

## **Christianity, Economics, and the Common Good: Alexis de Tocqueville on American Christianity as the Indispensable Institution**

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When Alexis de Tocqueville came to America in the 1830s, he discovered what he thought was the healthiest relationship of religion and politics he had yet seen in the world. The political order ensured the freedom of the religious order, and the religious order in turn supported the political order; above all, the religious order kept the liberty provided by the laws from degenerating into license. While this was a mutually beneficial relationship, the religious order was manifestly the more important part, for, unlike those Enlightenment theorists who thought that religion was nothing more than a troublesome irritant or obstacle to good politics, Tocqueville thought that good politics could not survive without religion; he was admittedly always less clear about whether and to what extent good religion needed good politics.<sup>1</sup>

American religion today is in significantly worse shape than it was in Tocqueville's day; it should therefore come as no surprise that our domestic political situation has similarly deteriorated. The decline in American Christianity has contributed to our ever-worsening incapacity to distinguish, especially in our jurisprudence, true liberty from mere license. Liberals have for many years been devoted to the liberation of the self-defining, autonomous individual from all traditional moral restraints on individual whims; and recent developments in the progressive direction have been proof enough that license eventually infringes upon liberty. Conservatives, however, are also guilty—in particular of abandoning the defense of the moral underpinnings of a free society in exchange for a doomed rearguard defense of narrow economic freedom, or, worse, in defense of an absurd and ahistorically absolutist interpretation of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Areshidze 2016; Berry 2019; Tessitore 2005, 650; and Yarbrough 2019. Though cf. also Herold 2015 and Zuckert 2016.

Constitution. Conservatives have repeatedly attempted to say to the rising progressive tide, in failed imitation of God setting limits to the sea, “thus far shall ye go and no further”—but the dikes always eventually burst.

Put bluntly, the Constitution alone (and therefore any approach that relies merely on Constitutional textualism) cannot provide its own moral foundations, nor did the Founders design it for that purpose. As John Adams famously said in his address to the Massachusetts militia, “Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people; it is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” We are meant to bring a preexisting moral and religious view *to* the Constitution, which view would inform our understanding of that document. The document itself is powerless to teach us how we ought to approach or interpret it; it is even less capable of teaching us the morality necessary for a free people to remain free. That was the all-important political task of American Christianity, and no secular philosophy, neither of John Rawls nor of John Stuart Mill, nor even of John Locke, can replace that essential function.

The chaos of contemporary politics has called into question many principles that were once thought to be self-evident. That chaos has called forth radical and even revolutionary proposals for restructuring our government, almost all of which are foreign to the American political tradition, in particular in being far friendlier to the exercise of state power than has hitherto been considered wise in American politics. And yet, it must also be said that the response of the defenders of the American tradition has been, on the whole, abstract and uninspiring—and in many cases based on a mistaken conception of what that tradition actually teaches. The purpose of the present essay is to bring to bear on our current political pathologies three important lessons about religion and political economy from Tocqueville’s reflections on America’s peculiar political tradition: first, that the destruction of religion is not, and never will

be, the destruction of dogmatism, but only a preparation for secular fanaticism; second, that secular materialism cannot form the basis for the common good; and finally that as religion decreases, the state must increase. I will conclude with a Tocquevillian reflection on the need for religiously informed political thinking as the basis for a truly *democratic* capitalism.

## **1. Secularism and the Failed Promise of Enlightenment**

The goal of the Enlightenment philosophers was to liberate the human mind and human society from, above all, the strictures and constraints of religious dogma—indeed, in the French Revolution, they “seemed to aim at dethroning God Himself” (Tocqueville 1983, 3).<sup>2</sup> The Enlightenment is therefore perhaps best understood, according to Tocqueville, as a “religious revolution” (*ibid.*, 11), which often took the form of a revolution against religion *tout court* (see, e.g., Tocqueville 2000, 282; see also Tocqueville 1983, 10-14). This revolution compelled or allowed the Enlighteners to “destroy the empire of traditions” and to “submit...all beliefs to the individual examination” (Tocqueville 2000, 404-405). Of course, what began with religion radiated outward; according to Tocqueville, the fires of rebellion eventually engulfed traditional philosophy, science, morality, and politics (*ibid.*). The doctrine of natural rights replaced the traditional natural law, the power of religion to inform politics and public morality was decisively subordinated to the putative needs of the secular state and the autonomous individual, and the relationship of the members of the community to one another was therefore radically reconceived on secular grounds. In Europe, the traditional focus on duty, virtue, and dedication to the common good was replaced by rights and the doctrine of enlightened self-interest. What began in the ivory tower was completed on the battlefield: the French Revolution and the

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<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville was under no illusions about the true goals of the Enlightenment: “it is undeniable that our eighteenth-century philosophers were fundamentally anti-religious” (Tocqueville 1983, 6).

