

To be published in *Combining the Spirit of Religion and the Spirit of Liberty: Tocqueville's Thesis Revisited*, ed. Michael Zuckert (University of Chicago Press, 2015)

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On Faith and Democracy as a New Form of Religion: A Few Tocquevillian Reflections¹

“Faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority”

~ Tocqueville

I. A problem of liberal modernity?

Three decades ago, in his influential book *After Virtue* (1981), Alasdair MacIntyre advanced one of the most trenchant arguments against liberalism that has elicited a wide array of responses and heated debates. The values of economic and political liberalism, he argued, are based on (what he called) an emotivist and relativist culture which uncritically celebrates the total autonomy of the individual will and slowly leads to the gradual but inevitable decomposition of the social fabric. The main culprit, in MacIntyre's view, is liberal individualism, the dominant doctrine of the last three centuries that shapes our norms and beliefs and has had a strong influence upon our social institutions and values. As society becomes atomized, so the story goes, it eventually turns into a mere “collection of citizens of nowhere,”² detached from each other and pursuing interests that are often at odds with the common good. “The barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers,” MacIntyre warned his readers, “they have already been governing us for quite some time and it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament.”³

MacIntyre's critique of liberal modernity still resonates today and the debate seems unlikely to be settled anytime soon. In an interesting exchange published in the August 2012 issue of *First Things*, Patrick Deneen reiterated some of MacIntyre's concerns when arguing that liberalism is unsustainable in a fundamental respect.⁴ "The first revolution, and the most basic and distinctive aspect of liberalism," Deneen argued, "is to base politics upon the idea of voluntarism—the free, unfettered, and autonomous choice of individuals" seen as radically independent and autonomous persons who can choose to engage in legitimate social relations only based upon their explicit consent. By grounding all relationships between autonomous individuals in a voluntaristic logic, liberalism, in Deneen's view, cannot enforce order and is unable to constitute social norms needed to sustain the practice and experience of self-governance in local communities. Neither MacIntyre nor Deneen seem to believe that this is a uniquely American phenomenon and they both criticize liberalism generally, often referring to the "liberal project."⁵ They view what they take to be the modern predicament as an expression of liberalism's deeply individualistic roots which illustrate, in turn, the distinctively modern anthropological individualism, characterized by a clear preference for individual autonomy and a deep-seated skepticism toward any form of self-limitation and self-restraint.

Individualism, negatively perceived, has long been a concern of those skeptical of individual autonomy and liberal thought in general. It might be useful to remember that this protean concept was invented in the crucible of post-Revolutionary France as the country was making its swift transition to modern industrial society. As Konraad Swart showed in a path-breaking article published five decades ago, the perplexing variety of meanings associated with individualism and the present-day confusion about its real meaning have an interesting history

which dates back to the nineteenth century when the word was invented.⁶ Individualism was then a term simultaneously used to designate the political doctrine associated with the rights of man, the economic doctrine of *laissez-faire* liberalism, and the cult of Romantic or Protestant individualism, sometimes bound up with a radical rejection of the *status quo*. Often, the three were related to each other. Some like Joseph de Maistre attributed the evils associated to political liberalism to the French Revolution and Protestantism which they took to task for furthering the atomization of society. Others like Marx denounced individualism for being the engine of economic liberalism and, as such, the main culprit for the large-scale disruption and alienation brought forth by modern capitalism. Most of these critiques shared the view that individualism is responsible for the waning of traditional social structures, values, and norms and thus is a serious threat to political and social order.

This story has already been told and it is relatively well-known. What some describe in term of a loss of traditional norms and values has been characterized by others as a step toward full individual autonomy, liberated from the shackles and constraints of an older hierarchical world. What we would like to do here is to emphasize a counter-narrative about liberal democracy's relationship to individualism by using the insights of two leading representatives of nineteenth-century French social and political thought whose writings have rarely been connected to each other. To examine the relationship between democracy, individualism, authority, and religion we focus on Abbé de Lamennais's critique of individualism and Tocqueville's analysis of democratic life between which, as we shall demonstrate, one can find a number of important affinities and differences. By juxtaposing Tocqueville's views on democratic individualism with those held by a major critic of modern liberal democracy such as

Lamennais, we seek to demonstrate that Tocqueville departs from him in both his diagnosis of the democratic problem (the perils of individualism) and his proposed solution (“civil” religion). Whereas Lamennais believed that the essential problem of democracy was the erosion of authority and that a primary task of modern life was to re-establish it by means of “true” religion, Tocqueville demonstrated how a new form of authority emerges in modern democratic society and how this democratic authority is self-generating and tends to become all-powerful, requiring proper limitation, not reinforcement. We also show how Tocqueville, long rightly seen as a critic of individualism and egoism, critiques them while also showing that individualism does not prevent the establishment of a new form of “religion” *sui generis* along with a new form of conformity to common opinion. That conformity unthinkingly celebrates mass opinion and the core tenets of democratic life: equality and individual autonomy. Tocqueville claimed that these democratic values and principles are held so unquestioningly that individualism produces a faith in democracy that takes on the characteristics of a new form of “religion.” While Lamennais assumed that genuine belief in Christianity was central to any solution to indifference and atomization, Tocqueville held a more complex view by which he praised democratically modified forms of traditional religion while also noticing that belief in them, like the belief in democratic values themselves, was essentially dogmatic.

In the first part of our paper, we draw upon and extend the pioneering work of Lucien Jaume on Tocqueville’s analysis of democracy as a new form of religion.⁷ In the second part of our essay, we show how the rise of individualism triggers a shift in the nature of religion in modern society by dint of which traditional attributes of religion such as hope, transcendence, and belief are transferred from the otherworld to democracy itself (and, sometimes, to its organ

of power, the state). In the final section, we explore a tension at the heart of Tocqueville's analysis of religion in America that sheds fresh light on the original theme of this essay, the relationship between individualism, authority, and democratic religion.

II. Authority and individualism in liberal democratic society

It is not a mere accident that the term *individualisme* gained wide currency in Saint-Simonian circles in 1820s France, as the country was making its belated transition from feudalism into modern capitalism. Konraad Swart traced back the first usage to an issue of *Le Producteur, journal de l'industrie, des sciences et des beaux-arts* in 1826.⁸ Within a few years, the term “*individualisme*” came to be seen as a metaphor for the disintegration of society and was employed by a variety of authors writing from different ideological and methodological perspectives to express dissatisfaction with the post-revolutionary order. The denunciation of individualism was a major trope in the writings of many critics of democracy who claimed that its principles erode authority and produce anarchic individualism.

Due to the excellent scholarship published in the last several decades, it is now well-established that Tocqueville was quite familiar with conservative critics of the liberal democracy, including Lamennais. While he disagreed with their overall assessment of political democracy, he paid special attention to one of their key concerns: the fate of authority in democratic times. Conservative critics of democracy worried that the new form of democratic individualism was subverting social and moral authority, paving the way to anomie and anarchy. Tocqueville took distance from these criticisms while giving voice to his own concerns. Unlike those opponents of liberalism who thought that individualism would erode communal ideals and was therefore inherently schismatic, dissociative, and unsustainable, Tocqueville argued that democratic

individualism is bound to create new and powerful forms of authority that restrain and limit the individual will, though not always in salutary ways. He also added that individualism, somewhat paradoxically, feeds into and ultimately promotes the power of mass opinion. Rather than undermining authority, individualism recreates it on a new basis.

As Lucien Jaume demonstrated, the intellectual dialogue between Félicité Robert de Lamennais (1782–1854) and Tocqueville is helpful for understanding the latter's views on authority in modern democracy. Lamennais was the author of several notable books and one of the most vocal Catholic writers in France in the early nineteenth century. Although he admired some of the ideas of ultra-conservatives such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, he was closer to the French liberal Catholics.⁹ For some time, he edited *l'Avenir*, an influential journal best remembered today for its unforgettable motto “God and Liberty.”¹⁰ His most important work was the four-volume *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (1817-1824), which earned him the reputation of the new Bossuet and a visit to the Vatican in 1824, where he was received warmly by Pope Leo XII (the relations with the Vatican would deteriorate later).¹¹ Among those who became particularly close to Lamennais were two distinguished liberal Catholics, the young Count Charles de Montalembert and Father Henri Lacordaire, who would succeed Tocqueville at the *Académie Française* in 1861. The encyclical of Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, issued in 1832 was critical of Lamennais's ideas, and signaled how far apart Lamennais and his former friends at the Vatican had become. Lamennais further radicalized his ideas in his *Paroles d'un croyant* (1834), signaling his complete rupture with the official Church. Despite his differences with the Holy See he was never formally excommunicated (he would still consider himself Catholic in 1836).¹²

Lamennais published his early and best known work, *Essay on the Indifference towards Religious Matters* between 1817 and 1824. Tocqueville certainly knew of the work and of Lamennais because he sent the latter a copy of Volume One of *Democracy in America* (1835) with a letter in which he wrote that “no one professes deeper respect or warmer admiration for your character and writings than I.”¹³ Despite some hint of disingenuous flattery characteristic of a young author desirous of gaining public approval for his first book, the thematic connection between the two authors suggests that Tocqueville did in fact learn a great deal from Lamennais’s work.

