



ALAN S. KAHAN

TOCQUEVILLE, DEMOCRACY, & RELIGION



Checks & Balances
for Democratic Souls

OXFORD

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For Sarah Bentley

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Contents

Introduction	1
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I. THEORY

1. Tocqueville the Moralist	11
Tocqueville's Moral Science	11
The French Moralist Tradition	16
Seventeenth-Century Grandeur	18
Tocqueville and Christian Moralism	23
2. Enlightened and Romantic Roots of Tocqueville's Moral Science	31
From Montesquieu to Rousseau: The Eighteenth Century	31
Tocqueville and his Contemporaries: The Nineteenth Century	39
3. Democratic Grandeur	49
What is Man?	49
Democratic Man	53
The Greatness Appropriate to Democracies	56
The Aristocratic Perfection of Democracy	61
4. Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls: Religion and Freedom	68
The Role of Religion	68
Religion as Check and as Balance	72
Separating Church and State	80
Religion and Freedom	85
Christianity, Democracy, and Freedom	88
5. Alternative Spiritualities and Alternatives to Spirituality	94
Of Pantheism, Poetry, and Professors	94
Patriotism	102

II. APPLICATIONS

6. Religion in America	117
The Point of Departure	117
Separation of Church and State	122
The Importance of Religion in Jacksonian America	128
American Religions	131
Protestant Method and Protestant Perfectionism	141

7. Religion in France	147
The France of <i>Mirari Vos</i> and the France of M. Homais	147
Tocqueville Between the Millstones: The Freedom of Education Controversy	153
The Old Regime and Religion	160
The Church and Napoleon III	167
8. Religion Elsewhere	173
Religion in Ireland and England	173
Tocqueville on Islam	182
Tocqueville on Hinduism	189
Global Democracy, Global Religion	193
9. Tocqueville Today	195
Weber's Moral Problematic	196
Tocqueville and Post-Secular Society	202
Religion and Republicanism	207
<i>Appendix: Methodology</i>	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	231

Introduction

The relationship between democracy and religion is as sensitive and important today as it was in Alexis de Tocqueville's time. His need to understand the role of religion in democratic societies was as great as ours. Comprehending the place of religion in his thought is crucial to understanding his work, and applying his insights to today's concerns can offer us new perspectives on some of the most pressing issues of our time.

When analyzing religion in democratic societies, Tocqueville faced problems that were deeply rooted in the France and America of his day, and still resonate with us today. Today we debate whether Islam can be reconciled with a democratic society—in nineteenth-century France the same question was asked about Catholicism. Today we wonder if financial markets can endure without some kind of moral restraint—Europeans asked similar questions about their newly industrializing societies in the nineteenth century. Revolutionary and religious fanaticisms, sometimes combined, were an ever-present threat in Tocqueville's time, as they are today. Tocqueville's writings can give us new insight into all these problems.

Tocqueville wrote a great deal about religion, but not for a religious purpose. Religion for him was primarily a means, rather than an end. His subject was democracy, and his goal was a free society in which great human beings could flourish. Democracy for Tocqueville was first of all a social condition, based on the legal and moral equality of all human beings and, second, a political system, based on the sovereignty of the people. The coming of democracy was the will of Providence, but democracy was not Tocqueville's religion, freedom was. Religion had many uses for Tocqueville, but the most important was that it was crucial to maintaining political freedom and human greatness in democratic societies. One reason he went to America was to better understand the relationship between religion and democracy, and to learn how that relationship could be mutually supportive, rather than mutually destructive.

Tocqueville neither saw nor predicted an earthly paradise, with or without the help of religion. He knew that religion, like democracy, was compatible with despotism as well as with freedom. In the worst of all democratic worlds, all would be equal under a despot whose reign was consecrated by a priest. But Tocqueville was convinced that religion, at least the correct kind of religion, was necessary though not sufficient for maintaining freedom in a democratic society. He thought that to achieve such happiness and greatness as was possible for human beings, one had to work with both the angel and the beast in human nature. In this task religion was indispensable. Religion for Tocqueville was a vital resource in the never-ending

task of checking and balancing the human soul and enabling it to live in freedom. Whatever rhetorical strategy he employed, whatever language he adopted or argument he made, contributing to the freedom and greatness of the individual in democratic society was the purpose of his new moral science.

Discussion of religion is not quite omnipresent in Tocqueville's writings—his *Recollections* of the revolutions of 1848 rarely mention it—but religion is central to his account of *Democracy in America*, and important alternately by its presence and its absence in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, his study of the French Revolution. It was a frequent concern during his own political career. Last and, in the judgment of some, not least, his personal religious beliefs have given rise to a certain amount of speculation and controversy. As a result, probably everyone who has ever written at any length about Tocqueville has said something about his views on religion.