Napoleonic conquest of Europe swept away the old order and brought the new ideas to almost every corner of Europe. Whatever still remained of the old feudal subordinate powers and checks-and-balances was erased and replaced with the new top-down rational administration of the modern Weberian sovereign, for this new philosophy proved to be far more conducive to the bureaucratic rule of absolute monarchs than any philosophy Europe had ever seen (Tocqueville 1983, 9-10).<sup>3</sup>

And yet, according to Tocqueville, the philosophical component of this enterprise was doomed from the very beginning, for “one cannot make it so that there are no dogmatic beliefs” (Tocqueville 2000, 407). Indeed, even on the individual level, he denies that a complete escape from dogmatism is possible, for “there is no philosopher in the world so great that he does not believe a million things on faith in others or does not suppose many more truths he establishes” (*ibid.*, 408). If a philosopher attempted to demonstrate everything with absolute certainty, “he would exhaust himself in preliminary demonstrations” and die immobile before he could decide which way he should step (*ibid.*, 407-408). Faith—or dogmatic belief—in *something* is “no less indispensable to [an individual] living alone than for acting in common with those like him” (*ibid.*, 408). If this is true even for a philosopher, then it is true *a fortiori* for human beings who have never given thought to philosophical reflection, and thus for human society as a whole: “there is no society that can prosper without such [dogmatic] beliefs” (*ibid.*, 407). In a way, this is obvious to everyone: Congress would be completely unable to function if, instead of debating a discrete policy proposal, they were forever detained on the level of fundamental political questions—if, at the opening of every session, some Congressional Socrates asked once again that they relitigate whether democracy is a good form of government. Not only our

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<sup>3</sup> See also Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIV, final paragraph together with the first three paragraphs.

Congressmen, but most Americans never seriously question our faith that democratic republicanism is good.

It is inevitable “that we encounter authority somewhere in the intellectual and moral world” (*ibid.*). The question for responsible statesmen is therefore not whether we can do away with authority, but what that authority will be. After all, if it is the right kind of authority—Christianity, for example—then, according to Tocqueville, our submission to that authority will be a “salutary servitude that permits [us] to make good use of [our] freedom” (*ibid.*, 408). That is, humanity’s selfish passions must be restrained, and only religion reliably teaches the majority of human beings to restrain *themselves*, thereby obviating the need for government to do the restraining (*ibid.*, 282). Thus, Tocqueville argued, if a man “has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe” (*ibid.*, 419). The destruction of religion in a people, by contrast, “cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude” (Tocqueville 2000, 418). On Tocqueville’s account, the empire of American Christianity made American democracy possible.

By a providential stroke, America managed to avoid most of the painful birth-pangs of the Enlightenment. Founded in the earliest stages of the movement and without an old order that had to be destroyed with violence (Tocqueville 2000, 46-53, 278-281), America could appropriate the Egyptian gold of the Enlightenment—to the extent that it chose to do so—with greater safety. America had no entrenched aristocracy to be guillotined, no ancient history tying this or that family to a given plot of land, and a broadly republican form of government and democratic state of society that began before the *Mayflower* even landed at Plymouth Rock. Perhaps most importantly of all, American Christianity as an institution was not intimately bound

up with the monarchic order, as it typically was in early modern Europe (see Tocqueville 1983, 3-5; Tocqueville 2000, 287-288).

Thus, whereas the European republican revolutionary felt himself bound to attack Christianity when he attacked the old regime, Americans were free to work out their ideas about democratic republicanism without abandoning Christianity and therefore without going down the darkest paths of Enlightenment thought—without, for instance, endorsing the “impious maxim” that “everything is permitted in the interest of society” (Tocqueville 2000, 280). In abandoning both Christianity and classical political thought, European Enlightenment was compelled to reestablish the state on the ground of material self-interest. This was not the case in America. The 1780 State Constitution of Massachusetts was still able to assert that “the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality; and...these cannot be generally diffused through a community, but by the institution of the public worship of God, and of public instructions in piety, religion and morality” (Part I, Art. III).<sup>4</sup> America was able to adopt certain Enlightenment formulations while remaining fundamentally committed to Christian morality and inspired by a modified classical republicanism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This language (which justified the collecting of taxes for the public support of religion) was replaced in 1833 by Article of Amendment XI, which, *to this day*, reads as follows: “the public worship of God and instructions in piety, religion and morality, promote the happiness and prosperity of a people and the security of a republican government.” Thus, even in the act of ending the public funding of Christian churches, the legislature acknowledged the fundamental importance of religion for American republicanism.