The *Essay* provides a thorough critique of modern individualism. It begins with a description of the profound transformation at work in modern society the roots of which can be traced back to Descartes and the *philosophes*. Lamennais critiqued the philosophical and individualistic foundations of modernity that, in his mind, paved the way for universal doubt and social anarchy. He decried the waning of sacred principles and fixed laws along with the disappearance of what he called *public reason*. More generally, he lamented the instability of public institutions and moral life, which produced a culture of doubt and uncertainty.¹⁴ Lamennais believed that the social and political chaos manifested by the surrounding social and political institutions mirrored the moral disorder and the disintegrating effects triggered by the belief according to which individual reason and will ought to be seen as the sole criterion of truth. Where every individual becomes his own law, the rational consequence, Lamennais argued, is widespread anarchy. In reality, he insisted, individual reason is always inferior to social reason and must unconditionally submit to it: “Authority, or the general reason, or what all men are agreed upon, is the rule for governing the judgments of the individual man.”¹⁵ Once *la*

raison publique—that is, the mixture of traditions, customs, social knowledge, and precepts that govern social interaction—is destroyed, there is nothing that can prevent or diminish the confusion between truth and falsehood. This explains, according to him, the growing chaos in society and the predominant uncertainty in ideas, doctrines, and institutions.¹⁶ Under these circumstances, the people become restless and confused and, in an attempt to rid themselves of the fear of living in darkness and uncertainty, they come to espouse “terrible beliefs”¹⁷ which can only bring about spurious and false certitudes.

Lamennais saw all these changes as nefarious consequences of the existence of a few principles of division at the core of the new democratic society which he denounced in unambiguous terms. Two philosophies, he claimed, compete for supremacy in the modern world: one of them tends to bring people together while the other separates and isolates them. The first protects individuals by integrating the individual into social norms, while the second contributes to the slow destruction of society by reducing everything social norms to corrosive individual judgement. The first principle emphasizes generality, authority, common beliefs, and duties to a universal and invariable law; the second principle emphasizes particularity, individual interests, and independence. In the individualistic mindset, duties are subordinated to rights and general norms and beliefs to individual opinion. Each individual conceives himself as self-sufficient and autonomous and obeys only the laws he has prescribed himself, considering his individual reason as the sole ground of certitude. Once this process of individualization of society unfolds, it is irreversible and leads to general anarchy. As a result, Lamennais argued, the very existence of society is gradually called into question, as constant change and pervasive social mobility tend to undermine established traditions, customs, social norms, ways of life, and mores.¹⁸

This idea can be found in an important text of Lamennais from 1825 which predates and anticipates to some extent Tocqueville's analysis of democracy. The character of modern democracy, Lamennais remarked, is constant mobility. Everything changes at a terrifying speed following and reflecting the incessant evolution of passions, opinions, and interests. Not surprisingly, the institutions and laws themselves are in permanent flux, thus contributing further to the acceleration of social and political life.¹⁹ In Lamennais's view, the driving forces behind this profound transformation are extreme individualism, doubt, and religious indifference. Doubt, he opined, contributes to the erosion of "a common fund of recognized truths, proclaimed rights, and a general order which nobody imagined could be turned upside down."²⁰ Today, Lamennais continued, all links between individuals are broken and man finds himself alone, a mere monad surrounded by many other free floating monads, separated from each other. Faith in the existence (or possibility) of a common good has disappeared and individuals no longer know what to do and what to believe in. They move in too many directions at once and their actions create universal disorder and instability in opinions and institutions.²¹ As such, Lamennais confidently claimed, the root of evil has a new name and face: it is an extreme form of individualism and the undisputed reign of individual will which recognizes no other authority than itself.²²

The numerous references to *la raison sociale*, a key concept in Lamennais's works, are far from accidental and deserve more attention in the present context. As we have seen, he believed that the attacks upon and the extinction of social reason would, in the end, lead to social disintegration and anarchy. To avoid the latter, he believed that modern individuals must acknowledge the existence of a "social reason" superior to—and placed above—their individual wills. While elevating the social reason above its individual counterpart, Lamennais did not

condemn the latter in the same way as Joseph de Maistre or Louis de Bonald had done before him by taking Protestantism (broadly defined) to task for creating all the evils in modern society. Lamennais condemned first and foremost the universal drive to absolute individual independence and autonomy, a tendency which, he believed, went beyond the borders of Protestantism—it could be found in Rousseau as well— and applied to the entire modern world.²³ In Lamennais's view, this extreme form of individualism was threatening to corrupt society and destroy the set of common doctrines and the principle of unity without which no society could properly function.

Lamennais concluded that, in order to survive and prosper, modern society needs a new form of authority capable of keeping the emerging intellectual anarchy at bay. He tried to imagine the possibility of a new form of authority in modern democratic societies capable of tempering and restraining individuals' wills while providing genuine certitude. A central piece of that authority, in his mind, was the belief in what he called "true religion." Authority, Lamennais insisted, is "the general means offered to people to discern the true religion" which relies upon "the greatest visible authority."²⁴ All philosophies, he went on, lead to universal doubt and, as such, they tend to subvert authority. And yet, Lamennais added, absolute doubt is "impossible for man," and human reason, when letting itself be guided only by skepticism and doubt, places human beings into a state contrary to their nature, since the latter itself is "the force to believe."²⁵ We all start our lives by obeying and cannot stray away from this path. In the absence of the ideas we are bound to receive without questioning, Lamennais concluded, we would fall into powerlessness and would be unable to think or act properly.

At first glance, there seems to be much that brings Tocqueville and Lamennais together, both in their diagnosis of the pathologies of democracy and also in their use of religion as a

solution to the problems of liberal democracy. They held, however, different opinions about the nature of democracy and the relationship between the democracy, individualism, and religion. A former student of Guizot whose lectures on the history of civilization in Europe he assiduously followed in 1828, Tocqueville sought to unearth the historical roots of the progress of democracy understood as a progressive equalization of conditions. In an unpublished note, Tocqueville offers the following account of this process. “In the Middle Ages,” he wrote, “it was believed that all opinions had to follow from authority” and that philosophy took “the characteristics of a religion.” In the eighteenth century, “the extreme of the opposite state was reached” and people claimed “to appeal for all things only to individual reason and to chase dogmatic beliefs away entirely.”²⁶ The situation began to change at the outset of the nineteenth century. Today, Tocqueville added, “the movement still continues in the minds of a second order, but the others understand and accept that received beliefs and discovered beliefs, authority and liberty, individualism and social force are needed at the very same time. The whole question is to decide the limits of these two things.”²⁷ While Tocqueville and Lamennais disagreed about the nature of the proper limits, they did agree to some extent on the phenomenon of individualism that required limitation.

On many points, Tocqueville’s analysis of the pathologies of modern life seems very similar to that of Lamennais. In a note to the opening chapter on the philosophical method of the Americans, Tocqueville describes the ultimate consequences of this change in a tone that reminds us of Lamennais’s critical diagnosis of modern society as increasingly devoid of true authority. Tocqueville points out the “general revolt against all authority,” which he equates with the “attempt to appeal to individual reason in all things.”²⁸ He then goes on to add that, while this

“essentially democratic” phenomenon had begun in the eighteenth century, it takes a much more radical form in the age of democracy, when conditions are becoming increasingly equal. This is important because it makes possible, somewhat paradoxically, a new form of servitude in the age of democracy that he calls soft despotism. One of the consequences of the rise of individualism, in Tocqueville’s (and Lamennais’s) view is that each individual becomes accustomed to having “only confused and changing notions” on the fundamental questions regarding personal and social life. Individual opinions tend to be, for the most part, poorly defended and easily abandoned, and one sees the authority of former beliefs challenged, eroded, or destroyed without being replaced by anything similar. Tocqueville was anxious about this “intellectual anarchy” and commented on the negative consequences of the spread of a new form of skepticism which, he believed, was a bad omen for the future: “We see on this point more disorder than we will ever see.”²⁹ Although he refers here to disorder rather than indifference as Lamennais had done before, it is accurate to say that the overall social and moral condition that concerns Tocqueville was the same intellectual vacuum denounced in Lamennais’s *Essai sur l’indifférence en matière de religion*.

