



DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

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Project Title: Tocqueville, Religion and Democracy: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls

Institution: Independent Scholar

Project Director: Alan S. Kahan

Grant Program: Fellowships

Tocqueville, Religion and Democracy: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls

Alan S. Kahan

This project is a comprehensive analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805-1859) understanding of the significance of religion in democratic societies. It builds on my previous work on Tocqueville and makes two new arguments about Tocqueville's thought as a whole. First, Tocqueville must be understood as a moralist whose goal was to encourage the perfection of human character. Second, that Tocqueville thought the role of religion was to provide checks and balances for human character in the spiritual realm, just as secular forces should provide them in the political realm, and that in the long run secular checks and balances were dependent on the success of spiritual checks and balances. For democracy to survive it needs a moral underpinning, in Tocqueville's view, and that underpinning is best provided by religion (I will also address the extent to which, from a Tocquevillian perspective, less traditional spiritualities might fit the bill).

Today we debate whether Islam can be reconciled with democracy; in nineteenth-century France the same question was raised with regard to Catholicism. Alexis de Tocqueville thus faced a situation that was similar to ours in important ways. One of the reasons he made his famous trip to America in 1831-32 was to better understand the relationship between religion and democracy, and to learn how that relationship could be mutually supportive. Throughout his career, from his masterful treatment of religion in *Democracy in America* to his discussion of religion and the French Revolution in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, as well as in his correspondence and his political activity, the relationship between religion and democratic society and politics was central to Tocqueville's concerns.

The relationship between religion and democracy continues to be an issue of immense significance. The focus of this project is thus as important today as it was in Tocqueville's time, and it is one about which Tocqueville has many things to tell us. However, religion has been less central to the concerns of most of Tocqueville's commentators than it was to Tocqueville. Partly this is because Tocqueville chose to spread his views on religion around his work, rather than concentrate them in one place. Rather than devoting, as he at one point considered, a major section of *Democracy in America* to the question of religion, in the end he chose to scatter his reflections among many smaller sections and chapters. The diffuse presentation has led some astray. Jon Elster's recent (Cambridge, 2009) study *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist*, refers to "Tocqueville's sophomoric analysis of the content of religions" (p. 46), and states that the "almost sophomoric content" of volume 2 of *Democracy in America* is at its worst when it comes to religion (p. 4). Even the best existing work on Tocqueville and religion, Agnès Antoine's *L'impensé de la démocratie: Tocqueville, la citoyenneté et la religion* ("Democracy's Unthinkable Thought: Tocqueville, Citizenship and Religion", Fayard, 2003), suggests that "on this subject which was so close to his heart, Tocqueville's argumentation in fact does not always have the same rigor as in the rest of *Democracy in America*" (130-31). There are no comprehensive English-language treatments of Tocqueville on religion (the works by Allen, Lawler and Mitchell are limited in scope, and the latter two have significant flaws).

I will suggest that Tocqueville's analysis of religion was as rigorous, if less compact, than any other aspect of his thought. Through close examination of Tocqueville's writings, my book will reveal the parallel structures in his secular and religious arguments. For example, when acting as a check on democratic society, "religion properly understood", as I call it, plays the same role as what Tocqueville famously called "self-interest properly understood", limiting and redirecting individualism. When acting as a balance to democratic desires, religion goes beyond self-interest to encourage human beings to rise above an exclusive focus on materialism, just as in the secular sphere decentralization and association lead individuals to perfect those elements in their character which Tocqueville most values. Similar to how good constitutions establish checks and balances among powers in the political realm, so, for Tocqueville, a good religion establishes checks and balances within the soul – and well-balanced souls in turn help maintain checks and balances in the political and social realm. These checks and balances are crucial, in Tocqueville's view, to the well-being of democratic societies. Once they are established,

democratic society will in its own way offer the many the same scope for human perfection and grandeur that aristocratic society once offered the few.

Such parallel structures are characteristic of Tocqueville. They are present in his conception of human nature, in his view of the relationship between religion and democratic society, and in the alternating emphasis on utility and greatness or perfection in his writings that has often been noted, but not understood. “Tocqueville, Religion and Democracy” will thus, besides illuminating Tocqueville’s views on religion, present a new reading of his overall argument and rhetoric. It will systematically develop the old suggestion, never really worked out, that Tocqueville was a moralist. His political thought was only a part (albeit a crucial part) of his reflection on questions relating to character and mores in modern democratic societies, questions to which religion was central. The book will thus be a significant contribution to Tocqueville studies. More than that, it will help readers understand the ways in which religion and democracy can be mutually supportive – a goal dear to Tocqueville’s heart.