Yet, on the whole, religion has been less important for Tocqueville's interpreters than it was for Tocqueville himself.¹ The upsurge in secondary literature about Tocqueville in the last twenty-five years has included work about Tocqueville and religion, but for the most part other aspects of his thought have attracted the lion's share of attention. Recent work on Tocqueville has preferred to focus on him as a traveler in America, a historian of the French Revolution, a social scientist, a political theorist, a French politician, a liberal, a literary figure, or as several, or even all of these. Tocqueville was indeed all of these, and religion was important to him in all of these contexts. But religion was much more than a backdrop for Tocqueville. It is important not to make religion seem less important to Tocqueville's thought than it was for him or for his readers, or to democratic societies today.²

There is, however, some justification for the lack of emphasis on religion in recent secondary literature. Tocqueville's thought about religion is scattered in many places, not all of them obvious. For example, he never wrote the big chapter on religion he originally intended for *Democracy* (see Chapter 6). Instead, religion appears in nine separate chapter or section titles in the book, and this far from

¹ In my introduction to Tocqueville's thought, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (London, 2010), I wrote that "it is difficult to overestimate the importance of religion in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*" and frequently discussed religion. Nevertheless, because that book did not emphasize Tocqueville's attachment to human greatness so much as it did his attachment to freedom (although the two are closely related), and did not introduce the concept of his moral science, religion did not play as central a role as it ought to have done. Kahan, *Tocqueville*, 52.

² In the past twenty-five years only one book has attempted a comprehensive account of Tocqueville's views on religion, the excellent work by Agnès Antoine, *L'Impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté, et la religion* (Paris, 2003). Other works have concentrated on only one aspect of his views and/or considered them in other contexts. See Barbara Allen, *Tocqueville, Covenant, and the Democratic Revolution* (Lanham, MD, 2005); Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy and the American Future* (Chicago, 1995); and Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD, 1993). Doris Goldstein's *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought* (New York, 1975), while still valuable, was written before a number of significant Tocqueville texts became available. There have also been a number of articles on the subject (see Bibliography). Among them Catherine Zuckert's "Not by Preaching": Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy," *The Review of Politics*, 43, no. 2 (1981), 259–80 deserves to be singled out as an early attempt to stress Tocqueville's sincere attachment to religion, against a number of commentators who argued that religion was only a useful "myth" to him.

exhausts the discussion. For example, several of Tocqueville's most interesting remarks on religion in *Democracy* are found in the chapter "Of Some Sources of Poetry among Democratic Nations." As a result of this scattered presentation, even a very perceptive work on Tocqueville and religion suggests that "on this subject which was so close to his heart, Tocqueville's argumentation does not in fact always have the same rigor as in the rest of *Democracy in America*." But as we will see, Tocqueville's analysis of religion was as rigorous, if less compact, than any other aspect of his thought. Religion was at the heart of Tocqueville's analysis of democratic society.³

Religion was central to his concerns for two reasons. One was a matter of history and politics. Religion, in his view, had played a very important role in the making of American and French history, and continued to exercise an enormous influence on not just those two countries, but on democratic societies in general.

The second reason was that his most important concerns were fundamentally moral ones. Religion mattered greatly to Tocqueville the historian, Tocqueville the social scientist, and Tocqueville the political theorist, but it was crucial to Tocqueville the moralist. The role of moralist was the key to all the other roles he played. As will be shown in the first two chapters, "Tocqueville the Moralist" and "Enlightened and Romantic Roots of Tocqueville's Moral Science," moral issues, that is, concerns about human character and its development in democratic society, were at the heart of his project. Indeed, his moral science and his political science were essentially one. As the young Tocqueville put it in 1833, when he was in the middle of writing the first volume of *Democracy in America*, "I am trying not to construct two worlds: the one moral, in which I am still enthusiastic for what is beautiful and good; the other political, in which I lie down flat on my face in order to smell . . . the dung on which we walk. . . . I am seeking not to divide what is indivisible."⁴

In putting the question of moral character at the center of his work, Tocqueville was placing himself within a long and distinguished French tradition that reached back to writers including La Bruyère, Pascal and Corneille, and continued through figures such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Chateaubriand. If Tocqueville invented a "new political science," as the well-known quotation goes, it was in the service of his new moral science, a science intended to encourage democratic grandeur and preserve democratic souls from degradation. It is well known that for Tocqueville democratic societies faced a choice between despotism and freedom. His new political science was intended to help them choose freedom. His new moral science was intended to help them face a parallel and related choice between moral degradation and moral greatness. As a moralist Tocqueville aspired to be not merely democracy's political guru, but its spiritual director.⁵

Chapter 3, "Democratic Grandeur," explains how Tocqueville's moral science, founded on his views of human nature in general and its democratic variant, was

³ Antoine, *L'Impensé*, 130–1.

