

**IN GOD WE TRUST?  
TOCQUEVILLE ON THE CHALLENGES FACING  
LIBERAL DEMOCRACY TODAY**

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Is democracy faltering? The optimistic melody of the 1990s has since given way to a more somber tune. The 2008 financial crisis exacerbated inequality and a sense of societal injustice, while at the same time many people began to see immigration as a threat to their nation's economic security and cultural identity. The dismissal of such fears by ruling elites led to people dismissing the elites. Populists from both left and right fill the void with a message shaped by emotions that reflect both real concerns and irrational fears. Add to this the unprecedented limitations to personal freedoms lately enacted by peacetime democratic governments to fight the Coronavirus pandemic, and we get a taste of how things may look in a post-liberal West. The pillars of a liberal democratic order are being put to the test, and many voters don't seem to mind, or seem eager to watch them fall.

So is this a temporary crisis or are we witnessing a more substantial phenomenon, perhaps a late phase of the liberal political system? Are the current doubts about democracy but a hangover after the neoliberal '80s and the optimism of the post-Cold War '90s, or is the problem more structural? The empirical data is suggestive: fewer than one-third of American-born millennials are of the opinion that democracy is "essential," compared to two-thirds of their parents'

generation.<sup>1</sup> The straightforward explanation of this trend is material: the West can no longer promise improvements in living standards, while an increasing wealth gap undermines the promise of equal opportunity and exacerbates social divisions.<sup>2</sup> To this one should add the effect of social media, which encourage partisan politics and gives disproportionate exposure to extreme opinions.<sup>3</sup>

Material factors point to an important aspect of what is going wrong in some countries, but they do not provide a sufficient explanation. This is obvious when one considers places like Poland, Hungary, or India, where wealth per-capita has increased markedly in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that, to understand the rise of anti-liberal forces, we must employ psychological categories.<sup>5</sup> These may include theories about “identity politics,” that help explain how unfulfilled desires for recognition can result in the resentment that fuels various populist movements.<sup>6</sup>

Much of what is being written on identity politics today takes its cue from Christopher Lasch.<sup>7</sup> In a series of essays published together in the early 1990s under the title *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch presents a damning account of a globalized, cosmopolitan elite in America. He argued that this elite has no sense of responsibility for the community from which it emerged, while being responsible for and oblivious to the breakdown in public trust that neither the market nor government could salvage. This process was being underwritten by two closely connected liberal tenets: the belief in progress and the conviction that a democratic state can dispense with civic virtue as long as appropriate institutions are in place. For a while this sufficed, Lasch argues, because American democracy had lived off the “borrowed capital of moral and religious traditions antedating the rise of liberalism”;<sup>8</sup> but that capital was drying up, with democracy in crisis as a result.<sup>9</sup>

Lasch’s was a Tocquevillian argument. Underlying it was the unresolved and unresolvable tension between the liberal and the democratic elements of our political system, that is, between the promise of freedom and that of equality. The ebbing of habits instilled by religious and moral traditions exacerbated this tension. In this framework, identity politics is simultaneously a response to this exacerbation and an inferior substitute for religion.<sup>10</sup> It replaced America’s salutary “middle class nationalism,”<sup>11</sup> and came to offer the

sense of security, spiritual comfort, and dogmatic knowledge in place of doubt, qualities that were once associated with Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

With the help of these notions, articulated by (among others) Lasch, it becomes clear that de Tocqueville has something important to say about the current challenges facing democracies. In fact, Tocqueville faced a similar rise of populism in nineteenth-century France, and he spent his entire professional career attempting to inoculate his compatriots against this threat, an effort in which religion played an important part. His take on democratic dynamics casts a different light on our own predicament, complicating the identity politics theories that try to explain it.

When applying Tocqueville's insight, it should be noted from the outset that in speaking of "democracy" we usually use the term in its narrow meaning, as a system of governance; however, in the nineteenth century the word often denoted a broader phenomenon, a common way of thinking that references prevailing desires and values. In this latter sense, "democracy" is a social state, as is "aristocracy." When Tocqueville uses these terms, it is this wider meaning that he intends. That is why he speaks of democracy as involving not only institutions, but also the habits and values held by those living in it.