In making this contribution, the book will incorporate, develop, and where necessary correct the work of Goldstein, Hancock, Allen, Antoine, Lawler, Mitchell and Jaume, among others. Much of this work has focused on the influences on Tocqueville’s religious thought. I will propose significant changes to the received view. In particular I will show the importance of Tocqueville’s dialogue with Rousseau and Lamennais (a contemporary French Catholic thinker whose contribution to Tocqueville’s ideas has gone largely unrecognized) on religion, how it relates to his view of American religion, his ambivalent relation to Montesquieu, and his substantial rejection of Pascal, contrary to previous accounts.

Following in Tocqueville’s footsteps, these genealogical considerations will lead me to examine Tocqueville’s views on the relationship between religion and democracy as actually practiced in America, France, and elsewhere (he also wrote about religion in England, Ireland, the Islamic world, and India). The whole will result in the first truly comprehensive account of Tocqueville’s views on religion, considered from the perspective of intellectual history, political history, and political theory. A tentative chapter outline is as follows:

Part I: Theory

Chapter 1: *Tocqueville the Moralist*, discusses the French “moraliste” tradition and how Tocqueville fits into it. I will discuss his view of human nature, and I will develop the argument that his chief moral concern was with human grandeur or greatness, inseparable in his eyes from political freedom.

Chapter 2: *Checks and Balances: Why Democracy Needs Religion*, examines the functions that Tocqueville believed religion ought to fill in democratic societies. Religion provides the democratic soul with checks and balances that are as important as any political constitution. Tocqueville envisages religion from two different viewpoints, utilitarian and perfectionist, and these two perspectives are embodied in the checks and balances he thought religion provided.

Chapter 3: *The Nature of Democratic Religion*. What are the effects of democracy on religion, according to Tocqueville? What makes democratic religions different from aristocratic ones? This chapter will include a discussion of Tocqueville’s erroneous prediction that democratic societies would not adopt new religions, made just when Mormonism was rising in America, and why he erred. It will also address whether, in Tocqueville’s view, nationalism, or Habermasian “constitutional patriotism,” can play the role of religion-substitute.

Chapter 4: *Privileged Partners – Tocqueville’s Dialogues on Religion*, discusses the “influences”, real and alleged, of various thinkers on Tocqueville’s religious thought, discussing chiefly but not exclusively Pascal, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Lamennais.

Part II: Applications

Chapter 5: *Religion in America – Tocqueville’s Two Accounts*, presents and analyzes the two different accounts of American religion Tocqueville gives in *Democracy in America* and contemporary notes and correspondence. In the first account, Tocqueville presented a very positive view of the way in which near-universal religious practice strengthened American democracy; in the second, he presented a less optimistic vision about both the long-run and short-term prospects of religion in America and democratic societies generally. Both accounts will be compared with the historical reality of American religion at the time of Tocqueville’s visit in 1831-32 and thereafter.

Chapter 6: *Religion in France*, discusses Tocqueville’s involvement in controversies about politics and religion in France, as well as his historical analysis of religion and politics in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Religion in France served Tocqueville as the negative version of the American experience, and the chapter will develop what Tocqueville saw as the dangers inherent in conflict between religion and democracy.

Chapter 7: *Religion outside Democracy*. Less well known, Tocqueville’s discussion of religion in aristocratic (England) and colonized (Ireland, Algeria, India) societies sheds important light on his overall views. This chapter will focus on these neglected aspects of Tocqueville’s thought.

Chapter 8: *Religion Today*. What might a Tocquevillian perspective be on such issues as the relationship between Islam and democracy, the rise of New Age religions, and French secularism (*laïcité*)? Today’s world is providing a test of Tocqueville’s theories against competing views, such as those of Huntington, multiculturalism, etc. Not surprisingly, Tocqueville comes off well.

Appendix: Tocqueville’s Religious Biography – A short account of the occasionally controversial subject of Tocqueville’s personal religious views, and a slightly longer discussion of how they did or did not influence his analysis.

This is an ambitious project, but there is good reason to think that I will succeed in it. I read French fluently, and I am very familiar with Tocqueville’s works and with the secondary literature on Tocqueville, as demonstrated in my numerous publications on Tocqueville over the past 25 years. I have already written several articles on Tocqueville and religion that will form the basis for chapters 1, 2, and 7. I also have a track record of turning my projects into completed work. Almost all of Tocqueville’s works are in print, and because I am based in Paris, I have easy access to those in print and out of print, and to secondary sources, at the national library. My chief need is time, which I hope will be provided by an NEH Fellowship. By the end of my year I plan to have completed the first draft of my manuscript.

I am aware of the volume of work being published on Tocqueville currently, but I believe that this book can make a major impact, not just on the ever-growing field of Tocqueville studies, but well beyond. Because of the enormous use currently made of Tocqueville, and because the relationship between religion and democracy is of so much present-day importance, a book focusing on the two of them has the potential for wide impact and readership.

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