⁴ *Democracy*, 3:769; Tocqueville to Eugène Stoffels, 12 January 1883, Roger Boesche, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin (Berkeley, CA, 1986), 81–2.

⁵ *Democracy in America*, ed. by Eduardo Nolla, trans. by James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis, IN, 2010), 1:16.

designed to cultivate greatness of character in democratic societies. As with religion, Tocqueville's discussions of moral grandeur or greatness are diffused throughout his writings, but to an even greater extent.⁶ There is no chapter "Of the Greatness Appropriate to Democratic Societies" in *Democracy in America*. Yet references to grandeur are made repeatedly at crucial points in *Democracy* and elsewhere in Tocqueville's published writings, as well as in his correspondence, and from them a picture emerges of what counted as greatness for Tocqueville. It is the job of the moralist to point out the alternatives of degradation and greatness in whatever context they may appear, and Tocqueville took care to do so in many contexts.

Once Tocqueville is identified as a moralist concerned with encouraging human greatness it is easy to see the place religion holds at the center of his moral science. Chapter 4, "Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls: Religion and Freedom in Democratic Societies," discusses Tocqueville's analysis of religion. It focuses on how religion can, does, and should check and limit the despotic claims of democratic society on the individual, as well as certain democratic tendencies within the individual, such as materialism and individualism, which otherwise might run amok. Tocqueville also used religion not just to limit existing, potentially degrading tendencies in the democratic soul, but to balance them with other kinds of desires and ambitions. The checking and balancing functions of religion are analogous to the utilitarian and perfectionist aspects of Tocqueville's thought, a combination rarely found in a single thinker to such a degree. Tocqueville sought to maximize both human happiness, as utilitarians do, and human greatness, as perfectionists do. This dual perspective is a source of many of the oft-perceived contradictions in Tocqueville's work.

Tocqueville did not suggest that religion was the sole source of checks and balances in forming human character. For every religious mechanism that he identified, there was a secular, often political mechanism that did much the same work. Tocqueville liked to think in parallel lines, and throughout his work parallel mechanisms can be found for achieving the same goal. Up to now, it is the secular political/sociological line of his thought that has received most attention. Without attempting to minimize the importance of secular checks and balances in Tocqueville's thought, of mechanisms such as civil associations, political participation, or self-interest well understood, this book concentrates on the role that religion played as the source of the spiritual checks and balances necessary, in Tocqueville's view, to the preservation of human freedom and greatness. Religion played the role of St. Christopher in Tocqueville's moral drama. Christopher, the story goes, was a tremendously powerful man who insisted on serving only the most powerful master he could find. Eventually, he worked his way up to serving God. For Tocqueville, religion was the most powerful, possible moral, intellectual and spiritual influence on human beings, and he wanted to enlist religion in the service of the highest ends, freedom and human greatness, which were indissociable in his mind. In his moral science, religion was the lever that lifted the most weight.

⁶ The Schleifer translation of *Democracy in America* translates *grandeur* as "grandeur." The Goldhammer translation prefers "greatness." I use *grandeur* and *greatness* interchangeably.

Religion was the most important source of spiritual checks and balances in democratic societies for Tocqueville. But it was not the only such source. Chapter 5, "Alternative Spiritualities," discusses pantheism, poetry, science, liberal education, and patriotism as means which Tocqueville investigated to provide some or all of the spiritual benefits of religion for democratic societies, although in the end he concluded that they were inadequate in their appeal or their effects.

The first five chapters, Part I of this book, describe the theoretical framework for Tocqueville's discussion of religion, grounding it in his project as a moralist concerned with human greatness. Part II examines how Tocqueville thought religion worked in practice, that is, how it had succeeded or failed in performing the checking and balancing functions necessary to realize his political and moral goals in America, in France, and in a number of other countries. It furthermore suggests ways in which his analysis might be applied to the democratic societies of the twenty-first century.