Tocqueville and Lamennais also shared a similar concern that commercial democratic society could become entirely absorbed in material affairs and would neglect the spiritual and transcendent aspects of life. They both traced in part the democratic tendency to selfish solipsism to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, although they differed in their general assessment of the latter. These themes are all quite apparent in the beginning of Volume Two of *Democracy*. There Tocqueville famously begins with the philosophic, Cartesian method of the Americans which seeks all truth “by yourself and in yourself alone” and appeals to the “individual effort of their

own intellect.”³⁰ These concerns are echoed and deepened in Tocqueville’s chapter on “Individualism in Democratic Countries”, where he laments and seeks to counter the tendency of democratic life to produce the habits of “withdraw[al] to the side with his family and his friends, so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself” and “encloses him within the solitude of his own heart.”³¹ In sum, although there were important differences between their understanding of democracy and individualism, both Tocqueville and Lamennais feared that democracy, if left unchecked, would produce social disintegration, civic apathy, and extreme privatization such that the social interests of citizens would be restricted to the narrow circle of their families and friends..

But the confluence between Lamennais and Tocqueville only goes so far, both in their analysis of democratic pathologies and in their recommended solutions. It is true that Tocqueville thought that individualism was a dangerous tendency of democratic modernity, but his analysis of individualism feeds into his deeper concern about democratic conformity, a topic not examined by Lamennais. It is in his analysis of democratic conformity that Tocqueville reveals his original genius and offers a different analysis of the democratic predicament than Lamennais. In the first volume of *Democracy*, Tocqueville expressed his deep worry that the loss of secondary bodies and the tendency of democracy to engender mass politics would produce a tyranny of the majority that would exclude dissent and restrain free thought. In the United States, he famously claimed, there is less freedom of the mind than anywhere else. These concerns are repeated and amplified in Volume Two of *Democracy* where, in the second chapter, Tocqueville explains how a culture with an individualistic Cartesian mindset does not produce the intellectual independence which Lamennais feared, but a paradoxical conformity to mass opinion. In an

unpublished note, Tocqueville remarks that “it is to the mass alone that each individual hands over the care of forming for him opinions that he cannot form for himself on a great number of matters.”³² He further writes that “as citizens become more equal and more similar, the tendency of each blindly to believe a certain man or a certain class decreases. The disposition to believe the mass increases, and more and more it is opinion that leads the world.”³³ While Lamennais feared the dissolution of all beliefs and the rise of intellectual anarchy, Tocqueville’s analysis reveals that he thought no such dissolution and intellectual anarchy would occur. Rather, it is likely that democratic times would have greater conformity than aristocratic centuries. This is a striking reversal.

Tocqueville’s concern about democratic conformity reveals how his analysis of democratic modernity departs from Lamennais on another crucial topic: the nature of authority in modern society. If Tocqueville’s primary lenses of analysis of democracy were equality and liberty, as Lucien Jaume has convincingly demonstrated, the fate of authority in modern times was also of great interest to him. Lamennais thought that the danger in democratic times was the erosion of authority and the ensuing intellectual confusion and anarchy. Tocqueville, on the other hand, thought that authority is always located (and found) somewhere, since the inflexible law of the human condition is such that man cannot form all his opinions by himself. Individuals are “always be brought and held together by some principal ideas; and that cannot happen without each one of them coming at times to draw his opinions from the same source and consenting to receive a certain number of ready-made beliefs.”³⁴ Without such beliefs, Tocqueville wrote, “there are no common beliefs and consequently no common action; so they are necessary to society.”³⁵

In spite of the fact that a democracy that promotes individual autonomy and choice seems to be contrary to dogmatic beliefs, individuals living in democratic times have neither time nor strength of mind necessary to develop their own opinions on all the matters that are of interest to them. Hence, they are led to rely on ready-made opinions that they “receive on trust and without discussion.”³⁶ As such, Tocqueville explained, “dogmatic beliefs are supports necessary for the weakness of men. ... A belief is an instrument that you have not fabricated yourself, but that you use because you lack the time to look for something better.”³⁷ Dogmatic beliefs, necessary at all times, are also found in democracy. “So no matter what happens, authority must always be found somewhere in the intellectual and moral world. Its place is variable, but it necessarily has a place. [...] Thus, the question is not to know if an intellectual authority exists in democratic centuries, but only to know where its repository is and what extent it will be.”³⁸ Since authority is no longer found in aristocratic persons, the danger in democratic times, in Tocqueville’s mind, is that there would be no other source of authority than a monolithic and potentially intolerant mass opinion. On this view, the danger of democratic times is not, as Lamennais thought, corrosive individualism and indifference toward religion, but the fact that individualism feeds into the power of mass opinion and undermines freedom of thought, empowering the majority to do as it will, and endangering the rights of minorities. For Tocqueville, unlike Lamennais, the problem of modernity is not simply that individualism erodes authority and subverts order; it is rather the fact that it is ultimately coevil with the problem of *too much* authority and order.

III. Democracy as a new faith and form of “religion”

But what kind of authority is bound to emerge in democratic times and why would it be detrimental to individual liberty? Is authority in the strong sense of the word even possible in a

democratic society composed of free and independent individuals who instinctively apply the philosophical precepts of Descartes to their daily choices? If so, what would be the foundation of certainty in such a society? Tocqueville's answers to these questions are derived from his views on individualism and religion and his reflections on the choice between liberty and equality facing individuals in democratic societies.³⁹ It is worth noting the type of language Tocqueville chose to describe the new authority in democratic times. He notes that the foundational tenets of democracy—the autonomy of the individual, the equality of all—are often held in ways analogous to religious belief and with the same fervor. It is not a mere coincidence that Tocqueville sometimes employs quasi-religious vocabulary to describe the nature of authority in democratic life, using terms such as the majority as “prophet” and the state as a “shepherd of the flock.” In his view, democracy not only is capable of eroding traditional forms of religious belief, it can itself become the simulacrum of traditional religion.

This religious terminology comes fully to light in Volume Two of *Democracy in America*, where Tocqueville explores the consequences of the appearance of new forms of democratic authority. Democracy's primary beliefs are held religiously insofar as they resemble tenets of faith, generate fervent emotions, and become sources of general meaning.⁴⁰ Individuals place all their hopes in the possibility of democracy itself, and the government, the organ that fulfills democratic longings, becomes the source of hope and the divine shepherd that guides the flock.⁴¹ At the same time that democracy becomes more akin to a religion, it “extricate[s] religion from [traditional] forms, practices, and figures, as men become more democratic.”⁴² But while democratic faith replaces traditional faith, it inherits and carried on a number of its characteristics. Democracy is not simply the movement from faith to secularism but the transfer

of hopes, longings, and beliefs from one sphere to another.⁴³ Against the background of the gradual erosion and displacement of traditional institutions and practices in modern society, democratic principles and values acquire a new status and image. In democratic societies, the new form of faith in equality and public opinion grants an aura of sacredness to the majority by investing the latter with the attributes of a powerful “prophet” that is the source of the solution to mankind’s problems. The wisdom and reason of the majority represent now the hope and democratic promise to ease suffering and produce freedom and well-being.

As Patrick Deneen remarked, this quasi-religious symbolism of democracy, a powerful and seductive combination of sacred language, belief in progress, and secular hope in the universality of democratic principles has been a constant feature of the American political discourse on democracy whose roots can be traced back to Walt Whitman.⁴⁴ This was anticipated by Tocqueville himself who, unlike the great American poet, drew mixed conclusions. In the final chapter of Volume One of *Democracy*, he describes the new republican religion as follows:

In the United States, the religion of the greatest number itself is republican; it subjects the truths of the other world to individual reason, as politics relinquishes to the good sense of all the responsibility for the interests of this one; and it agrees that each man should freely take the path that will lead him to heaven, in the same way that the law recognizes the right of each citizen to choose his government.⁴⁵

As Tocqueville himself acknowledges, “religion itself reigns there much less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion.”⁴⁶ He elaborates on this point in a long and very interesting note (which he chose not to include in the final text) where he distinguishes between “true” religion

and the new democratic religion in which the majority enjoys virtually absolute power.