<sup>5</sup> Consider, e.g., Ratzinger 2008, 193-209: Modern “democracy is a product of the fusion of the Greek and the Christian heritage and therefore can survive only in this foundational connection. If we do not recognize this again and accordingly learn to live democracy with a view to Christianity and Christianity with a view to the free democratic state, we will surely gamble away democracy. [...] To this we must add, by way of clarification, that democracy as understood today need not and did not automatically spring from this root but, in fact, was first shaped under the special circumstances of the American congregationalist type, that is, apart from the classical European traditions of the church-state relationship that developed historically here. Hence it is only in a very qualified sense true that the Enlightenment led to democracy.”

Nevertheless, the European example worried Tocqueville. He saw it as a possible future for the entire world: “Do you not see that religions are weakening and the divine notion of rights is disappearing? [...] Do you not perceive on all sides beliefs that give way to reasoning, and sentiments that give way to calculations?” (*ibid.*, 228; though cf. Zuckert 2016, 504ff). In the Europe of Tocqueville’s day (and in contemporary America today), the power of traditional Christianity was (and is) manifestly on the wane (cf. Kessler 1994, especially Chapter 8). This decline, Tocqueville thought, ought to be concerning not only to Christians, but to all serious and public-spirited citizens. For what would replace Christianity? As we have seen, Tocqueville denied that the death of Christianity would herald a new dawn of philosophic reason. It could lead only to a new—and likely less salutary—set of dogmatic beliefs. Since “intellectual independence [...] cannot be boundless, [...] the question is not that of knowing *whether* an intellectual authority exists in democratic centuries, but only *where* it is deposited and what its *extent* will be” (Tocqueville 2000, 408; my emphases).

In democratic societies, “men conceive a sort of instinctive incredulity about the supernatural and a very high and often much exaggerated idea of human reason” (*ibid.*). That “instinctive incredulity” breeds an “almost invincible distaste for the supernatural” (*ibid.*, 404). Thus, the new authorities that will arise to replace waning Christianity as the ground of morality and politics will not take the form of a “new religion” because the attempt would be “not only impious, but ridiculous and unreasonable” (*ibid.*, 408). New authoritative opinions can be put forward in one of only two forms. The first form is as new or modern interpretations of old religions: thus, for instance, could Christianity be liberalized, its illiberal doctrines discarded, its supernatural character deemphasized, and the focus placed increasingly on issues relevant to life

in this (material) world—not conversion or theological disputation, but social justice and the alleviation of poverty as the primary mission of Christian churches.

The only other alternative is to appeal to the spirit of the age—that is, to the widespread *belief in* (rather than knowledge of) science (or secular philosophy). I stress “belief” not least because science strictly speaking excludes *all* authoritative opinions, that is, all opinions that are received from an authority instead of established by reason alone. The authoritative opinions to which I refer are not truths scientifically established, but opinions supported by arguments that *sound* scientific or that are endorsed by scientific authorities.<sup>6</sup> If the first alternative (liberalizing religion) gave us the Social Gospel, this alternative (popularizing science) gave us Social Darwinism—a political doctrine that, in order to lend itself authority, used scientific language and relied on the endorsement of scientists as the authoritative priesthood of the new morality.

The religious landscape of contemporary America is arguably even less believing than the Europe of Tocqueville’s day. The percentage of the population affiliating with the traditionally dominant religion has plummeted from nearly universal (84% of the so-called “Silent Generation”) to less than half (49% of Millennials).<sup>7</sup> As Tocqueville predicted, these people have not joined a new religion, but have become skeptical of religion altogether: the number of people who do not affiliate with any religion has more than tripled over the same period.<sup>8</sup> The younger generations in America find religion in general less credible than did their

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<sup>6</sup> To give a somewhat silly example, there are astronomers who are said to be able to demonstrate that the earth revolves around the sun; however, I confess an inability to do so myself. I therefore hold the doctrine of a heliocentric solar system as an article of faith—and even an article of faith that contradicts the apparent empirical evidence (i.e., that I seem to observe with my own eyes the sun moving in the sky around the earth).

<sup>7</sup> “In the US, the Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace,” *Pew Forum*, 2019 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>). See Catherine Zuckert’s insightful discussion of Tocqueville and the current state of American religion (2016, 509-517).