Tocqueville holds that democracy rests on two basic principles: equality and freedom. But the degree to which people cherish these two ideals is not, in his opinion, itself equal. People in a democracy, he writes, cherish liberty but cannot live without equality; they are happy to have both, but these two values are not always aligned, and if democrats need to choose, they will pick equality over freedom.<sup>13</sup> A community will sooner become equal and deprived of certain freedoms than suffer what it perceives as unjust privilege in its midst. When Tocqueville speaks of *l'égalité des conditions*, he is not referring only to the legal dimension of equality, nor to equality of wealth or talent. The Greeks had a word for what he meant: *isonomia*, the equality of those who form a body of peers.<sup>14</sup> We can also understand this as an equality of moral standing. It is both an ethical and a psychological condition. According to Tocqueville, this condition is the defining feature of democratic social life.

This is why Tocqueville holds that democracy is incessantly at risk of losing its liberal component to demagogues offering the impression of justice.<sup>15</sup> The maintenance of a liberal political order requires an active civil society, Tocqueville argues,<sup>16</sup> as the art of politics is not a given—it must be learned and nurtured.<sup>17</sup> And unfortunately, democracy does not encourage the sacrifice of one's time, energy, or privacy for the common good. On the contrary, claims Tocqueville, many of the behaviors characteristic of people in democratic societies have the opposite effect. Central to this is a democratic trait Tocqueville identifies as excessive individualism. He thinks of this as a problem of related propensities. People in a democracy require freedom to be able to take care of their private lives, to which they will devote time that could otherwise be directed to matters of common concern;<sup>18</sup> by prospering in private they convince themselves that their own well-being is an issue independent of the common good. If asked, such a person will not willingly forego his or her political rights, but he will not find the time to stand up for these rights, as long as his private affairs are not being interfered with. In addition, isolated from fellow citizens, he will not even be quite sure how to effectively oppose the gradual encroachment on his liberties by the state.<sup>19</sup>

The threat this poses to liberal politics is exacerbated by democratic dynamics. Democracy stimulates a search for identity and offers little in the way of authority, according to Tocqueville. This stems from the revolutionary nature of modern society, which incessantly upends norms and traditions, something also recognized by Karl Marx.<sup>20</sup> The lack of authority results from the fact that in the age of equality people are unlikely to accept the superiority of any one person in their midst. With little in the way of serious role models or meaningful reference to tradition, they subject themselves to numerous trials of self-definition, in egotistic rituals that leave no space for common concerns.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this, the rapid development of commercial exchange and the dominance of the scientific method in democratic societies affect the way people experience time. In aristocratic societies, one's own lifetime is intimately connected with the history of one's ancestors and with future generations. In democracy, time becomes cheap and fleeting. Fortunes are made and lost in a day. People become used to expecting quick gain, and the present completely eclipses any

consideration of past or future generations. Yet a longer perspective is crucial for people's well-being, Tocqueville argues, both materially and politically, because it allows them to think in terms of a multigenerational community.<sup>22</sup>

When these tendencies are allowed to develop unhindered, Tocqueville believes that society is at risk of becoming illiberal. The growth of individualism leaves issues of common concern to be attended to by a centralized government, which is simultaneously expected to address demands concerning individual rights. Faced with such expectations, the government is inherently keen to increase its prerogatives, to the detriment of liberty.<sup>23</sup> This may lead to a degeneration of democracy into an illiberal version of itself, Tocqueville predicts, one that is "neither cruel nor savage" but "caviling and meddlesome,"<sup>24</sup> with elections becoming a formality offering little meaningful choice.<sup>25</sup>

According to Tocqueville, therefore, democracy contains within itself threats to the freedom it tries to insure. These include individualism, apathy, and alienation. Since these are spiritual rather than material malaises, Tocqueville believes that for people in a democracy to continue to cherish and defend their liberty, they must first and foremost cherish and nurture their souls.<sup>26</sup>

It is not often that religion is evoked as a bulwark of democracy. Modern liberal democracy is the child of an effort to create a system of governance founded on secular ideas.<sup>27</sup> The eighteenth century French *philosophes* saw the Catholic Church as necessarily at odds with liberty. Karl Marx's conclusion that religion is "the opium of the people," preventing them from acting in their true interests, was an expression of the same Enlightenment tradition, as was the modernization theory that emerged after World War II. The idea of secularization—that is, of the inevitable decline of religion in parallel with the advance of knowledge—has dominated the social sciences for most of their existence, accentuating these views. The thought that religion is irrelevant, if not somehow detrimental, to democracy, holds more sway in society today than Tocqueville's proposition. But although there is no doubt that the liberal democratic system has its roots in the very rational endeavors by Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and others to prevent bloodshed provoked by theological disputes, as well as to overcome the brutality, injustice, and stagnation of the

aristocratic age, this does not imply that it is independent of cultural factors shaped by religion.