Tocqueville writes:

A religion is a power whose movements are regulated in advance and that moves within a known sphere, and many people believe that within this sphere its effects are beneficial, and that a dogmatic religion better manages to obtain the desirable effects of a religion than one that is rational. The majority is a (illegible word) power that moves in a way haphazardly and can spread successively to everything. *Religion is law, the omnipotence of the majority is arbitrariness.*⁴⁷

The problem identified by Tocqueville is that the new form of democratic faith, based simultaneously on the authority of the individual and the infallible authority of collective opinion, contains within itself the potential seeds of arbitrariness and despotism. Hence, he believes that it must be countervailed by traditional religions and dogmas that rely on a different type of authority and place the object of man's desires beyond and above the goods of this world.

In another revealing note written for the same chapter (*Of the Principal Source of Beliefs among Democratic Peoples*), Tocqueville stressed the link between traditional forms of religion and modern democratic faith as follows:

New sources of beliefs. Authority. Sources of beliefs among democratic peoples. To put in, before or after the chapters in which I treat the influence of equality on philosophy and religion. Religion—authority. Philosophy—liberty. What is happening in the United States in the matter of religion is proof of this. (Illegible word) difficulty for men to stop at common ideas. Remedy for that in the future. This difficulty is something more *revolutionary* than *democratic*.⁴⁸

The equation between religion and authority in this passage is as striking as that between philosophy and liberty. The two concepts must, of course, be interpreted metaphorically, as demonstrated by another important note, in which Tocqueville explains: “By philosophy I mean all that the individual discovers by the individual effort of his reason. By religion I mean all that he accepts without discussing it. So philosophy and religion are two natural antagonists. ... Philosophy is needed and religions are needed.”⁴⁹ Liberty and authority, he writes in yet another note, “will always divide the intellectual world into two parts. These two parts will be more or less unequal depending on the centuries. Authority can be exercised in the name of one certain power or in the name of another; but authority itself will continue to exist.”⁵⁰

What Tocqueville emphasizes in these fascinating notes is that all societies—and, above all, democratic ones—need a balance between what he called “religion” (that is, authority) and “philosophy” (that is, liberty), both of which are essential to the preservation of liberty and pluralism. If one were to prevail at the expense of the other, society would succumb either to despotism or anarchy. The question that preoccupies Tocqueville is whether or not modern democracy can offer such a happy marriage between authority and liberty, or, to use his terms again, between “religion” and “philosophy.” Depending on the fate of this union, liberty or servitude would prevail in modern society. Viewed from this perspective, the new forms of democratic authority that are held analogously to religious beliefs need to be moderated. Paradoxically it is traditional religion that balances democratic faith. Traditional religion must balance faith in democracy in order for the latter to survive and go forward.

This complex balancing is both demonstrated and complicated by a seminal note of Tocqueville that deserves to be quoted in full:

Faith in common opinion is the faith of democratic nations. The majority is the prophet; you believe it without reasoning. You follow it confidently without discussion. It exerts an immense pressure on individual intelligence. The moral dominion of the majority is perhaps called to replace traditional religion to a certain point or to perpetuate certain ones of them, if it protects them. *But then religion would live more like common opinion than like religion.* Its strength would be more borrowed than its own. All this can be supported by the example of the Americans. Men will never be able to deepen all their ideas by themselves. That is contrary to their limited nature. The most (illegible word) and the most free genius believes a million things on the faith of others. So *moral authority* no matter what you do must be found somewhere in the moral world. Its place is variable, but a place is necessary for it. Man needs to believe dogmatically a host of things, were it only to have the time to discuss a few others of them. This authority is principally called *religion* in aristocratic centuries. It will perhaps be named *majority* in democratic centuries, or rather *common opinion*.⁵¹

There are many possible interpretations of this fragment and we would like to emphasize only one for the moment. The implication of Tocqueville's view is that democracy should not be interpreted as an exit from religion, but rather as an avatar or metamorphosis of religion broadly defined.⁵² Tocqueville is ambivalent about this development and he is far from sanguine about it. He notes that democratic individuals are expected "to believe without reasoning" and notes that the new democratic faith becomes faith in equality and public opinion understood as the voice of the majority. As such, these dogmatic beliefs accepted without individual consent become the

locus of the new moral authority in democracy. There is a deep irony or contradiction here that does not escape Tocqueville's perceptive eye. He sees that this democratic faith is needed but he is not sure whether this is the best form of faith that serves the cause of democracy in the long term. What makes the American case so interesting and puzzling is that the American democracy seems to self-regulate through its own internal contradictions. We explore this idea in the next section in which we turn to the dilemmas of what we call Tocqueville's religious "functionalism."

IV. The dilemmas of Tocqueville's religious "functionalism"

Tocqueville predicted that in an age of increasing individualism in which true "individuality" is becoming rare, "faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority."⁵³ It would be a new faith that no longer seeks to leave the earth behind in search for a better world. "But then," he added, "religion would live more like common opinion than like religion."⁵⁴ This is a striking phrase which might help us understand how, in Tocqueville's view, the authority of revealed religion tends to be gradually replaced by the authority of public opinion in democratic societies.

Tocqueville felt uneasy about this transition and was not entirely optimistic about unconditional religious deference toward public opinion and its self-proclaimed prophet, the majority. He believed that the new democratic religion would certainly be different from the religions of the past. It would most likely fail to satisfy the deepest longings of those who crave for the revelation of a genuine *mysterium tremendum*; yet it will also be a powerful form of religion in keeping with the inclinations of the democratic mind. As Tocqueville explained, the sources of this new type of religion must be looked for in equality, an all-powerful principle in

democratic times commanding universal respect and allegiance. He saw, however, that the gradual tendency to replace traditional faith with belief in the infallibility of the majority was not inevitable and he thought that it could be effectively countered. In the United States, he noticed that traditional religion might act as a healthy antidote to some of the pernicious tendencies of democratic life, but that, in order to do so, it would be forced to make doctrinal and pastoral accommodations to the democratic spirit. But he also realized that religion in the United States was held more or less dogmatically largely because religious traditionalism was an inherited belief held with the same dogmatism with which the Americans believed in the majority. Paradoxically, the United States had been able to use traditional religion well to counter the new religion of democracy partially because it did so unthinkingly.

Tocqueville feared that religions which have as their object eternal truths might dilute their substance if they were to give in too much to the new democratic *Zeitgeist*.⁵⁵ In particular, he was concerned about the rise of pantheism in democratic societies, a concern which he expressed in the (short) seventh chapter of the first part of Volume Two of *Democracy in America*. It is no accident that the discussion of pantheism comes after two important chapters on the principal source of beliefs among democratic peoples and the Americans' preference for general ideas. By pantheism, Tocqueville did not have in mind the classical definition of this term, i.e. a doctrine that equates God with the forces and laws of the universe. The key observation he made was that in democratic times, people have a strong tendency to espouse general ideas and search for rules "applicable indiscriminately and in the same way to several matters at once."⁵⁶ Pantheism thus tends to become a popular doctrine in democratic societies because it mirrors and springs from the new egalitarian social condition. While promoting

equality and individual independence, the democratic *état social* tends to make individuals isolated and powerless and leads them to seek a compensation in general ideas and causes:

In centuries of equality, all men are independent of each other, isolated and weak; you see none whose will directs the movements of the crowd in a permanent fashion; in these times, humanity always seems to march by itself. So in order to explain what is happening in the world, you are reduced to searching for some general causes that, acting in the same way on each one of our fellows, therefore lead them all voluntarily to follow the same route. That also naturally leads the human mind to conceive general ideas and causes it to contract the taste for them.⁵⁷

Tocqueville then points out the disturbing implications of this powerful inclination that tends to make individuals obsessed with single causes and unity (at the expense of particularity) and leads them to embrace determinism. Firstly, pantheism represents a formidable if invisible threat to preserving liberty and human greatness in democratic societies. “Among the different systems by the aid of which philosophy seeks to explain the world,” Tocqueville opined, “pantheism seems to me the one most likely to seduce the human mind in democratic centuries. All those who remain enamored of the true grandeur of man must join forces and struggle against it.”⁵⁸ Secondly, pantheism tends to foster fatalism and thwarts (or denies) the people’s ability to change or reform the world in which they live because it attributes to individuals “almost *no influence* on the destiny of the species, or to citizens on the fate of the people.”⁵⁹ At the same time, it gives “great general causes to all the small particular facts” and tends to present all events as “linked together by a tight and necessary chain,” thus ending up “by *denying* nations

control over themselves and by contesting the liberty of having been able to do what they did.”⁶⁰ As such, thirdly, pantheism tends to foster uniformity and centralization of power among democratic peoples which have seen the principle of equality triumph among them.