<sup>8</sup> 84% of Americans aged 70 and above affiliate with some form of Christianity, compared to 49% of Millennials (Americans aged 21-37). 10% of Americans aged 70 and above report being unaffiliated with any religion, compared to 40% of Millennials (“Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace”).



parents and grandparents. And it is not merely an age gap: Millennials themselves appear to be getting *less* religious as they get older.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the percentage of people pointing to philosophy, reason, or science as their authoritative source for moral guidance has doubled, whereas those who cite religion as their primary source of moral guidance has fallen by almost half.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that one of our most prominent pseudo-religious moral authorities is heralded by the oft-repeated call to “believe science”—a kind of prophetic witness or altar call supposedly to set aside our partisan emotions and accept the clear, hard conclusions of empirical scientific experimentation. And yet, this call is, curiously, deployed only against conservative positions. When it comes to the *causes célèbres* of the progressive Left, the steely-eyed commitment to scientific objectivity ends, for the “science believers” show a strange tendency to ignore and even repudiate scientific data about, and at times even research into, subjects like abortion or the psychology of transgenderism.<sup>11</sup> Of course, given the repeated failure of doomsday climate prophecy after doomsday climate prophecy, perhaps there was no steely-eyed commitment to scientific objectivity to begin with. Indeed, it seems unlikely that the vast mass of, e.g., climate activists are particularly well versed in the latest scientific research

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<sup>9</sup> In 2007, only 25% of Millennials were unaffiliated with any religion (“America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Forum*, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>).

<sup>10</sup> 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study, raw data (<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>). 28% of 18-29 year-olds cite philosophy, reason, or science as their chief authority for moral guidance compared to 14% of people 50 and older. Conversely, only 24% of the 18-29 year-olds point to religion, compared to roughly 40% of those over 50.

<sup>11</sup> Consider in this context the transparent partisanship displayed by the so-called “March for Science;” recall also the persecution of Dr. Kenneth Zucker for his research on transgender youth and his subsequent politicized firing by the University of Toronto (which institution he has since successfully sued). With respect to the scientific consensus regarding abortion, see, *inter alia*, the finding that 95% of academic biologists agree that human life begins at conception (Jacobs 2018).

into humanity's relationship with, and impact on, the global climate. The movement accordingly looks less like a series of scientific conferences and more like a spiritualist religious revival.<sup>12</sup>

This religion itself is, despite appearances, not primarily a religion of works-righteousness but of faith-righteousness: the problem, we are often told, is bigger than any of us individually, and so our individual actions (for instance, picking up trash) pale in comparison to the importance of our personal conversion to the cause and our evangelization of others. Indeed, the problem requires nothing less than the mass conversion of other people and ultimately the use of governmental coercion on a global scale. The faithful believers must overcome the infidel deniers and usher in the worldly reign of an ecological savior-king before the advent of the end-times. This is not the global awakening of scientific enlightenment (note again that we are called to “*believe* science,” not to “*know* science”), but the adoption of a new dogmatism, a new pseudo-religion complete with its own eschatology, its own sacred priesthood, its own litany of saints, and even with its own sale of indulgences<sup>13</sup>—but, and this is not unimportant, without any exhortation to humility on the part of believers.<sup>14</sup>

Even more disturbing is the religion of contemporary gender ideology, divorced as it is from all empirical evidence and the accumulated experience of human history. This latter-day Gnosticism, as Robby George has called it, rests solely upon the unassailable subjective whims of the self-defining autonomous individual. This ideology is not a repudiation of the Enlightenment, but the fulfillment of its political project: no gods or kings, nor indeed even

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<sup>12</sup> See for example the bizarre and orgiastic Extinction Rebellion protests in Europe and Australia, which combined climate change activism with large-scale public dance parties, LGBT activism, anti-capitalism, and even the odd blasphemy (at one of the Extinction Rebellion protests in Brussels, an animal rights activists carried a crucified orangutan doll bearing the sign “killed for our food”). This is not even to mention the more explicitly and openly neo-pagan component of certain sectors of climate activism.

<sup>13</sup> I have in mind in particular the concept of “carbon offset credits” purchased by wealthy environmentalists like Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio as a way to justify, e.g., their use of transcontinental private jets and their ownership of large, energy-consuming mansions.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the claim to scientific objectivity often encourages the opposite quality.

reason (a mere slave of the passions), can dictate to the nature-subduing individual any unconquerable limits to his subjective desires.

