, and of the power of evil (hatred, envy, cruelty) in them, Pascal clearly sets limits to the political possibilities for establishing the free and virtuous life.⁸³ As an Augustinian, Pascal considers the city of men (the polity) as the domain or kingdom of the devil. Hence, Tocqueville's suggestion that the statesman is called to bring humankind back to a state of faith – the statesman who is part of the city of men rather than the city of God – is not realistic.⁸⁴

Yet, Tocqueville is a realist and does not suffer from cultural nostalgia or nineteenth century romanticism. For the Christian apologists, pride or lack of humility makes the mediocre person think that he can be his own god and govern himself. Tocqueville's understanding of pride, however, is different. For the apologists, a harmony between the city of men and the city of God is impossible, because pride, for them, means putting one's own will before the will of God. The statesmen, those proud commanders and spokespersons of the common good, are incapable of guiding humankind towards the free and good life because their pride prevents them from obeying the good in the first place. Tocqueville, however, adopts a notion of pride, which is somewhat different from that of the Christian moralists. In his understanding, pride means something like "right ambition", which strongly resembles Aristotle's definition of pride: pride as a necessary condition for personal grandeur and strong individuality.⁸⁵ Understood as "right ambition", pride is still a sin because it stands in contrast with Christ's humility, but it is a sin that produces several civic virtues. Tocqueville says that "pride restrains the most imperious of human passions"⁸⁶ and "fosters a healthy self-respect and often an overmastering desire to make a name for oneself".⁸⁷ It makes man inured to civic hardships, indifferent to the amenities of life, intrepid in the face of political and moral danger and capable enough to cope with physical and mental suffering.⁸⁸ Though pride prevents man from becoming a saint, it is a passion that enables the Christian to act as a citizen.⁸⁹ Pride prevents man from falling into mediocre snobbery (that is, a feeling of superiority *vis-à-vis* others, which destroys human dignity) and it keeps meek conformity and feebleness in check.⁹⁰ Thus understood, pride

moderates the extremes of vanity and slavish humility. In the modern world, with all its temptations and materialism, pride is socially necessary to revivify the human spirit.

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Endnotes

¹ Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968); Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville et la Nature de la Démocratie* (Paris: Commentaire Julliard, 1982); Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and Tocqueville* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Jean-Michel Heimonet, *Tocqueville et le Devenir de la Démocratie: la Perversion de l'Idéal* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999); Cheryl Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. xv. All of Tocqueville's works can be found in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951-).

³ "Spiritualism must be found in the way of treating all the sciences." Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Louis de Kergorlay*, September 20, 1834.

⁴ "Socialism as a whole, I would say that it is a new formula of servitude." Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes* III/3, 171. "The socialist has not taken here [among the French people],

the place the devil occupied in the imagination of the Middle Ages.” Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Gustave de Beaumont*, July 16, 1854.

⁵ “After having believed in the power of transforming ourselves, we came to believe ourselves to be incapable of transformation; after having had an excessive pride, we have fallen to a humility which is not any better; we have believed in any power, now we do not believe anything, and we like to believe that from now on, struggle and effort are of no use, and that our own blood, our muscles, and our nerves will always be stronger than our will and our virtue.” Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Arthur de Gobineau*, December 20, 1853.

⁶ Tocqueville was shortly imprisoned. See Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*.

⁷ “The actual question is evidently not to make *progress*, but to stop backward steps and to regain lost ground; to preserve our liberties more than to augment them.” Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Gustave de Beaumont*, September 19, 1842.

⁸ Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, Pt. II, ch. i

⁹ Manent, *Tocqueville et la Nature de la Démocratie*.

¹⁰ “It is a fallacy to flatter ourselves with the reflection that the barbarians are far from us; for if there are some nations that allow civilization to be torn from their grasp, there are others who themselves trample it underfoot.” Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. I, ch. x. “The barbarians are already at our gates... They are around us, in the bosoms of our cities.” Tocqueville quoted in Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (London, Cornell University Press, 1987), 231.

¹¹ M.R.R. Ossewaarde, *Tocqueville’s Moral and Political Thought: New Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 2004); Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993); Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹² Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, Pt. II, ch.v.

¹³ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. I, Pt. II, ch.ix.

¹⁴ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Paul Clamorgan*, January 1, 1839.

¹⁵ “I believe firmly in the need for external ceremonies. I know that they fix the human spirit in the contemplation of abstract truths and help it grasp them firmly and believe ardently in them. I do not imagine that it is possible to maintain a religion without external observances.” Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. I, ch.v.