Tocqueville suggests that at its core democracy requires from individuals an irrational belief in something bigger than oneself in order to flourish. This would be the sense

that everyone belongs much more to this collective Being than he does to himself; that towards this Being no one ought to be indifferent, much less, by treating such indifference as a sort of languid virtue, to enervate many of our noblest instincts; that every one is responsible for the fortunes of this collective Being; that every one is bound to work out its prosperity, and to watch that it be not governed except by respectable, beneficent, and legitimate authorities.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly religion is not the only way to achieve this; ideologies and demagoguery provide alternatives. But Tocqueville is of the opinion that only religion can deliver this non-rational sense of “collective being”<sup>29</sup> in a way that supports the liberal elements of a democratic social structure.

This is because of the particular nature of democratic freedom. Under an aristocracy, freedom meant the independence of a privileged few. Democratic freedom requires willing abidance to laws established freely by the political community.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore a freedom that is based on the acceptance of limits to freedom. A democrat is constrained as an individual so as to be free as a citizen.<sup>31</sup> This applies to the “collective being” of any democratic society. A fine balance must be struck between this sense of communal aims and responsibility on the one hand, and an upholding of private freedoms on the other.<sup>32</sup> The French Revolution serves as proof for Tocqueville that ideologically driven politics falter in this balancing act. The “dogma of political necessity” must have its limits where individual rights are concerned, something the revolutionaries in Tocqueville’s France patently failed to adhere to.<sup>33</sup>

Religion allows for this balance to be had, Tocqueville argues. It offers a sense of collective being and sanctifies the individual; it counters individualism by pointing the way from self to God as running through society,<sup>34</sup> and by redirecting one’s attention away from the trappings of immediacy.<sup>35</sup> It fortifies the individual by imposing a “salutary discipline” on his intellect; this mitigates doubt regarding the meaningfulness of life, doubt the excess of which “enervates the soul, weakening the springs of the will and preparing

citizens for servitude.”<sup>36</sup> But for Tocqueville religion also prevents one from ever conceiving certain things; any ideology promoting the dangerous maxim that everything is permitted in the interest of society, even at the cost of the sanctity of human life, could never germinate in a religious society, he points out, taking the United States as his example.<sup>37</sup>

Tocqueville does not think that our religious nature will wane as modernity progresses.<sup>38</sup> But he predicts that “positive religion” will weaken and that certain, more democratic, “spiritual practices” can be expected to develop outside the institutionalized churches, as the former lose their influence.<sup>39</sup> Our pursuit of equality may find its expression in pantheism, he thinks, in which the distinction between the sacred and the profane is challenged, “subsuming God and the universe in a single whole.”<sup>40</sup> Or, our individualistic inclinations may find an outlet in a neo-religious emphasis on the spiritual authority of the self. These are but expressions of an elaborate egotism, Tocqueville warns, a manifestation of “intellectual sloth”<sup>41</sup> with no benefits for the soul, or liberty.<sup>42</sup>

Authority in questions of religion is required to prevent a spiritual degeneration of this sort, Tocqueville argues. Basic religious truths, “definite ideas about God, the soul and...general duties toward the Creator and fellow man,” should not be questioned, because they exceed the capacity of reason; they should fall under dogma.<sup>43</sup>

The French author is well aware of how undemocratic this sounds to the modern ear, “how reluctant the human mind has been to entertain dogmatic beliefs in ages of enlightenment and equality.”<sup>44</sup> Yet society cannot function without dogmas, Tocqueville argues, understood as opinions that are accepted on faith and without discussion. “If society is to exist and, *a fortiori*, to prosper, the minds of all citizens must be drawn and held together by certain leading ideas,” he states, “and that cannot happen unless each of them draws his opinions from the same source and is prepared to accept a certain number of ready-made beliefs.”<sup>45</sup> The alternative that Tocqueville is presenting is not one between a body of peers instructed solely by rational conduct and one that conducts itself on the fundament of irrational belief. The irrational element is always a part of democratic society; what is at stake is who or what provides these dogmatic beliefs. Or, to quote Tocqueville, “the question is not whether some

form of intellectual authority exists in democratic ages but only where it resides and what its extent may be.”<sup>46</sup>