Much of *Democracy in America* is devoted to describing and analyzing the role religion played in America from the arrival of the Puritans in the seventeenth century to Tocqueville's travels in America in 1831–2. Chapter 6, "Religion in America" discusses how Tocqueville thought religion functioned in American society, both religion in general and particular religions, such as Puritanism or Catholicism. While most of the material for this chapter naturally comes from *Democracy in America*, some of it is drawn from Tocqueville's correspondence, drafts, and portions of the manuscript of *Democracy* that Tocqueville deleted. These shed a great deal of light on aspects of American religion that Tocqueville knew about but chose not to discuss in the text. The elements "missing" from the published text, in turn, shed light on what he did choose to discuss, and the reasons behind those choices.

For Tocqueville, democracy in America was, on the whole, a success story, because the Americans had managed to preserve their freedom for the fifty or so years since their independence. Not by chance, religion was also a success in America; Tocqueville described the United States, following the conventions of his time as well as his own observations, as the most religious country in the Western world. From his perspective the two successes were directly related to one another. The vicissitudes of freedom in France after the French Revolution, and ultimately the failure of democratic society in France to preserve freedom, were from Tocqueville's perspective largely due to the failure of religion in France to play its proper role. Religion's failure in France shaped much of Tocqueville's discussion of religion in *Democracy in America*.

If "Religion in America" had a happy ending, "Religion in France," the subject of Chapter 7, turned out to be a tragedy. In his *Recollections* of the revolutions of 1848 Tocqueville did not list religion among the causes of the collapse of the July Monarchy, but the moral malaise to which he attributed much of the blame for its fall was precisely what he wanted religion to combat. In his political activity during the July Monarchy, in his discussion of the French Revolution and its origins in *The Old Regime*, and in his letters about the Second Empire, Tocqueville frequently discussed the weakness of religion in France and its causes. Tocqueville's pessimism,

in his last years, about the future of freedom in France was a direct result of the bad relationship between religion and democratic society in France.

Tocqueville's discussion of religion's role in different national contexts was not limited to France and America, even if America received the most attention, and France was always on Tocqueville's mind. Tocqueville was a keen observer of religion wherever he travelled, and Chapter 8, "Religion Elsewhere," shows how he applied his moral science and his understanding of the proper role of religion to Ireland and England, as well as in his discussions of Islam (based in part on his two trips to Algeria) and of Hinduism (Tocqueville never visited India, but was interested in it for a number of reasons). In the context of the early twenty-first century his at times ambivalent, at times hostile reaction to Islam is of special interest.

Tocqueville's discussion of Islam is not the only way in which his analysis might be used to enrich contemporary sociological and political analysis. Chapter 9, "Tocqueville Today," outlines a few of the ways in which a Tocquevillean perspective might enrich contemporary debates. The chapter begins by looking at Max Weber's understanding of religion, which has served as the theoretical framework for most discussions of religion in the modern world, contrasting it with a Tocquevillean perspective. The results suggest that Tocqueville's views hold promise for enriching what is still in many respects the dominant paradigm for the sociological understanding of religion. Tocqueville's vision of religion's enduring significance in democratic societies aligns him with those who are associated with theories of "post-secular society" today. But his thought about the relationship between democracy and religion does not so much anticipate the ideas of twenty-first century post-secular theorists like the sociologist José Casanova or the philosopher Jürgen Habermas as go beyond them. Indeed, it is not just with reference to Weberians or post-secular thinkers that Tocqueville's ideas about religion are relevant today. Because he was a moralist who theorized about democratic society, the kind of society in which we still live, Tocqueville's discussion of the relationship between moral values and democratic politics, and between religion and democratic politics, is directly relevant to many contemporary schools of political thought. This is particularly true with regard to "republican" theorists such as Michael Sandel. Indeed, in many respects a Tocquevillean understanding of some of the issues republican values face in contemporary societies seems necessary if republicanism is to be relevant.

It should be clear by now that this book approaches Tocqueville's thought from several angles, and discusses his work in a variety of contexts, some contemporary with him, and some not. This raises methodological issues which some readers may find of interest. Rather than encumbering the main body of the book with debates that are not directly related to Tocqueville, analysis of the theoretical questions raised by my approach(es) will be found in the appendix on "Methodology."

Before beginning to examine Tocqueville's views on the role of religion in democratic societies, it is useful to discuss one aspect of his biography: his own religious beliefs. Thanks to letters he wrote late in life, we have an unusually clear view of his private convictions, although a certain amount of doubt remains about the last weeks of his life.