¹⁶ “The philosophers of the eighteenth century explained in a very simple manner the gradual decay of religious faith. Religious zeal, said they, must necessarily fail the more generally liberty is established and knowledge diffused. Unfortunately, the facts by no means accord with their theory.” Ibid., Vol. I, Pt. ii, ch. ix.

¹⁷ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Francisque de Corcelle*, May 13, 1852.

¹⁸ Tocqueville’s Dutch contemporary Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer had made this idea the central focus for evaluating modernity. See Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution*, ed. Harry van Dyke (Amsterdam: The Groen van Prinsterer Fund, 1973).

¹⁹ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. I, ch. ii.

²⁰ In his biography of Tocqueville, André Jardin shows that Tocqueville, tutored by a priest, was educated in the Catholic tradition that prevailed in France. Also, Tocqueville’s family consisted of Catholic conservatives who were – unlike Tocqueville himself who became a Catholic liberal – Legitimists. See André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (London: Peter Halban, 1988).

²¹ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. xviii.

²² “If faith be wanting in him [man] he must be subject [to God]; and if he be free, he must believe.” Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. I, ch.v.

²³ Ibid., Vol I, Pt. ii, ch. ix.

²⁴ Tocqueville stresses again and again that there can be no genuine desire for political liberty without religion. Hence, the true governor is always a religious person: “There is no religion that does not place the object of man’s desires above and beyond the treasures of

earth and that does not naturally raise his soul to regions far above those of the senses.”

Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. I, ch .v.

²⁵ Tocqueville warns that in modernity the image of God may become vague with the pluralization of different forms of Christianity and the spread of other world religions: “In democratic ages, then, it is particularly important not to allow the homage paid to secondary agents to be confused with the worship due to the Creator alone.” Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. I, ch .v.

²⁶ “It is indispensable that the subject of religion should from time to time be reviewed as a strictly scientific question, and that its evidences should be tested by the same scientific methods and on the same principles as those of any of the speculative conclusions drawn by physical science.” J.S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1969), 128-9. See also Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford: Fontana, 1982), 133-4.

²⁷ “Religion is the road to knowledge, and the observance of the divine laws leads man to civil freedom.” Ibid., Vol. I, Pt. I, ch. ii.

²⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Ann Cohler, Basia Miller and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Bk. XI, ch. iii.

²⁹ Tocqueville, *Voyages en Angleterre et en Irlande de 1835*, 91.

³⁰ Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes* III/2, 587.

³¹ Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Pt. III, ch. iii.

³² Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. I, Pt. II, ch .ii.

³³ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Mme Swetchine*, February 26, 1857.

³⁴ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. I, ch. vi. See also Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt* (London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Robert P. George mentions that considering statecraft as “soulcraft” is characteristic of the Thomist tradition. See Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: civil liberties and public morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 72. Tocqueville’s preoccupation with the character of the statesman who is called to invent an institutional order in which the

demands of God's will can more easily be heard has been the central subject of St Thomas Aquinas's *De Regno*.

³⁶ "Free in any real sense, that is to say, self-governing." Tocqueville, *Ancien Régime*, Pt. II, ch. ii.

³⁷ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Intro.

³⁸ "I will freely admit that public peace is a great benefit; but I would not want to forget that it is through good order that tyranny is reached. Certainly it does not follow that men should despise public peace, but it should not be all they desire." Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Eugène Stoffels*, July 25, 1836.

³⁹ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol I, Pt. II, ch. vi.

⁴⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. xxvi.

⁴¹ "Philosophers and those in power ought to be always striving to place the objects of human actions far beyond man's immediate range. Adapting himself to the spirit of his country and his age, the moralist must learn how to vindicate his principles in that position. He must teach virtue away from the petty selfish passion of the hour that the general passion of happiness can be satisfied." Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. xvii.

⁴² Tocqueville, *Voyages en Angleterre et en Irlande de 1835*, 91.

⁴³ "Virtue knows how to bend to the order of things and of events which reason shows to it." Tocqueville, *Notes et Idées*.

⁴⁴ "I am ignorant of His designs, but I shall not cease to believe in them because I cannot fathom them, and I had rather mistrust my own capacity than His justice." Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Intro.

⁴⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 119.

⁴⁶ Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

⁴⁷ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. ii.

⁴⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, ed. James L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 15.

⁵⁰ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec J. Eötvös*, July 1, 1858.

⁵¹ Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes* III/2, 39.