In a democracy, the most natural source of belief is that which functions as common opinion, Tocqueville explains. “In times of equality, men have no faith in one another because of their similarity, but that same similarity gives them almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public, because it seems unlikely to them that, everyone being equally enlightened, truth should not lie with the greater number.”<sup>47</sup> The dogmatic knowledge thus produced by the public is formidable; the opinion of the majority imposes its beliefs, and “it permeates men’s souls.”<sup>48</sup> Thus anyone who manages to sway the public may exercise a hold on it of a fortitude akin to that which the church enjoyed in the centuries of religious fervor. This is the threat of democratic populism, witnessed by Tocqueville from up close, as Napoleon III destroyed the French Second Republic.

The function that Tocqueville assigns to religion extends beyond its inadvertent support of democratic liberty. Although the author’s political philosophy is thoroughly secular and democratic, he believes that any stable society requires a living belief in the idea of the immortal soul.<sup>49</sup> This comes down to the problem of theodicy. Without the idea of the immortality of the soul it is hard to conceive how justice can be had in a world so apparently unjust, the argument goes; and without the chance of conceiving a just universe it is difficult to argue for the inherent value of political freedom, for what would be the point?<sup>50</sup> That is why Tocqueville states that what matters most for society “is not so much that all citizens profess the true religion as that each citizen profess some religion.”<sup>51</sup> And although the author holds metempsychosis to be a silly theory, he is of the opinion that it is better for a democrat to believe that after death his soul would be reincarnated in the body of a pig than for him to accept having no soul at all.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, for Tocqueville, faith in the immortality of the soul forms the basis of society.<sup>53</sup> He has no doubt, however, that this faith will be most difficult to maintain, because democracy “encourages the taste for material gratification...leading man to believe that everything is mere matter.” The stakes are high enough for him to conclude that those who profess theories that everything perishes with the body should be regarded as “enemies of the people.”<sup>54</sup>



Tocqueville's philosophy lies on a metaphysical fundament, the roots of which can be traced to the Bible. Matthew 4:4 tells us of the Savior coming to the world to liberate humanity. During his time in the desert, he is tempted by Satan to perform a miracle by changing stones to bread so as to convince his followers of his divinity. By succumbing Christ would have forced his disciples into submission. "One does not live by bread alone," Jesus replies to the Devil. Instead of earthly bread he offers people freedom and the promise of life after death, if they will believe in him and follow him. But do people actually want this? Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor asks just this question in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In his opinion there are only two options: man will renounce freedom for earthly bread or he will be free with Christ, suffering in the faith that heavenly bread awaits. Society cannot have both, the Inquisitor argues, because free men will never share their bread justly with others. The Inquisitor offers people bread at the price of their freedom, and Dostoyevsky leaves us pondering whether this is not for our own good.<sup>55</sup>

The exceptional thing about democracy is that it offers to reconcile these two ideals. It offers humanity both freedom and bread; people have the potential to be free and equal. This is what makes the democratic promise so exceptional and why Tocqueville sees democracy's progress as an expression of God's glory.<sup>56</sup> His life's work is based on the premise that humanity can fulfill this promise,<sup>57</sup> but it is far from inevitable. For it to be possible, Tocqueville is convinced that people must care for their souls. The author of *Democracy in America* is of the opinion that human nature is essentially unchangeable, somewhere between the states of angel and animal.<sup>58</sup> Freedom is a value cherished by humans' angelic side, he argues, but the animal is not particularly concerned. It is up to religion to nurture the angelic by accommodating the soul.

Tocqueville's argument can be summarized as follows. The belief that the democratic project is an essentially rational one, which implies that it will flourish in parallel with the progress of the enlightenment of the people, is dangerous because it discourages us from seeing the structural threats to our liberty. The collective being is something other than an aggregate of rational individuals; it requires dogmatic beliefs to exist, and the content of the dogma matters. People will always believe certain things without understanding them; this is an epistemological necessity.<sup>59</sup> If they

accept on authority claims pertaining predominantly to the short-term common good, they will jeopardize their political skills, which are not something democrats are born with. Populists can then take advantage of the full force of public opinion as expressed through identity politics, aggravating the tensions between equality and liberty to the detriment of the latter. It is therefore advisable that the dogmatic knowledge relied upon pertains to problems of more long-term consequence, which transcend the quotidian challenges facing a community. This will allow citizens to exercise their judgment on issues concerning politics, while sparing them energy in areas over which their rational and scientific apparatus can have less say, such as the condition of the soul.