Tocqueville was born into an aristocratic Catholic family in 1805. His mother was very devout, his father much less so. He was initially educated at home, with a priest who was an old family friend as his tutor. At 15 he left his mother and beloved tutor behind and finished his secondary schooling at Metz, where his father was a government official. By his own account Tocqueville was a conventionally devout Catholic until the age of 16, when, after precocious reading in his father's library, well stocked with all the classics of the Enlightenment, he experienced a wave of doubt in which he lost his faith. Outwardly, he remained a practicing Catholic (with the possible exception of his years at law school in Paris), regularly attending church, although never taking communion (infrequent communion was common at the time, so this did not arouse comment). Inwardly, however, he was no longer a Christian.

Instead—we do not know exactly when he adopted these views—he became a sort of Deist, whose faith more or less replicated that of Rousseau's Savoyard Vicar, perhaps deliberately. He gave his credo in a letter of February, 1857, a little more than two years before his death. In it he said that although he found “human life inexplicable in this world and frightening in the next,” he nevertheless held certain firm religious beliefs. He accepted the existence of a just God who gave humanity free will and the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and he believed in a future life in which good would be rewarded and evil punished (the punishment of evil goes beyond the credo of Rousseau's Vicar). “But beyond these clear ideas, everything which goes beyond the limits of this world seems to me enveloped in terrifying shadow.” Indeed, despite these clear ideas, from time to time he was plunged into depressions in which he doubted all his beliefs. However, his lack of conventional faith and his doubts were always well-concealed from the public, and even from many of his intimate friends.⁷

In between his loss of faith and his 1857 letters, Tocqueville married Mary Motley, an Englishwoman who converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism for the wedding. She became a very devout Catholic, and externally they were a conventional religious couple, regularly attending church. She made efforts to convert Tocqueville in the months before his death, and thereafter to persuade the world that Tocqueville had died, indeed had always been, a devout Catholic. She persuaded his friend Gustave de Beaumont to say so in his preface to the 1860 edition of Tocqueville's works. An earlier draft of the preface, however, recounted an incident that occurred a few weeks before Tocqueville's death in which he told his wife, “Don't ever speak to me of confession—ever! Ever! No one will ever make me lie to myself and make a pretense of faith when I don't have faith. I want to remain myself and not stoop to telling lies.” Nevertheless, a few days before his death eyewitnesses recorded that Tocqueville heard mass, confessed, and took communion.

⁷ Tocqueville to Mme. Swetchine, 26 February 1857, *Oeuvres complètes*, 18 vols. (Paris, 1951–), 15, 2:314–15; See also Tocqueville to Arthur de Gobineau, 24 January 1857, Boesche, *Selected Letters*, 342–4. There he referred to people “who are full of veneration and a sort of filial tenderness for the Christian religion, without unfortunately being for all that absolutely convinced Christians,” and implied that he was among them.

Was this, as some commentators have argued, a deathbed conversion? Or was he making a parting gift to his wife, desperate for the soul of her beloved husband? No evidence will ever permit us to know.⁸

It is very difficult to tell what effect Tocqueville's beliefs had on his views about the role of religion in democratic societies. He was no missionary for Deism. He kept American Unitarianism out of the pages of *Democracy in America* despite the sympathy he expressed for it in his correspondence (see Chapter 6, pp. 135–7), and he showed no sympathy for the Theophilanthropy of the French Revolution or new religions like Positivism. He always argued that Catholicism was the only plausible religion for France. Perhaps the only safe conclusion that may be drawn was that his beliefs contributed to his lack of religious bigotry and his expressed willingness to find in all religions support for the greatness of the human soul. Tocqueville's search for moral greatness in democratic societies certainly needed all the help it could get.

⁸ André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (New York, 1988), 529, and, more generally, 528–32. For a good account of Tocqueville's last days, see the first chapter of Goldstein, *Trial by Faith*.

PART I
THEORY

1

Tocqueville the Moralist

TOCQUEVILLE'S MORAL SCIENCE

When we think about Tocqueville today, “moralist” is not the first word that comes to mind. He is the author of that book about America, a founding father of political science, a great historian of the French Revolution, a defender of liberty. Yet if we examine any of these closely, it soon becomes apparent that Tocqueville’s intent was consistently that of a moralist. What Tocqueville most cared about was character, not political or social systems. He cared more about people than about politics, and he sought, above all, to encourage the development of great human beings. He was a French moralist far more than he was an “American” political thinker.