Religions, Tocqueville argued, must always hold firm in this regard. They must not compromise with regard to the principal opinions that constitute their fundamental beliefs but they should be at the same time flexible enough with regard to the incidental notions which are linked to them. This middle ground seems to be his recipe for reconciling religion (authority) and philosophy (liberty) and for combating pantheism:

As men become more similar and more equal, it is more important for religions, while still keeping carefully out of the daily movement of affairs, not unnecessarily to go against generally accepted ideas and the permanent interests that rule the mass. ... In this way, by respecting all the democratic instincts that are not contrary to it and by using several of those instincts to help itself, religion *succeeds* in struggling with advantage against the spirit of *individual independence* that is the *most dangerous* of all to religion.⁶¹

The example of America also taught Tocqueville another important lesson about religion in democracy: it acts as a countervailing power to this-worldly attitudes, excessive individualism, and materialism that dominate democratic times. Tocqueville noticed how Americans are melancholy amidst their material abundance in part because universal competition opens up all avenues to everyone and increases the competition at the same time. As democracy tells everyone, in the spirit of equality, that there is no limit to one's right to pursue one's desires as long as they do not harm others, democratic life is bound to promote disappointment and

unhappiness when individuals realize that they cannot, in fact, achieve everything that democratic ideals promise them. “When all the prerogatives of birth and fortune are destroyed, when all the professions are open to everyone, and when you can reach the summit of each one of them on your own, an immense and easy career seems to open before the ambition of men, and they readily imagine that they are called to great destinies. But that is an erroneous view that experience corrects every day.”⁶² The main point here is not that democratic mass opinion tends to promote worldliness, materialism, and commercialism. It is that democracy engenders unlimited hope about its own ability to deliver widespread material abundance and social mobility that democratic institutions are rarely able to satisfy.⁶³

Hence, democratic faith needs to be “moderated” and purified of its excesses because the “dogmas” of democratic life alone, such as the autonomy of the will, the power of the individual, and the equality of all do not automatically engender universal bliss or happiness. Democratic faith itself produces a cycle of disappointment out of which it cannot escape. It oscillates between effusive optimism and dejected disappointment, promoting and feeding off of ceaseless restlessness. To shift the locus of transcendence from the divine to the majority, to put one’s full faith in democracy and its foundational assumptions is, according to Tocqueville, an error. The democratic faith and dogmas, even if the majority is their prophet, must be limited by countervailing tendencies which come from traditional religion.

Nonetheless, traditional religion can only combat materialism, commercialism, and social disintegration so long as it does not become fully captured by the democratic egalitarian spirit. “It must be recognized,” Tocqueville wrote, “that equality, which introduces great advantages into the world, nevertheless suggests, as will be shown below, very dangerous instincts to men; it

tends to isolate them from one another and to lead each one of them to be interested in himself alone. It opens their souls excessively to the love of material enjoyments. The greatest advantage of religions is to inspire entirely opposite instincts.”⁶⁴ When recommending religion as an antidote to commercial conformity, Tocqueville reveals, in fact, both his distance from Lamennais and the affinity with him. Certainly Tocqueville and Lamennais overlapped on their concern to preserve traditional religion in the democratic era, but they did so for significantly different reasons. Tocqueville thought that organized, institutional and traditional religion was a counterweight to the democratic tendencies of materialism, while Lamennais was above all concerned with the pernicious effects of individualism and the unlimited use of individual reason. Yet, both believed that in order to survive, liberal democracy must be spiritualized somehow. In an unpublished foreword to Volume Two of *Democracy*, Tocqueville included among the “principal objects” of his work his desire to “make them understand that democracy cannot give the happy fruits that they expect from it except by combining it with morality, spiritualism, beliefs.”⁶⁵ He also expressed similar sentiments early in Volume One when admiring how the Puritans admirably combined the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion, and thought that religion was “the most precious heritage of aristocratic centuries.”⁶⁶

While Tocqueville accepted the need for institutionalized religion as an antidote to democratic pathologies, he praised it primarily (though not exclusively!) for its *functional* value rather than because revealed Christianity was *the* true religion, as Lamennais argued. Tocqueville’s personal beliefs have been a subject of much speculation and are beyond the scope of this essay. He did not seem to have endorsed a conventional view of civil religion⁶⁷ and was critical of Catholic liberal parties. He took his distance from liberal Catholics such as Lacordaire

and Montalembert and criticized the papal hierarchy of Pope Pius I. Moreover, he had no place for dogmas such as the Immaculate Conception and never spoke about original sin in his works. Personally, he was plagued by inner doubt and terrified by it (along with old age, decrepitude, and illness). “If you know a recipe for belief,” Tocqueville wrote, “for God, give it to me. ... If will alone were sufficient for belief, I would have been devout a long time ago; or rather I would always have been devout, for doubt has always seemed to me the most unbearable of the ills of the world; I have constantly judged it to be worse than death and inferior only to illnesses.”⁶⁸

What is clear is that he embraced a rather nebulous form of spiritualism plagued by uncertainty and doubt. This was in stark contrast with Lamennais who was a believer and thought that Christianity was necessary for what it brought and also for the truth it contained. Tocqueville’s primary concern was with human liberty and greatness, and only secondarily with the truth content of the religious beliefs of the Americans. When discussing materialism Tocqueville’s first concern is not that it is false but that the doctrine is “pernicious.”⁶⁹ He goes even farther and claims that “Assuredly metempsychosis is not more reasonable than materialism; but if it were absolutely necessary for a democracy to make a choice between the two, I would not hesitate, and I would judge that citizens become brutalized less by thinking that their soul is going to pass into the body of a pig than by believing that it is nothing”.⁷⁰ All religions, even the “most false and dangerous ones” Tocqueville claims, lift man’s attention skyward, make him believe he is more than just material, and impose duties on him that take him out of himself.⁷¹

Nonetheless, Tocqueville did not think that every form of religious worship accomplished the goal properly. He noted that “there are very false and very absurd religions,”⁷² but did not go

into a debate about metaphysical truths. “I have neither the right nor the will to examine the supernatural means that God uses to make a religious belief reach the heart of man. At his moment I am envisaging religions only from a purely human viewpoint.”⁷³ He preferred to draw two distinctions, one about the content of beliefs, and one about religious practice. In terms of content, Tocqueville admonished religions to make doctrinal and pastoral concessions to the animating spirit of democratic life. He recommended, however, that they remain “within the limits that are appropriate to them and must not try to go beyond them,” thus refraining from commenting on political matters.⁷⁴ They should attempt instead to “purify” well-being but they should not seek to eradicate it. For this reason, he thought that Islam, and other forms of comprehensive religious practice, would face strong headwinds in democratic times. Democracy requires that religious doctrines conform to equality, and it also demands that religious practices lay less emphasis on obscurantist ritual. In that category, he originally was going to mention as examples indulgences, pilgrimages and relics, but he changed his mind later.

At the same time, Tocqueville thought that communal practices and rituals are important in limiting the excesses of individualism in democratic societies. He claimed that he “firmly believe[s] in the necessity of forms” and drew a distinction between institutionalized, regularized, and ritualized religion as opposed to episodic, de-ritualized religion characteristic of bucolic gatherings in the West during the Second Great Awakening.⁷⁵ Throughout the second volume of *Democracy*, Tocqueville contrasted two sets of religious contexts. The first is the traditional Christian service, whether Catholic or Protestant, broadly conceived. The second are unorthodox forms of democratic worship, such as spontaneous gatherings in the western woods or forms of mysticism. What distinguishes the traditional practice from the bucolic spiritual

gatherings is that man's religious impulse is filtered through what Tocqueville calls *formes*, a word which is close to a shorthand for *formalités*, the idea that there are sanctioned rules and practices for religious worship and social interaction. While those formalities can degenerate into obscurantism, Tocqueville insists that formalized worship encourages more sophisticated and durable forms of religious practice. The democratic ethos scorns formalities and wants an immediate, direct experience of the divine. Americans do not care, for instance, about the "details of worship."⁷⁶ They tend to believe that iconography hides rather than illuminates. True to his Cartesian subjectivity, democratic man thinks the direct spiritual experience more meaningful and true than one filtered through conventional religious authorities. Tocqueville was perfectly happy if this religious impulse for immediacy remained within the broad confines of traditional Christian worship. The number of Protestant sects in America did not worry him at all.⁷⁷