But this is only part of the argument. The other concerns the matter of our actual fondness for liberty. Tocqueville does not embrace the optimistic idea that people cherish liberty above all. This is not the case by default, he argues. Our love of freedom is a potential that can be fulfilled in democracy; but it requires people to nurture that which transcends the material, rational and temporal. People will not care for freedom without a well-ordered soul. Tocqueville is clear that for religion to serve this dual purpose of providing space for people's political independence and nurturing a love of that independence, it must be harmonized with a democratic social state. The example he uses is that of Christianity as he found it in the United States in the 1830s.<sup>60</sup>

#### THE PRESENT

Applying Tocqueville's insight about religion to our current predicament may seem counterintuitive. Does religion not accompany those right-wing populist movements that threaten the future of the liberal democratic system? The Catholic Church is supporting illiberal governments in Poland and Hungary. Evangelicals voted for Trump. Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party is stirring a wave of Hindu nationalism.

The liberal creed is founded on the recognition of universal human rights. Identity politics focuses on the recognition of the specific rights of certain groups. In its right-wing variety, identity is often defined through religious affiliation. Whether it is the Catholic identity of conservative Poles or the Hindu identity of the supporters

of Modi, religion is used to separate and delineate. As such, it becomes similar in form and substance to nationalism.<sup>61</sup>

For Christianity to be a force of exclusion is anathema to Tocqueville. On the contrary, it is precisely the universalistic message of Christ that makes this religion an ally of liberal democracy, in his opinion. This is why Tocqueville held that the alliance of the French Catholic Church with reactionaries in the 1830s, or with Napoleon III in the 1850s, was an unfortunate mix-up, and not an inevitable outcome. His two great works, *La Démocratie en Amérique* and *L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*, were meant to prove to the French that it can be the other way around, that the clergy should stand hand-in-hand with liberals.

When considering the future well-being of democracy, Tocqueville prefers any of the great religions to a materialistic outlook. He nevertheless holds that some are better equipped to maintain democracy than others. It is because Christianity does not provide a clear framework of how a Christian world is to be ruled, for example, that it is compatible with political liberty to a larger extent than Islam; correspondingly, the Christian message of the equality of all people in the eyes of God makes it more democratic than Hinduism, Tocqueville would suggest. The appeal of radical Islam to some third-generation immigrants in France today, or the stirring of minds by Hindu nationalism in India, can be explained by right-wing identity politics, in which case the function of these religions should be understood foremost as offering a source of identification.<sup>62</sup> But a Tocquevillian reading of religion's importance in democracy pertains primarily to the West, in which the liberal order has been shaped by an ongoing struggle with Christianity.<sup>63</sup>

That said, much the same argument about religion functioning primarily as a source of identity can be made when considering the Catholics supporting right-wing populists in Poland or Hungary.<sup>64</sup> Ivan Krastev offers an interesting theory of why these countries, once considered poster-children of successful transitions to liberal democracy, are now succumbing to illiberal forces. He focuses on the resentments in societies that in 1989 were assured that no alternative existed to the Western liberal-democratic model. A Communist orthodoxy was replaced by a liberal one, and a new imbalance of power, that between the imitated (Western Europe) and imitators

(post-communist Europe), established. While on an absolute scale liberal democracy was incomparably preferable to the former Marxist-Leninist model, subjectively a similar socially wrenching experience of imitative politics was required, Krastev concludes. Precisely because the West is predominantly secular, Catholicism became a potent symbol for the reaction against 30 years of imitation, forming an important part of the right-wing, identity-fueled populism rocking Poland and Hungary today.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, therefore, it is not religion that turns minds away from liberal democracy; it is rather a sense of resentment, for which religious affiliation becomes the vehicle.