And yet, at the very moment when subjectivity and freedom seem decisively to have subdued authority and nature, we are suddenly confronted with a complete reversal—with a victory for authority more irresistible and hopeless than the cruelest triumph of Babylonian antiquity. For when the individual has finally overcome the last natural limit, when the force of his subjective will has mastered the last objective truth, he will find himself in world of force alone; and the force of the individual is rarely or never able to match the force of society. Thus, the attempt to free the individual from all authority, and especially from the authority of religion, and to compel all things to bow before the subjective judgment of the individual has not issued in a new birth of freedom. It has instead stripped the individual of his last defense (the truth) against the authority of brute power and exposed him to the storms of irrational passion.

## **2. The Failed Promise of Materialist Republicanism**

According to Tocqueville, another goal of certain Enlightenment philosophers was to lower the sights of human politics, or to remove the high (virtue, beauty, God), about which we often disagree, from the public sphere and to replace it with the low (security, material plenty), about which we can supposedly all agree. But base materialism, Tocqueville thought, could not hold a free country together, could not form the basis of a true common good uniting a free people and sustaining a free republic. He feared above all the degrading effect of materialism on the France of his day: in his correspondence with John Stuart Mill, Tocqueville asserts that the “greatest malady which menaces” the French people is “the gradual destruction

(*anéantissement*)<sup>15</sup> of mores, the abasement of the spirit, the mediocrity of taste” (Tocqueville 1864, VI, 186; my translation).<sup>16</sup> France must not “console herself with building railroads and with creating prosperity in peace, in whatever way peace may be obtained” (*ibid.*, 187). The rulers of a democratic nation tempted with such consolations must work to preserve a “proud attitude” (*attitude fière*) or risk “a great debasement of the national character” (*ibid.*; translation from Pappe 1964). The greatest danger for a “democratic nation” is that it be allowed to “easily acquire the habit of sacrificing that which she believes is her greatness (*grandeur*) to her repose, the great affairs to the small” (*ibid.*, 186-187).<sup>17</sup>

Tocqueville goes so far as to call materialism a “dangerous malady of the human mind” (Tocqueville 2000, 519). This hostility comes not least from the fact that the characteristic vices of democracies “combine marvelously” with materialism to disastrous effect (*ibid.*). Tocqueville asserts that American religion, even with all its apparent strength, is powerless to “moderate the ardor in [an American] for enriching himself, which everything comes to excite” (*ibid.*, 279). In the second volume, he admits that the democratic “taste for material enjoyments ... soon disposes men to believe that all is nothing but matter,” which is tantamount to a rejection of religion *tout court*, for most religions are “only general, simple, and practical means of teaching men the immortality of the soul” (*ibid.*, 519). All religions respond to humanity’s “ineradicable desire for the infinite and immortal” (Kitch 2016, 950). But if human beings could imagine the possibility of an infinitely increasing amount of material enjoyment and mastery, then it is perhaps conceivable (or to be feared) that this psychological root of religious belief could be

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<sup>15</sup> The original phrase reads “*l’anéantissement graduel des moeurs.*” In an article on the Tocqueville’s correspondence with Mill, H.O. Pappe translates the same phrase as “the gradual *softening* of manners,” which may come closer to the sense than does my translation (Pappe 1964, 222).

<sup>16</sup> All translations from the original are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>17</sup> On Tocqueville’s concern for greatness, see Aurelian Craiutu’s insightful analysis of Tocqueville’s own deepest longings (2005). Cf also Lawler 1989 and 1993.

satisfied instead by ever-expanding wealth, or an ever-greater concern for material well-being. Democratic man, Tocqueville fears, might give himself over entirely to this vision of infinite materialism and thereby “finally degrade himself” (Tocqueville 2000, 519).

Tocqueville marshals a host of arguments in the fight against materialism. His first sally is to assert that “the excessive love of well-being can be harmful to well-being” (*ibid.*, 521), or that even a clever materialist would want to stave off the final triumph of materialism. It is, in other words, an appeal to enlightened self-interest, for the “angel teaches the brute the art of satisfying itself” (*ibid.*). The remarkable progress humanity has made in controlling nature and providing for our material wants and needs is possible only because of our elevation above the base material instincts that drive the animal world: “we employ our *souls* in finding the material goods toward which instinct alone leads them” and thus “all that elevates, enlarges, extends the *soul* renders it more capable of succeeding in the very one of its undertakings that does not concern it” (*ibid.*, 521-522; my emphases). The brute may enslave the angel; but the brute’s own interest dictates that it refrain from destroying its angel servant. Indeed, any attempt to do so appears initially to be doomed to failure, for if the brute ever succeeded in establishing materialism as the dominant public doctrine, society would fall into chaos and the measures taken to restore order would lead inevitably to the return of the angel, that is, the return of religion (*ibid.*, 523-524). According to this account, the destruction of religion is never the *final* destruction of religion; it is, at most, a prelude to the self-destruction of free society and, eventually, the rebirth of religion and society together.