⁵² Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, Preface T.S. Eliot (London: Routledge, 1997). See also Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 163-5.

⁵³ Tocqueville, *Conversations avec Nassau Senior*, August 19, 1850.

⁵⁴ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Paul Clamorgan*, April 17, 1842.

⁵⁵ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. III, ch. xix.

⁵⁶ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard*, April 6, 1838.

⁵⁷ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. I, ch. xx.

⁵⁸ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard*, April 6, 1838.

⁵⁹ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Gustave de Beaumont*, March 21, 1838.

⁶⁰ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Francisque de Corcelle*, March 19, 1838. The teaching of the incompleteness of the pagan account of the virtues has of course been integral in the Catholic tradition (most clearly articulated by Abelard).

⁶¹ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Arthur de Gobineau*, September 5, 1843.

⁶² Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. I, ch. iii and ch. v.

⁶³ “Do not seek to supersede the old religious opinions of men by new ones...” Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. xv.

⁶⁴ “Everyone is the best and sole judge of his own private interest, and society has no right to control a man’s actions unless they are prejudicial to the common weal or unless the common weal demands his help.” Ibid., Vol. I, Pt. I, ch. v.

⁶⁵ “I believe firmly in the need for external ceremonies. I know that they fix the human spirit in the contemplation of abstract truths and help it grasp them firmly and believe

ardently in them. I do not imagine that it is possible to maintain a religion without external observances.” Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. I, ch. v.

⁶⁶ Tocqueville, *Ancien Régime*, Pt. I, ch. iii.

⁶⁷ See for Tocqueville’s defense of Roman Catholicism, Ossewaarde, *Tocqueville’s Moral and Political Thought: New Liberalism*, 33-38. See also Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom*, 86.

⁶⁸ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec François de Corcelle*, July 29, 1857.

⁶⁹ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. I, ch.v.

⁷⁰ Tocqueville, *Ancien Régime*, Pt. II, ch. xi.

⁷¹ “Christianity, indeed, teaches that a man must prefer his neighbor to himself in order to gain eternal life; but Christianity also teaches that men ought to benefit their fellow creatures for the love of God. A sublime expression!” Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. ix.

⁷² Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. xv.

⁷³ Ibid., Vol. II, Bk. II, ch. xv.

⁷⁴ Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Mme Swetchine*, January 1, 1858.

⁷⁵ “Some real preoccupation with religious truths, but not going so far as a complete intellectual absorption in the other world, has always seemed to me to be the state conforming most closely to human morality in all its forms.” Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Louis de Kergorlay*, July, 1835.

⁷⁶ Tocqueville, *Discours sur les Prix de Vertu*, July 22, 1847.

⁷⁷ “Moralists are constantly complaining that the ruling vice of the present time is pride... Far from thinking that humility ought to be preached to our contemporaries, I would have endeavors made to give them a more enlarged idea of themselves and of their kind. Humility is unwholesome to them; what they most want is, in my opinion, pride. I would willingly exchange several of our small virtues for this one vice.” Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. III, ch. xix.

⁷⁸ St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, ed. David Knowles (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), preface.

⁷⁹ Jacques Benigne Bossuet, *Sermons choisis de Bossuet*, ed. Cardinal Maury (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1844), 480.

⁸⁰ Bossuet, *Sermons choisis de Bossuet*, 492.

⁸¹ François Fénelon, *Œuvres Spirituelles*, ed. François Varillon S.J. (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 92.

⁸² Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres Complètes de Pascal*, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 617.

⁸³ Kolakowski, *Religion*, 200.

⁸⁴ It must be stressed here that in Luke 4:6 the devil offers Christ all kingdoms of the secular world, which, as he states, explicitly belong to him, in exchange for His obedience. Hence, it seems to follow that the city of men is the devil's domain.

⁸⁵ See also David Riesman, *Selected Essays from Individualism Reconsidered* (New York: The Free Press, 1954), 31.

⁸⁶ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. I, Pt. II, ch. x.

⁸⁷ Tocqueville, *Ancien Régime*, Pt. II, ch. xii.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Pt. III, ch. viii.

⁸⁹ "Christianity... has divided the pleasures so that we can believe both in materialism as in spiritualism. Christianity does not condemn honest materialism, because it considers it from a practical point of view: it does not ask perfection from man." Tocqueville, *Correspondance avec Louis de Kergorlay*, August 5, 1836.

⁹⁰ Tocqueville, *Démocratie*, Vol. II, Bk. III, ch. xix.