When Tocqueville wrote of the role of religion in the good fortunes of a democracy, it was the United States he based his argument on. But at least since Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* it has been argued that the Protestant ethic weakened irretrievably in America. Christopher Lasch echoes this concern. And yet the United States remains overwhelmingly religious. New York Times columnist Ross Douthat points this out, but argues that in an important sense Americans are only Christian in name. They follow a "bad religion", one that preaches to "an affluent, appetitive society exactly what it wants to hear: that all of its deepest desires are really God's desires, and that He wouldn't dream of judging."<sup>66</sup> Tocqueville feared that "intellectual sloth"<sup>67</sup> could lead to a transmutation of the old faith into a pseudo-spiritual movement that justifies the very dissipation it should be curbing, and Douthat is suggesting this is in fact what has happened to American religiosity.

It would be far off the mark, however, to suggest some sort of updated civil religion or Christian theocracy as the Tocquevillean response to what is being described. Tocqueville's books are not tracts in political theology. The separation of Church and State is, for him, key. If anything, he is a student of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, not Joseph de Maistre. But not the Rousseau of the *Social Contract*; it is the humanist religion presented in the *Profession of Faith of the Savoy Vicar* that serves as his model.<sup>68</sup> Although Tocqueville considered himself a Catholic (albeit a struggling one), what he proposed for the future of democracy is above all a benign form of Theism. He believed that a clear and ubiquitous idea of an Absolute is necessary for the love of freedom to remain firm in society. "For my part, I doubt man can ever tolerate both complete religious independence and total political

liberty,” he writes, “and I am inclined to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.”<sup>69</sup>

This is not a proposition that liberals today are generally happy to accept, and it is safe to assume that most of them do not. Considering that the previous dark century of ideologies is just barely history, this skepticism is understandable. But those who worry excessively about ideological fanaticism often fall into a complacency of their own. These devoutly open-minded intellectuals see themselves “as a civilized minority in a sea of fanaticism,” as Lasch put it.<sup>70</sup> “Priding themselves on their emancipation from religion, they misunderstand religion as a set of definitive, absolute dogmas resistant to any kind of intelligent appraisal [and thus] they miss the discipline against fanaticism in religion itself.”<sup>71</sup> No prophetic tradition was more vigorous in condemning this urge for certainty than the Judeo-Christian one.<sup>72</sup>

Applying Tocqueville’s insight today suggests that the current crisis has something to do with a spiritual disorder, a dislocation of dogma in democracies. But what unfolds as a consequence of this disorder is not nihilism. On the contrary, identity politics offers debilitating certainties—and that is the problem. Tocqueville suggests that Christianity, correctly understood, requires a rejection of any definitive identity and an acceptance of uncertainty as part of the human condition. This is what he means when, in a poignant evocation of Pascal, he presents life as a balancing act between the abyss of nothingness and that of eternity.<sup>73</sup> It is through the acknowledgment of this condition that individual moral choice is possible, and that is why religion remains a source of liberal freedom.

As we attempt to stabilize the wobbling fundament of our liberal democratic order we would do well to consider Alexis de Tocqueville, who reminds us that our love of freedom is a sentiment the persistence of which we too often take for granted.

## NOTES

- [1] Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2018, p. 135.
- [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31; see also Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2017.
- [3] Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, p. 31.
- [4] A close study of an unspecified small city in central Poland points to the centrality of a sense of belonging and a common narrative of regained dignity to the right-wing Law and Justice party currently in power; material matters seem to be of secondary importance to it. Maciej Gdula, *Dobra zmiana w miastku. Neoantorytyzm w Polskiej polityce z perspektywy małego miasta*, available online at: [krytykapolityczna.pl/file/sites/4/2017/10/Dobra-zmiana-w-Miastku.pdf](http://krytykapolityczna.pl/file/sites/4/2017/10/Dobra-zmiana-w-Miastku.pdf).
- [5] See Ivan Krastev & Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, Penguin Books, London, 2019; see also Francis Fukuyama, *Identity, Contemporary Identity Politics, and the Struggle for Recognition*, Profile Books, London, 2019.
- [6] Francis Fukuyama argues, in an American perspective, that identity politics originated on the left and has served as an example for the much more dangerous identity politics of the right (see Fukuyama, *Identity*, pp. 118-120). The rise of Hungary's Orbán and Poland's Kaczyński are classic examples of right-wing identity politics; they offer their supporters an evocation of a traditional communal national identity, which was looked down upon by the cosmopolitan elites formerly governing these countries.
- [7] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, Norton, London, 2013. Like Lasch 30 years ago, authors discussing identity politics today tend to recognize a genuine deficit of democratic agency in periods running up to a populist takeover of a government. This concession is then followed by the admission that only the nation-state can guarantee such agency. See Fukuyama, *Identity*, p. 139; Jan Zielonka, *Counter Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018, p. 34; Krastev, *The Light that Failed*, p. 58; Mounk, *The People vs Democracy*, p. 32.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- [9] Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, pp. 47, 101.
- [10] "...or at least for the feeling of self-righteousness that is so commonly confused with religion." *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- [11] This nationalism provides "a common ground, common standard and common frame of reference without which society dissolves." *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- [12] *Ibid.*
- [13] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Library of America, New York, 2004, pp. 581-84.
- [14] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1963, p. 30.
- [15] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 584.