Religion ought therefore to be maintained while it exists, not least as a bulwark against the temptation of self-destructive dogmatic materialism. Even statesmen who entertain private doubts should be able to realize the political strength of religion. Religion causes human beings

to “repress a thousand little passing desires the better to succeed in satisfying the great and permanent desire that torments them” (*ibid.*, 522); less beautifully and in purely mundane terms, we might say that religion inculcates a remarkable capacity for delaying gratification. Whereas, Tocqueville claims, materialism constantly restricts our time-horizon until we “think only of the next day” (*ibid.*, 523), religion places “the final goal of life” outside this life altogether (*ibid.*, 522). Religion thereby engenders a certain stamina and a commitment to long-term projects, two key qualities Tocqueville finds lacking in democratic society (*ibid.*, 522-524). It is in this way that “religious peoples...in occupying themselves with the other world...encountered the great secret of succeeding in this one” (*ibid.*, 522).

### **3. The Mortal or the Immortal God?**

And yet, Tocqueville in a way overstates the case. The merely material cannot serve as the basis of the common good *in a free republic*. One of the chief political problems with materialism, according to Tocqueville, is that it erodes our belief in justice. We lose in the first place the consolations of a mysterious but providential order. We come instead to believe that chance dominates a greater and greater portion of human events. We cease to trust that virtue is rewarded, and come at last to abandon even mundane prudence or long-term calculation as a foolish gamble:

when each seeks constantly to change place, when an immense competition is open to all, when wealth is accumulated and dissipated in a few instants amid the tumult of democracy, the idea of sudden and easy fortune, of great goods easily acquired and lost, the image of chance in all its forms presents itself to the human mind (*ibid.*).

Chance is not visible justice, nor even the invisible justice asserted by the religious doctrine of divine providence. The more powerful we believe chance to be, the less we will be inclined to

act justly or indeed even prudently, for prudence relies on actions having at least somewhat predictable results. If chance dominates all, the future cannot be planned; the only reasonable course is to seize whatever gratification is available in the current moment. If, he tells us, it comes to pass that religion is lost, governments will have to “apply themselves to giving back to men this taste for the future which is no longer inspired by religion;” but then it *is* in principle possible to give human beings this taste *without* religion (*ibid.*, 524). Politics can function, though perhaps not well, without religion, despite his apocalyptic account of materialist self-destruction.

One conceivable form of a purely materialist politics is Tocqueville’s nightmare vision of “democratic despotism” (*ibid.*, 664). In such a state, “like and equal men” pursue “small and vulgar pleasures” which “fill their souls”; the government “takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate,” fixing them “irrevocably in childhood” and taking away “from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living” (*ibid.*, 663). This government “does not tyrannize”—if anything, it gives the people exactly what they say they want and thereby exercises even greater power; but “little by little” it undermines liberty and renders citizens ever more dependent (*ibid.*, 663). This “regulated, mild, and peaceful servitude,” in which the people has become “a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd” (*ibid.*, 663), does not seem to suffer from the “tumult” and “instability” of the unregulated materialism of Tocqueville’s earlier argument (cf. *ibid.*, 523). If this paternalistic administrative state can become sufficiently wealthy, and war become sufficiently rare, perhaps the need “to banish chance as much as possible from the political world” would not require religion; sufficiently advanced market regulation and a sufficiently large service-providing administrative bureaucracy could replace the church (*ibid.*, 524).

Thoroughgoing Enlightenment materialism no sooner deprives us of the immortal God than it must construct in His stead the “mortall god” of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.

It is not at all clear that Tocqueville believes this situation to be impossible or untenable. To be sure, democratic despotism may eventually be forced to forgo the ritual of elections to prevent the “imbecility of the governed” (to which despotism leads) from hindering the efficiency of the government; but “a single master” may nevertheless preside over a paternalistic administrative state dedicated to democratic material well-being (Tocqueville 2000, 665). We today have examples of states (China, for instance) that have managed to combine this spirit of technocratic bureaucracy and top-down administrative management with dogmatic materialism and what Tocqueville would consider a democratic social state. Tocqueville’s actual animating concern thus seems to be, not whether this situation can last, but what effect such a government has on those who live under its dominion—whether this despotism eventually “extinguishes their spirits and enervates their souls,” causing them finally to fall “below the level of humanity” (*ibid.*). Materialism thus understood poses an existential threat not so much to political order as to political liberty, and to honorable and elevated human existence; it is, in large part, these things that Tocqueville seeks to save when he exhorts democratic statesmen to preserve religion. *Pace* his earlier appeal to enlightened self-interest, Tocqueville’s devotion to the angel is more than merely instrumental.