What blurs the distinction between Tocqueville the political scientist and Tocqueville the moralist is that for Tocqueville political freedom was essential to the full development of character. Freedom was both the precondition for, and an essential component of, human grandeur. In its highest form, virtue was only possible for free human beings living in a free society. If Tocqueville invented a “new political science,” as the well-known quotation goes, it was as part of his new moral science. His moral science simultaneously analyzed the psychological conditions necessary for political freedom, and the political conditions necessary for the full development of human beings.

Tocqueville’s discoveries in America were as much moral as political. *Democracy in America* is largely a study of the democratic character, its strengths and weaknesses, its habits, foibles and tendencies. What Tocqueville learned about the democratic character and its form of greatness is at the heart of *Democracy*. *The Old Regime and the Revolution* continued this study of the democratic character, with meditations on French peasants, aristocrats, bourgeois, and intellectuals replacing Americans as models for Tocqueville’s portrait gallery of democratic character types. Tocqueville wanted his readers to understand the natural tendencies of democratic people, and how those tendencies could be balanced or encouraged in ways that lead to moral improvement, political freedom, and ultimately human perfection and greatness. His nineteenth-century readers were more attuned to such moral concerns than many twentieth-century political scientists who have discussed Tocqueville’s “new political science.” Whether or not he was a pioneering social scientist, Tocqueville was the “exemplary figure of a modern moralist.”¹

¹ Françoise Mélonio, “‘Une sorte de Pascal politique’: Tocqueville et la littérature démocratique,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, 105, 2005/2, 273–84, DOI 10.3917/rhlf.052.0273, 274.

Understanding Tocqueville as a moralist is necessary to an understanding of his work, and in particular the crucial role religion plays for Tocqueville. Unfortunately, discussion of Tocqueville the moralist has usually been brief, unsystematic, or buried in a footnote.² Reading Tocqueville without understanding his moral purpose is like trying to use a complicated tool without knowing its intended purpose. Some features will always remain a mystery, and others will not be properly appreciated. To understand why Tocqueville discussed religion, poetry, or newspapers, centralization, laws or mores, we must understand him as a moralist.

Tocqueville's intent is shown by the Introduction to *Democracy in America*, which opens with a discussion on the history of democracy, defined as "equality of conditions."³ In the course of that discussion Tocqueville suggests that the spread of knowledge and education highlighted "the natural grandeur of man." A few paragraphs after this remark the secular history of equality ends.⁴ The rise of equality is then re-described in religious terms, through a parallel sacred history in which the rise of equality is revealed to be a "Providential fact." Democracy is inevitable, and "to want to stop democracy... would seem to be struggling against God himself." The mission statement of *Democracy in America* follows this double history, and this mission is assigned to "those who lead society." It includes both a moral and a political component. The mission is "to instruct democracy, to revive its beliefs if possible, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute

² Thus Schleifer: "It is difficult to read the entire *Democracy* without sensing the author's essential moral purposes and convictions... Tocqueville strongly attacked any democratic tendency which in his eyes threatened to debase the human spirit." James T. Schleifer, "Tocqueville and Religion," *Tocqueville Review*, 4, no. 2 (Winter 1982), 313. Shiner writes that Tocqueville was "a purveyor of wisdom... in the French tradition of Montaigne, La Bruyère, and Voltaire, offering reflections on human motives and actions," L. E. Shiner, *The Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville's Recollections* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), 136. Agnès Antoine relegated to a footnote her observation that "reflection on the fate of morality in democracy, which Tocqueville described as an 'important and seminal idea,' without devoting separate treatment to it, in a way underlies the whole of [Democracy]." Antoine, *L'Impensé*, 356n.36. Françoise Mélonio titled a chapter of *Tocqueville and the French* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998) "Moralist for Modern Times, 1840s," but suggests that Tocqueville's moralism is found only in the second volume of *Democracy*, and gives it no sustained analysis except from the perspective of its reception. Jean-Louis Benoît titled a book *Tocqueville moraliste* (Paris, 2004) but its discussion is so broad and diffuse as to make application difficult. The only work on Tocqueville that gives serious and extended analytical consideration to Tocqueville as a moralist is Lucien Jaume's *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton, NJ, 2013), especially 145–58. Some of my differences with Jaume will be found in the notes, but it is a work from which I learned much.

³ Defining democracy as a social state was common in France at the time. See for example the historical works of Guizot or the parliamentary speech of Tocqueville's correspondent Royer-Collard, *Archives parlementaires*, 34, 2e série (22 January 1822), 133. Tocqueville did not limit himself to one meaning for "democracy," however. See James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Democracy in America*, 2nd edn. (Indianapolis, IN, 2000), 325–39. The most common other meaning for "Democracy" is a political system based on the sovereignty of the people. Melvin Richter, and with more caution François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, argue that this political meaning became dominant in Tocqueville's work after 1848. See Melvin Richter, "Guizot and Tocqueville on Democracy: From a Type of Society to a Political Regime," *History of European Ideas*, 30, no. 1 (2004), 61–82. I agree with Cheryl Welch that this was not the case. See Welch, "Tocqueville's Resistance to the Social," *History of European Ideas*, 30, no. 1 (2004), 63–107.