His main concern was what might happen when the desire for immediacy and directness manages to completely break loose from traditional religious contexts. This is when democracy gives rise to "bizarre sects ... that open extraordinary roads to eternal happiness," "religious follies," and "mysticism."⁷⁸ Tocqueville does not deny that man can have a direct and meaningful experience of the divine outside of a traditional service, or that all meaningful spiritual practices are only transmitted through hierarchy. Tocqueville himself had an unstructured religious experience in the wilderness of Michigan. The central point is that these forms of worship are not durable and do not establish stable religious contexts that more permanently structure man's religiosity. Religion "is the one [area] in which it is most difficult for each person, left to himself, to come to fix his ideas solely by the effort of his reason."⁷⁹ The

solitary experience of the divine does not provide answers to “primordial questions” that are “very enduring.”⁸⁰ They give rise to “confused and changing notions.”⁸¹

His concern, then, is that extreme democratic forms of religiosity cannot give rise to fixed and stable ideas but “delivers all [man’s] actions to change and condemns them to a sort of disorder and impotence.”⁸² Since the unorthodox religious experience is much more fluid and indeterminate, it is more easily co-opted by democratic fads. Rather than acting as a regularized oppositional force to democratic life, it is merely a cesura that has little lasting effect. Therefore, when Tocqueville says that religion poses a “salutary yoke on the intellect” and stops the “free ascent of the mind in all directions,”⁸³ what he means is that a traditional religious context aids us in formulating our questions about the divine and in structuring and regularizing our religious practice. Tocqueville’s concern, as opposed to Lamennais and Maistre, is not that the world is going to become completely atheistic if man starts asking “forbidden” questions and asserts his individual will. Tocqueville thinks man is by nature a religious animal and will always exhibit and search for one form of spirituality or another. The real question for him is whether spiritual practices will be bizarre, idiosyncratic, and sporadic with little lasting effect, or whether democratic man’s spiritual life will be more sophisticated and effective. The answer to this question, in his view depends on the extent to which man’s spiritual life is regularized and institutionalized in traditional and durable religious communities and contexts.

Tocqueville wondered whether structured and traditional forms of Christian religious life could be maintained against the advance and power of democratic norms and values. If left unchecked, democratic faith, he feared, would subsume and completely replace traditional faith. He worried that institutionalized, ritualized religion would either be entirely subsumed into the

democratic movement or displaced by idiosyncratic forms of democratic spiritualism. On the latter point, Tocqueville's experience of democracy in America convinced him that mysticism, religious communitarianism, and other forms of ecstatic but episodic religions might take on greater prominence in democratic centuries.⁸⁴ Following Pascal, he professed his appreciation for a religious "middle" between the "angel" and the "beast," along with his admiration for the English, a people famous for its middlingness even in religious matters.⁸⁵ While Tocqueville believed that overall political liberty enlivens religious passions more than it extinguishes them, and that free institutions are often the natural and, sometimes, indispensable instruments of religious passions, he was concerned about the effect of extreme religious passions as much as about the propensity toward an extreme detachment from earthly passions (as preached by Thomas à Kempis, the author of *The Imitation of Jesus-Christ*). In Tocqueville's view, in America, the passing of time and the increase of well-being had deprived the religious element of three-quarters of its original strength. This was, Tocqueville believed, a natural phenomenon that could not be arrested or reversed in modern society. Once political liberty is well established and operates in a peaceful environment, it encourages people to pursue and develop a taste for well-being that eventually diminishes and may even extinguish religious passions.

At the same time, Tocqueville worried that religious pulpits would simply be the mouthpiece of all democratic values, but he did not think that, for that matter, religion should be anti-democratic as it happened in France during the Old Regime. "As men become more similar and more equal," Tocqueville wrote,

It is more important for religions, while still keeping carefully out of the daily movement of affairs, not unnecessarily to go against generally accepted ideas and

the permanent interests that rule the mass. ... In this way, by respecting all the democratic instincts that are not contrary to it and by using several of those instincts to help itself, religion *succeeds* in struggling with advantage against the spirit of *individual independence* that is the *most dangerous* of all to religion.⁸⁶

For religion to act effectively as a counterweight to the self-defeating tendencies of democracy, it needs much more than ritual and structure and must avoid the pitfalls of pantheism. In other words, it must preach beliefs that are not simply spiritual analogs of commercialism and individualism. This, Tocqueville surmised, was no easy task in a conformist environment like America where, he thought, religion is believed and practiced more because it is a mass opinion and phenomenon than because of its intrinsic doctrinal content.

This is where Tocqueville's views on religion become paradoxical. The belief in the equality of all is a new democratic faith supported by common opinion in such a way that it takes on the trappings of a religion, and religion itself, the very thing meant to counter the pernicious tendencies of democracy, is also believed because it is mass opinion. There is, he feared, a certain degree of hypocrisy in American religious belief and practice: it is done because it is what people do. "You are free to think that a certain number of Americans, in the worship they give to God, follow their habits more than their convictions. In the United States, moreover, the sovereign is religious, and consequently hypocrisy must be common."⁸⁷ American public opinion then contains an internal inconsistency of which it is not fully aware: it is a form of dogma that has political or functional value only so long as it is believed.⁸⁸ Tocqueville saw the mass opinion which favored religious institutions and practices as beneficial. But if that is the case, Tocqueville might have seen religion more as a salutary myth, beneficial only so long as it is

believed, and it is “believed” only because being religious in America is a form of acquiescence to social pressure. To the extent that democratic mass opinion in favor of religion erodes, to that very extent Tocqueville’s solution itself becomes tenuous. The conjunction of the erosion of the mechanism of religious influence in the American polity and the erosion of religious consensus gives some cause for Tocqueville to worry about the future of religion in democratic societies.

V. Conclusion

Tocqueville never relinquished the conviction that “if [man] does not have faith he must serve, and, if he is free, he must believe”.⁸⁹ He liked religion for what it brings, prizing it mostly as a salutary dogma while also admitting that at times that it could serve as a vehicle of eternal truths. This double feature of his thought, public recommendation and private doubt, forces Tocqueville into a posture in which he thinks it is best for the masses to believe that which he himself doubts. Such a view would seem to be able to attract few adherents today.

But Tocqueville is valuable as a guide for us today insofar as he is worried about public thought that encourages individualized forms of spiritual experience shorn of tradition, institution, and ritual. Tocqueville would therefore be broadly sympathetic to contemporary defenses of spiritualism insofar as he thought that materialism was morally corrosive and an unfit doctrine for a regime that encouraged freedom.⁹⁰ But Tocqueville was far less concerned with defending the truth or reasonableness of theism and did not think that philosophy could do much good in maintaining public faith broadly defined. It is hard to counter one’s skepticism about moral standards or uneasiness in the face of an infinite universe which might lack a center merely with philosophic arguments, however ingenious they may be. Tocqueville sarcastically ridicules the physiocrats for wanting a regime that has “for religion only a philosophy, and for an

aristocracy none but intellectuals".⁹¹ While Tocqueville recommended a form of civil religion, he was concerned that its the dogmatic and insincere character it takes in America may ultimately prove inferior to genuine religious belief.⁹² From this point of view, Lamennais may, in fact, have been right that religious indifference could be combated only by traditional religious faith and not by enlightened self-interest, however well understood, or by religious social conformity. The latter will ultimately be only another mouthpiece of democratic dogmas, and a dangerous one.

Be that as it may, Tocqueville helps us see that it is misleading to think that the world will be divided simply between indifference or secular atheism and agnosticism or pietistic religiosity. On this issue, he provided a more complicated portrait of modern life than Lamennais insofar as he grasped the extent to which foundational tenets of democracy are themselves held in the same manner as religious beliefs. It is not so much that hope is lost as that a shift occurs in the entity that provides hope. The ultimate consequence of the spread of democratic norms and values seems therefore to be the replacement of traditional religious belief with new forms of belief. The locus of faith shifts from transcendent otherworldliness to the autonomy of the individual will, then collectively to the will of the (majority of the) people and, ultimately, to the state as their organ (and incarnation) of democratic hope.