#### **4. How Should We Then Live?**

If Tocqueville’s analysis is correct, then the decline of American Christianity has prepared the way for the rise of socialist sympathies in at least three ways. In the first place, the clearing away of the comprehensive view of the whole provided by Christianity has not made way for the triumph of uncorrupted reason, but the replacement of, at best, one set of dogmatic



beliefs with another. Moreover, the economic instability of the past few decades has left many Americans feeling exposed to the vagaries of chance, and increasingly without the consolations of a hidden providential order. Finally, for a variety of reasons, American political thinking has come more and more to resemble that of the European Enlighteners and less and less the approach of our own Founders; we have moved away from, e.g., a dedication to ordered liberty for the sake of which we might be willing to pledge not only lives but our sacred honor, and toward a much more materialistic conception of the common good.<sup>18</sup> Socialism is, in a way, a natural response to this movement, for it is an ideology that urges us to centralize capital in the hands of the paternalistic state as a way to protect the naked individual—the atomized or isolated individual client of the service-providing state—against the ravages of fortune, in the name of a dogmatic materialist-egalitarian conception of justice.

Of course, the decline of religion is not solely to blame for this predicament; more accurately, the decline of religion is inextricably linked with other trends of political decay. The decline of widespread participation in local government, that training ground of democratic self-government according to Tocqueville (see, e.g., *ibid.*, 233), and the inexorable centralization of power in the administrative state—an institution that is “republican at the head and ultramonarchical in all other parts,” which arrangement Tocqueville calls “an ephemeral monster” (*ibid.*, 665)—are also at fault. But these causes are related. America’s churches once facilitated social cohesion on the local level, and therewith encouraged local self-government, to such an extent that churches often doubled as town meeting halls. And the service-providing

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<sup>18</sup> Note in this connection that, even where our Founders drew most explicitly on Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke (for instance, in echoing Locke’s assertion that the purpose of government is to secure “life, liberty, and property”) they modified the materialist Enlightenment teaching in a Christian and classical direction—the American government aims (or aimed) not merely at the security of property, but at the far more exalted “pursuit of happiness.” The American tradition therefore differs from Lockean philosophy in at least one crucial respect: for Locke, the protection of property is itself an end; in the American tradition, the protection of property is not an end, but merely a means to more important ends (and ultimately to the most important end: happiness).

administrative state, in many ways a precursor to the all-provident paternalistic democratic despotism Tocqueville feared, has arisen in no small part in response to the collapse of America's traditional intermediate social institutions, chief among them the family and the church. When these institutions cannot help shield the individual from the blows of fortune, the state will naturally step in to take over that responsibility. And as institutions like the church decline, the sentiments—the loyalty, the sense of community, and the dedication to a higher purpose—the church once inspired will transfer most naturally to the state.

It must also be admitted that, according to Tocqueville, American religion flourished in part precisely because American political economy at the time appeared to operate with a greater degree of egalitarian justice than is apparent today—or if not always with justice at least with wide-ranging generosity. Put differently, in Tocqueville's day capitalism was more democratic than it is today—great fortunes were made and lost without the benefit of elite accreditation or familial support. Tocqueville observed a constant revolution in the fortunes of Americans, tied more or less directly to their individual prudence and commercial good sense. The second child of a penniless bigamist con-man could become the wealthiest tycoon in American history, and an autodidact from backwoods Kentucky with less than a year of formal schooling could become one of our greatest presidents. This constant mixing of the high and low (not least in the pews of our churches), Tocqueville argued, prevented the formation of distinct socioeconomic classes in American politics. Numerous studies—many of them by conservative public intellectuals, from Charles Murray to Ross Douthat—have indicated that this healthy mixing is no longer occurring, or that our socioeconomic classes are beginning to ossify and stratify to a degree unknown in the history of our country. Tocqueville asserted that, in his day, the tastes, the interests, and the

pursuits of the rich were, broadly speaking, the same as the poor.<sup>19</sup> We can no longer say the same.

Wealthy policy making elites have increasingly segregated themselves into politically, economically, and even racially homogeneous enclaves with little to no awareness of the lives of most ordinary Americans, and little to no experience of the real-world results of their favorite policies.<sup>20</sup> The elites of, e.g., Brookline, Massachusetts and the DC suburbs have much less in common with average, everyday Americans in their own geographical areas than they do with the elites of Silicon Valley, in whose hands most of the wealth of the country has been centralized. These elites have shown themselves to be hostile to Christianity, traditional morality, and often even to the common American.<sup>21</sup> Unmoored from Christianity, these purveyors and beneficiaries of what we might charitably call oligarchic capitalism have come to view the country as little more than an economic alliance, or a contractual partnership for merely material gain, and one belonging to them and their ilk by right. For the average American, this centralization of capital in the hands of hostile elites is hardly preferable, and certainly no more democratic, than the centralization of capital in the hands of an incompetent government.