⁴ Tocqueville's story is similar to the standard Scottish Enlightenment account of the four stages of human history, that is, savage, pastoral, feudal, and finally commercial and egalitarian.

little by little the science of public affairs for its inexperience, knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to times and places; to modify it according to circumstances and men.”⁵

Tocqueville’s intention to create a new moral science has been masked for many readers by the statement that follows, in which he proposes to aid democratic leaders in accomplishing their mission through his “new political science,” a striking phrase that has monopolized attention. What follows, however, is not a set of political prescriptions, but a description of public morals in France and Europe. Tocqueville then calls on the political leadership and the “most powerful, most intelligent and *most moral* classes of the nation” (emphasis added) to remedy social damage which Tocqueville describes in moral terms, damage that has occurred because democracy, “abandoned to its wild instincts,” has grown up “like those children deprived of paternal care, who raise themselves in the streets of our cities, and who know society only by its vices and miseries.” The development of democratic society in Europe has been accompanied by moral and spiritual flaws: by “servility”; by idolatry—democracy “adored as the image of strength”; and by excess. All democratic nations and people are threatened by a new evil, one from which aristocratic society, for all its faults, had preserved them: their souls risk being “degraded” and “depraved.” The rest of the Introduction proceeds from a discussion of the moral strengths and weaknesses of aristocratic society to the depiction of alternate moral futures for democracy, one debased, the other great. It concludes by discussing how America can shed light on the paths democracies should follow and the pitfalls to be avoided.⁶

The Introduction thus describes a situation in which the alternative moral outcomes of democracy are degradation or greatness, just as it offers the parallel political alternatives of democratic despotism or democratic freedom. Tocqueville the moralist aims to help society’s leaders learn how to avoid the one and encourage the other:

To point out if possible to men what to do to escape tyranny and debasement while becoming *democratic men*. Such is, I think, the general idea by which my book can be summarized and which will appear on every page of the one I am writing at this moment [the letter was written between the two volumes of *Democracy*]. To work in this direction is, in my eyes, a *holy* occupation.⁷

This is Tocqueville’s purpose, a fundamentally moral, indeed quasi-religious purpose. His political science, like his moral science, supports “human liberty, source of all moral grandeur.”⁸ Tocqueville views freedom and greatness as symbiotes, that

⁵ *Democracy*, 1:9–10, 14, 16.

⁶ *Democracy*, 1:16–18, 20. Françoise Mélonio overlooks the moralism strongly present in volume one of *Democracy*, reserving it for volume two. In her view, volume two demonstrates Tocqueville “turning . . . from political science to moralizing.” But the moralizing was always there. See Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Charlottesville, VA, 1998), 55.

⁷ Tocqueville to Kergorlay, 26 December 1836, *OC*, 13, 1:431, cited in *Democracy*, 1:32n.x. Exceptionally, I depart from the Schleifer translation here, which instead of “becoming democratic men” has “becoming democratic.” The French text is *en devenant démocratiques*. The plural, I think, requires the emendation and avoids the reader thinking that Tocqueville is referring to democratic *society*.

⁸ *Democracy*, 1:24.

is they exist in intimate and mutually beneficial association. His political science is part of the study of the effects of democracy on character that is central to his work as a moralist.

That Tocqueville is often engaged in character study is sometimes concealed by the manner in which he goes about it. We tend to associate character study with the close examination of individuals, as in novels, plays, and many histories. This kind of character study is not found in Tocqueville.⁹ Rather than talking about specific individuals, who are rarely discussed at any length in either *Democracy* or *The Old Regime*, Tocqueville prefers to examine character types, and to make more or less broadly focused remarks about the effects of democratic society on character. Discussions of the *gouts*, the “tastes” or “inclinations” of a kind of person, or of democratic societies in general, and the kinds of characters they form, can be found throughout Tocqueville’s writings. One’s tastes and inclinations are a reflection of one’s character. The taste for material well-being that Tocqueville finds typical of democratic societies is one particular example of the way in which democracy affects character.