As such, secular atheism does not fully capture the mix of faithful hope and curious dogmatism that characterizes the belief that democracy engenders in itself. Tocqueville's analysis of democracy as a new form of "religion" challenges precisely the crudest version of the secularization thesis and what Charles Taylor recently called "subtraction stories,"⁹³ that is, narratives that explain modernity's trajectory as one of loss or liberation from previous religious

narratives. The development of equality and the emergence of democracy, Tocqueville reminds us, do not inevitably lead to atheism and do not necessarily attack the core of religion. The political and the religious can work—and do often work—hand in hand. Far from seeking to emancipate itself from the chains of religion, modern democracy contributes to a metamorphosis of faith. Correspondingly, the fullness of democratic life is to be looked for, not beyond human life, but essentially *within* it. It is important to note that this latter point, along with Tocqueville's insistence on the compatibility between democracy and religion in America, was, in fact, meant to be a lesson addressed to his French audience still sharply divided on the issue of religion. Post-revolutionary France offered the spectacle of a constant struggle between those who believed that modern democracy could not function without religion and those who believed that religion was a relic of the past incompatible with modern democracy. Tocqueville shows their compatibility, but not in the way that conservatives thought that religion would survive in modern society.

Democracy, Tocqueville concluded, redefines the form and role of religion, but in so doing, it also relies upon inherited traditional religious principles and practices to achieve the necessary degree of self-restraint and prudence necessary for social cooperation. Those religious practices may themselves be dogmatically upheld only out of social conformity. And yet, the good news that Tocqueville brings us is that, while the barbarians may be waiting at the gates, as MacIntyre and others warned us, we do have sufficient resources to fight them, something that Lamennais, for example, doubted. Tocqueville insisted, in Pascal's footsteps, that unbelief is a historical accident while faith alone, however defined, seems to be the permanent state of humanity.

Will the future vindicate his optimism? And if so, will that faith be compatible with democracy or inimical to it? These are bound to remain open questions and the best homage we can pay to Tocqueville is to pose them to our readers and invite them to find their own answers.

¹ An earlier draft of this chapter was originally presented (by Aurelian Craiutu) at the conference “Combining the Spirit of Religion and the Spirit of Liberty: Tocqueville’s Thesis Revisited,” University of Notre Dame, September 29-30, 2011. The authors would like to thank Michael Zuckert for his extensive and generous comments and for including this essay in the present volume.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 147.

³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 245.

⁴ Patrick J. Deneen’s essay “Unsustainable Liberalism” and Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Griffiths’s responses published in the August 2012 issue of *First Things* are available here: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/08/unsustainable-liberalism#print> (accessed December 2, 2014).

⁵ We note in passing that critics of modern forms of narcissism, like Christopher Lasch, are sometimes inclined to believe that this is a predominantly American phenomenon.

⁶ Konraad W. Swart, “Individualism’ in the Mid-nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (January-March 1962): 77.

⁷ Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: Les sources aristocratique de la liberté* (Paris: Fayard, 2008). English translation: *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). In what follows we cite and quote from the French original edition.

⁸ See Swart, “Individualism’ in the Mid-nineteenth Century,” 79.

⁹ Agnès Antoine comments on the intellectual dialogue between Tocqueville and the liberal Catholics and insists on the differences among them (Antoine, *L'Impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté, et la religion* [Paris: Fayard, 2003], 208-11). For more information, on Lamennais and liberal Catholicism, see Bernard Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition. Aspects of Catholic Thought in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 62-112.

¹⁰ For more details on the context, see Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 7.

¹¹ Lamennais's first volume of his *Essai* was originally published in 1817 and received wide acclaim; three more volumes followed between 1818 and 1824. In what follows, we use the four-volume edition, *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (Paris: Tournachon-Molin & Segun, 1830). For more information, see Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition*, 66-78.

¹² Lacordaire severed all ties with Lamennais in 1832 and Montalembert did the same soon thereafter. On the relationship between them, see Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition*, 107-12; and Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic*, chapter 7.

¹³ See Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 80.

¹⁴ Here is the original passage: “Des lors, plus de principes certains, plus de maximes ni de lois fixes; et comme il n’y a rien de stable dans les institutions, il n’y a rien d’arrêté dans les pensées. Tout est vrai, et tout est faux. *La raison publique, fondement et règle de la raison individuelle, est détruite*” (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, ii).

¹⁵ This passage, taken from Lamennais's *Défense de l'Essai sur l'indifférence* (1821), is quoted in Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition*, 71. In the foreword to the fourth edition of the *Essai*, Lamennais admitted: "Chercher la certitude, c'est chercher une raison infaillible; et son infaillibilité doit être crue, ou admise sans preuves" (as quoted in Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition*. 73, n. 48).

¹⁶ "On n'aperçoit qu'un chaos d'idées inconciliables" wrote Lamennais (*Essai*, II, iii). Also interesting is the original parallel that Jaume draws in his book about Tocqueville between Tocqueville's ideas and those of Alexandre Vinet with special emphasis on individualism, authority, and the constitution of society. A defender of Protestant liberalism, Vinet opposed "individuality" to individualism and provided a trenchant critique of public opinion in modern society.

¹⁷ Writes Lamennais: "Quand les esprits sont dans le vague, ils s'inquiètent; dans leurs ténèbres et dans leur effroi, ils se font des croyances terribles" (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, iv).

¹⁸ Here is the original paragraph: “Deux doctrines sont en presence dans le monde; l’une tend à unir les hommes, et les autres a les *séparer*; l’une conserve les individus en rapportant tout à la société, l’autre détruit la société *en ramenant tout à l’individu*. Dans l’une tout est général, l’autorité, les croyances, les devoirs; et chacun n’existant que pour la société, concourt au maintien de l’ordre par une obéissance parfaite de la raison, du coeur et des sens à une loi invariable. Dans l’autre tout est *particulier*; et les devoirs sont plus que les intérêts, les croyances que des opinions, l’autorité n’est que l’indépendance. Chacun, maître de sa raison, de son coeur, de ses actions, ne connaît de loi que sa volonté, de règles que ses désirs, et de frein que la force. Aussi, dès que la force se relâche, la guerre commence aussitôt; tout ce qui existe est attaqué; la société *entière est mise en question*” (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, v-viii; all emphases added).

¹⁹ Here is what Lamennais wrote in another book, *De la religion considérée dans ses rapports avec l’ordre politique et civil* in 1825: “Le caractère de la démocratie est *une mobilité continue*; tout sans cesse y est en mouvement, tout y change, avec une rapidité effrayante, au gré des passions et des opinions. Rien de stable dans les principes, dans les institutions, dans les lois” (as quoted in Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 124-25; all emphases added). A similar idea of *démocratie mouvante* was put forward by Charles de Rémusat, a young member of the group of the so-called French Doctrinaires, in several important articles published in 1825-26. For more details, see Darío Roldán, *Charles de Rémusat: Certitudes et impasses du libéralisme doctrinaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000).

²⁰ Lamennais, *Essai*, II, x.

²¹ The original paragraph reads as follows: “Tous les liens sont brisés, l’homme est seul; la foi sociale a disparu, les esprits, abandonnés à eux-mêmes, ne savent où se prendre; on le voit flotter au hasard dans mille directions contraires. De là, un désordre universel, une effrayante instabilité d’opinions et d’institutions” (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, x-xi).

²² Writes Lamennais: “Il y a au fond des coeurs, avec un malaise incroyable, comme un immense dégoût de la vie, et un insatiable besoin de destruction” (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, xi).

²³ “On ne croît que soi, on n’aime que soi, on ne rapport rien qu’à soi; et qu’est-ce que cela, sinon le renversement de la société? Car la société consiste dans la croyance de certains vérités sur le témoignage général. ... Société signifie union, et là où tout se sépare et devient individuel, chacun des lors se trouve dans l’impossibilité de se défendre contre tous, ou dans l’impossibilité d’exister” (Lamennais, *Essai*, II, xiv).

²⁴ Lamennais, *Essai*, II, 191.

²⁵ Lamennais, *Essai*, II, 192.

²⁶ *DA*, 2010, III: 709, note u. We cite and quote from the four-volume bilingual critical edition of *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010). We refer in each case to the volume in question, followed by the corresponding pages.

²⁷ *DA*, 2010, III: 709-10.

²⁸ *DA*, 2010, III: 708, note t.

²⁹ *DA*, 2010, III: 708, note t.

³⁰ *DA*, 2010, III: 829.

³¹ *DA*, 2010, IV: 882, 884.

³² *DA*, 2010, III: 711, note a. 4.

³³ *DA*, 2010, III: 718.

³⁴ *DA* 2010, III: 713.

³⁵ *DA*, 2010, III: 711, note a, 1.

³⁶ *DA*, 2010, III: 712.

³⁷ *DA*, 2010, III: 712, note c.

³⁸ *DA*, 2010, 716-7.