Conservatives must be willing to admit that this too has been a cause of rising sympathy for socialism; if we are going to resist that rising tide, we must endeavor to make capitalism democratic again. This effort does not necessarily require transfer payments or pointless redistributions of income for the sake of redistribution (not least because these solutions do not

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<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville of course acknowledged that there was, even in his day, a minute aristocratic class even in America; but he insisted that that class was politically and socially irrelevant (2000, 170-172).

<sup>20</sup> See, *inter alia*, Peggy Noonan's 2016 article "Trump and the Rise of the Unprotected."

<sup>21</sup> Consider the examples given in Ross Douthat's 2018 article in the *New York Times* on "The Rise of Woke Capitalism" and Tom Cotton's 2019 article in *First Things* on "The Dictatorship of Woke Capital." On a related note, consider the following remarks from Bill Kristol: "Look, if things are as bad as you say they are with the white working class, don't you want to get new Americans in?" and "I'd take in a heartbeat a group of newly naturalized American citizens over the spoiled native-born know-nothings" who supported Donald Trump.

fix the underlying problem—the anticompetitive and undemocratic centralization of capital in the hands of a few elites). It may however require a government willing to go after dangerous and ideological monopolies like Facebook and Google—companies that often use their massive resources to quash any attempt at competition. Consider, for instance, the practice of predatory pricing as an artificial way to increase barriers to market entry—whole subsidiaries designed to lose money for years (kept afloat by ultrawealthy investors) in order to put competitors out of business before hiking prices up to sustainable levels. Or consider Amazon’s supposedly noble-minded support for increasing taxes on companies like Amazon: Amazon supports these taxes precisely because they can afford to pay them, whereas competitors may not be able to do so. In other words, our situation may require a more active role for government to *revive* and *protect* competition, not least because more competition will result in a more democratic distribution of capital and economic power. Conservative senators like Josh Hawley and Marco Rubio are already trying to chart a course in this direction—to recover a role for religion in public life and to restore the democratic element of democratic capitalism to prominence. It is the job of conservative academics to assist them in this endeavor.

## **5. Conclusion**

According to Tocqueville, it is far more difficult to restore religion once lost than to preserve a religion that exists. It is particularly difficult given the interconnectedness of religion, public morality, and political economy. And yet, precisely because of that interconnectedness, an effort must be made. That effort must, I think, begin with religion—even if only with a reawakening among religious conservatives of the importance of Christianity as a guide in all aspects of public policy. We need this reawakening for both strategic and principled reasons: mere proceduralism cannot compete with the impassioned cries for justice we hear from

progressives. Conservatives must find a way to articulate a conception of justice and liberty that is not merely procedural, not merely economic, if we are to have any chance of winning hearts and minds. But more importantly, the distinction between liberty and license is meaningless without reference to some understanding of virtue and a more-than-material common good. The Bible and the Christian intellectual tradition obviously have a great deal to teach us about both.

Thus, a renewed conservative focus on political economy—on a political economy that is both democratic *and* capitalist—must begin with a renewed appreciation for the political role of Christianity in American democracy. The Christian moral teaching enables us to distinguish between liberty and license and to restrain ourselves for our own good instead of relying on the government to restrain our excesses. Christianity teaches us a more-than-material common good, which in turn allows us to understand the instrumental role that democratic capitalism can play in serving that common good; in other words, a clearer understanding of the common good will allow us to distinguish good regulations from bad regulations, between true infringements on liberty and the mere restraint of license.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, the compelling, if obviously controversial, argument given by Lowenthal (*No Liberty for License*) that the First Amendment does not protect, and was never intended to protect, obscenity, pornography, or seditious speech. Lowenthal argues that the Court's current excessively permissive approach has been "shaped by an inadequate conception of the importance of public morality and an excessive concern for individual liberty—a concern inconsistent with our historical tradition, with our long-range interests as a free people, and with the true interests of thought, literature, and art as well" (149). Lowenthal's treatment of religion in the book is based upon his rejection of any neutrality with respect to religious belief, based on his "understanding of the moral and political contributions religion, and only religion, can make to the well-being of the American commonwealth" (*ibid.*, 202).

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