Material well-being is a pleasure, and pleasures of various sorts, and the choices to be made among them, are traditional topics of the moralist. The problem of choosing which pleasures to pursue is important to Tocqueville. “Political liberty, from time to time, gives sublime pleasures to a certain number of citizens. Equality provides a multitude of small enjoyments at every moment.”¹⁰ The choice of pleasure is both an indication of character and a political choice. The study of the political consequences of character did not begin with Tocqueville—it is a central feature of Plato’s *Republic*—but Tocqueville is one of its most eminent modern practitioners. Tocqueville returns again and again in *Democracy* to the different forms that a particular taste or character trait takes in different social circumstances, as in the chapter of *Democracy* titled “Why in the United States you find so many ambitious men and so few great ambitions.”¹¹ Ambition is a constant of human nature, in some ways encouraged and in others discouraged in democratic societies. It is the business of the moralist to figure out how and why, and where it is good or bad.

But Tocqueville the moralist does not just analyze the democratic character. He does not merely wish to describe its psychology, or rather possible psychologies, because what he describes are always tendencies and impulses which are, or may in future be, balanced by other forces. Tocqueville wants to be the physician of democratic souls, not only their physiologist. In a passage in one of the notebooks from which he constructed *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville imagines himself as a lawgiver for a democratic people, trying to figure out ways in which he can prevent the all-powerful majority from engaging in tyranny. At the end of the passage he writes: “I understand that one serves the cause of democracy, but I want one to do so as a moral and independent being who retains the use of his liberty even as he lends his support.”¹² Tocqueville is simultaneously an independent spectator (a classic rhetorical pose of the moralist, as we will see) and an engaged participant.

⁹ The exception to this rule is Tocqueville’s *Recollections*, where he shows himself to be gifted in this art as well.

¹⁰ *Democracy*, 3:876.

¹¹ *Democracy*, 4:1117.

¹² *Democracy*, 3:723n.

For Tocqueville the moralist, politics and religion are levers which move the world and form its mores and morals. The political methods Tocqueville describes have been extensively debated and analyzed, the spiritual methods less so. This is partly because Tocqueville seems to spend more time talking about politics. The attention devoted to his social and political observations has obscured the moral dimension of this thought, even though his sociology and political science have a moral purpose. Indeed, for Tocqueville morals and politics effectively have the same purpose, a moral one: "After the general idea of virtue, I do not know any more beautiful than that of rights, or rather, these two ideas merge. The idea of rights is nothing more than the idea of virtue introduced into the political world."¹³

As a moralist Tocqueville discusses human nature in general, but far more often his analysis of character is tied to the social state in which he and his subjects find themselves, democracy. The second volume of *Democracy* is particularly rich in moral observations about democratic humanity. Its chapter titles present a catalogue of democratic vices and virtues, and the chapters themselves describe a moral battle in which desires for freedom, equality, and material well-being strive for moral mastery of the democratic soul, endeavoring to turn each other's strengths into weaknesses. All Tocqueville's work abounds in moral aphorisms and observations (once every ten pages or so in *Democracy*).¹⁴

Tocqueville expresses his views as a democratic moralist in two ways, logically distinguishable but not so easy to disentangle in his artfully constructed texts. He is both an outside observer and a participant in his society's moral struggles. Only the outsider can judge a democracy which considers every individual as one among equals, with no right or ability to pass judgment on the majority. His outsider pose allows Tocqueville to make recommendations without seeming to take sides, and to give his moral advice from an Olympian distance which conveys authority.¹⁵

As a participant/preacher/politician, however, Tocqueville urges people to behave in a certain way, to develop the kind of character that will make them great human beings who want to be free, and who are able to bear freedom once they have it. This is the moral purpose which drives all of Tocqueville's writing. Religion is crucial to this purpose because Tocqueville thinks religion an indispensable means of encouraging the development of great and free people in democratic societies. In this sense, he is not shy about giving religious advice. Tocqueville does not tell us how to save our souls, but he does tell us how religion can save democracy from moral degradation. Tocqueville's writings are guides to the political, social and spiritual means of preserving the moral dignity of humanity in democratic society. That is Tocqueville's new moral science.

¹³ *Democracy*, 2:389.

¹⁴ Laurence Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages de la démocratie* (Paris, 2004), 302n.62. Guellec also describes volume two of *Democracy* as Tocqueville's "*psychomachie*," a well-chosen term for those with sufficient knowledge of Classical culture, 301.

¹⁵ "The moralist never fully joins himself to the crowd. Even if only a little, he is always off to one side." Louis Van Delft, *Le moraliste classique* (Paris, 1982), 297.