³⁹ On this issue, see Antoine, *L'impensé de la démocratie*, 148. The claim to originality must be taken, however, with a necessary grain of salt, since in this regard, as Lucien Jaume amply demonstrated in his magisterial book, Tocqueville drew upon a number of past and contemporary authors. They also argued that the religious sentiments or instincts are constitutive of human nature and that faith represents, as it were, the “permanent state of humanity.” This is Tocqueville’s phrase, but its spirit can also be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the writings of Joseph de Maistre and René de Chateaubriand.

⁴⁰ For a more extensive discussion on this sacralization of democracy, see Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 87-90. Also see John Dewey’s description of democracy in his essay, “Christianity and Democracy” (1892).

⁴¹ Tocqueville was uneasy about this phenomenon and was far from endorsing it.

⁴² *DA*, 2010, III: 742, note a. Tocqueville was aware that in the ideal case-scenario, it would still need to be religion, not just the authority of the majority *in nomine*.

⁴³ It is revealing that, after arguing for the need to have a fluid type of religion, Tocqueville adds: “Necessity of gaining the favor of the majority” (*DA*, 2010, III: 742, note a).

⁴⁴ Walt Whitman, “Perpetuity of the Democratic Spirit,” in *The Gathering of Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rogers and John Black (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), I, 7.

⁴⁵ *DA*, 2010, II: 633-34.

⁴⁶ *DA*, 2010, III: 720; all emphases added.

⁴⁷ *DA*, 2010, III: 721, note r; all emphases added.

⁴⁸ *DA*, 2010, III: 711-12, note b.

⁴⁹ *DA*, 2010, III: 713, note e.

⁵⁰ *DA*, 2010, III: 724, note s.

⁵¹ *DA*, 2010, III: 720, note p; all emphases added.

⁵² For a close analysis on this topic, see Lucien Jaume, “The Avatars of Religion in Tocqueville,” in *Crediting God. Sovereignty and Religion in the Age of Global Capitalism*, ed. Miguel Vatter (New York, Fordham University Press, 2011), 273-84. A different perspective can be found in Richard Avramenko, “Tocqueville and the Religion of Democracy,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2012): 125-37. On modern democracy and religion, see Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) and *La démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 27-108, 401-64.

⁵³ *DA*, 2010, III: 724.

⁵⁴ *DA*, 2010, III: 724.

⁵⁵ *DA*, 2010, III: 751.

⁵⁶ *DA*, 2010. III: 728.

⁵⁷ *DA*, 2010, III: 733-34.

⁵⁸ *DA*, 2010, III; 758.

⁵⁹ *DA*, 2010, III: 853; all emphases added.

⁶⁰ *DA*, 2010, III: 853; all emphases added.

⁶¹ *DA*, 2010, III: 752-53, all emphases added.

⁶² *DA*, 201, III: 946.

⁶³ See Peter A. Lawler, *Tocqueville: The Restless Mind* (Rowman and Littlefield: 1983); Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy and the American Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ *DA*, 2010, III: 745.

⁶⁵ *DA*, 2010, III: 693, note f.

⁶⁶ *DA*, 2010, III: 958.

⁶⁷ On Tocqueville's civil religion, see Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 249-58.

⁶⁸ Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XV: 2. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Francisque de Corcelle. Correspondance d'Alexis de Tocqueville et de Madame Swetchine*, ed. Pierre Gibert (Paris: Gallimard 1983), 29; an English translation can be found in the Nolla-Schleifer critical edition of *DA*, II, 480, note t. On Tocqueville's view on religion, also see Alan S. Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶⁹ *DA*, 2010, III: 957.

⁷⁰ *DA*, 2010, III: 958. We acknowledge that Tocqueville's functional account is complicated because his description of democratic man owes much to Pascal and thus can be described as a secularized version of the latter's Christian anthropology. An excellent account of the affinities between Tocqueville and Pascal can be found in Luis Díez del Corral, *El pensamiento político de Tocqueville* (Madrid: Alianza Universidad, 1989), 227-71. In addition, Tocqueville also thinks that the truth of human nature is that mankind is naturally a spiritual being. Hence, to say that Tocqueville merely has a "functional" account of religion would be to neglect the fact that he thinks there are elements to the religious outlook on the world that are constituent elements of the human condition. Nevertheless, the dominant thrust of his analysis of religion is from the human point of view and, thereby, functionalist.

⁷¹ *DA*, 2010, III: 746.

⁷² *DA*, 2010, III: 744.

⁷³ *DA*, 2010, III: 746.

⁷⁴ *DA*, 2010, III: 746.

⁷⁵ *DA*, 2010, III: 750.

⁷⁶ *DA*, 2010, III: 750.

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that after 1840, in all of his writings on America and especially in his correspondence with his American friends, Tocqueville no longer mentioned religion as a pillar of democracy. While Tocqueville earlier believed that religion properly practiced could provide the foundation for sound mores and a virtuous form of materialism in an age of individualism and skepticism, by the mid- to late 1850s this belief appeared to have waned. Tocqueville no longer made mention of America's originality in combining liberty and religion. On this issue, see Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings's introductory study, "The Third Democracy," in *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, eds. and trans. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26-33.

⁷⁸ *DA*, 2010, II.ii.12.

⁷⁹ *DA*, 2010, III: 743.

⁸⁰ *DA*, 2010, III: 744.

⁸¹ *DA*, 2010, III: 745.

⁸² *DA*, 2010, III: 743.

⁸³ *DA*, 2010, III: 744.

⁸⁴ *DA*, 2010, III: 940.

⁸⁵ “J’ai toujours cru qu’il y avait du danger même dans les passions les meilleures quand elles devenaient ardentes et exclusives. Je n’accepte pas la passion religieuse; je le mettrai même en tête, parce que poussée à un certain point, elle fait, pour ainsi dire et plus qu’aucune autre disparaître tout ce qui n’est pas elle et crée les citoyens les plus inutiles ou les plus dangereux au nom de la morale et du devoir. Je te confesse que j’ai toujours considéré un livre comme *l’Imitation de Jesus-Christ* par exemple, quand on le considère autrement que comme un enseignement destiné à la vie claustrale, comme souverainement immoral. Il n’est pas *sain* de se détacher de la terre, de ses intérêts, de ses affaires, même de ses plaisirs, quand ils sont honnêtes, au point que l’auteur l’enseigne et ceux qui vivent de la lecture d’un semblable livre ne peuvent guère manquer de perdre tout ce qui fait les vertus publiques en acquérant certaines vertus privées. Une certaine préoccupation des vérités religieuses n’allant pas jusqu’à l’absorption de la pensée dans l’autre monde, m’a donc toujours paru l’état le plus conforme à la moralité humaine sous toutes ses formes. C’est ce milieu dans lequel on reste plus souvent ce me semble chez les Anglais que chez aucun autre peuple que je connaisse” (Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes, XIII: 2, Correspondance d’Alexis de Tocqueville et de Louis de Kergorlay*, eds. André Jardin and Jean-Alain Lesourd [Paris: Gallimard, 1977], 328).

⁸⁶ *DA*, 2010, III: 752-53; all emphases added.

⁸⁷ *DA*, 2010, II: 473.

⁸⁸ For those who see Tocqueville's account as problematic, see Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967) and Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). For those who see it as consistent, see Catherine Zuckert, "Not by Preaching Alone: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy" *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (April 1981): 259-280.

⁸⁹ *DA*, 2010, III: 745

⁹⁰ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: While the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2012), Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2000).

⁹¹ Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan, eds. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 213.

⁹² On the general issue of civil religion in America, see “American Civil Religion Revisited,” Hammond, Philip et. al., *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter 1994): 1-23. Several scholars such as Sanford Kessler (*Tocqueville’s Civil Religion: American Christianity and the Prospects for Freedom* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1994]) and, more recently, Ronald Beiner (*Civil Religion*), argued that Tocqueville believed that America had, in fact, a robust “civil” religion. According to Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 250), “the religious life of the American citizens described by Tocqueville does exactly what Rousseau says a civil religion should do: It fosters good citizenship, attaches the citizenry to the laws and institutions of the political community, and serves a thoroughly patriotic purpose.” As the letters included in *Tocqueville on America after 1840* show, beginning with 1852, Tocqueville noticed obvious signs of decline in America and was no longer sure whether religion could stave it off. It is also worth pointing out that in a letter to Corcelle from July 29, 1857, in which Tocqueville spoke admiringly of England, he praised that country’s “perfect accord between religious and political morality” (Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, 1253). A similar reference to the relationship between religion and liberty in England can be found in Tocqueville’s letter to Kergorlay from August 4, 1857 (Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, 1256; translated in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society, Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985], 355–57).

⁹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 22.