- [16] *Ibid.*, pp. 820-21.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 823. Tocqueville proposes a “new political science” to this end (see *Democracy in America*, p. 7). In order to uphold meaningful representation and resist the natural tendency of any modern state to gradually centralize power through an ongoing exchange, where security and comfort is offered at the price of freedoms, secondary bodies constituted by ordinary citizens are essential (*Democracy in America*, p. 823).
- [18] See Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*, available on line at: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/constant-the-liberty-of-ancients-compared-with-that-of-moderns-1819>
- [19] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 585-87.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 640.
- [21] “...threatening to imprison [democrats] in the loneliness of their own heart.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 587.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 585-87.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 590.
- [24] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 629.
- [25] “The system would degrade, without tormenting.” *Ibid.*, p. 817-19.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 503.
- [27] See Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, Random House, New York, 2008.
- [28] Alexis de Tocqueville to Madame Swetchine, October 20, 1856, in *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*. Translated from the French by the translators of Napoleon’s correspondence with King Joseph. 2 vols., Macmillan, London, 1861; vol. 2, p. 1610 [?]. Available on line at: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-memoir-letters-and-remains-of-alexis-de-tocqueville-vol-2>
- [29] *Ibid.*
- [30] Alexis de Tocqueville, “État social et politique de la France avant et depuis 1789,” *Œuvres*, III: *De la démocratie en Amérique III*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004, sections 32–37.
- [31] Radical freedom is nothing but anarchy, Montesquieu claims in *The Spirit of the Laws*.
- [32] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 829.
- [33] *Ibid.*, pp. 827-28.
- [34] *Ibid.*, p. 629.
- [35] *Ibid.*, p. 639.
- [36] *Ibid.*, pp. 502-503.
- [37] *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- [38] *Ibid.*, p. 340. Today, “post-secular theory” suggests that his predictions are correct. Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World, Resurgent Religion, and World Politics*, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, DC, 1999. Tocqueville also rejects the idea that a more democratic religion should or could take root in modern times. (“Men who live in ages of equality are ... not inclined to locate the intellectual authority to which they submit outside and above mankind,” he writes. “This is sufficient, perhaps, to prove that no new religion can be established in such ages, and that any attempt to do so would be not just impious but

ridiculous and unreasonable.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 490). This is a point on which he notably differs from some of his contemporaries (see, e.g., Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion: Or a Summary Exposition of the Universal Religion in Thirteen Systematic Conversations between a Woman and a Priest of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2009) and Émile Durkheim (e.g., *On Morality and Society: Selected Writings*, edited by Robert N. Bellah, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973).

- [39] The trend towards an expanding pluralism of religious expression is well-studied in ‘post-secular’ theory (see, e.g., Peter Berger, *The Many Alters of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2014.). On the other hand, José Casanova argues that public, institutionalized religions are enjoying a comeback (see his *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994).
- [40] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 513.
- [41] *Ibid.*
- [42] This is no laughing matter: “... all who are still enamoured of man’s true greatness should join forces to combat” these versions of democratic spirituality. *Ibid.*
- [43] *Ibid.*, p. 501.
- [44] *Ibid.*, p. 504. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that this knowledge must be entrusted to an institution made up of people, whose shortcomings prove to be numerous.
- [45] *Ibid.*, p. 489.
- [46] *Ibid.*, p. 490.
- [47] *Ibid.*, p. 491.
- [48] *Ibid.*
- [49] *Ibid.*, p. 635. He shares this view with his contemporary, Dostoyevsky, whose Ivan Karamazov famously states that if there is no God, everything is permitted.
- [50] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 12.
- [51] *Ibid.*, p. 335
- [52] *Ibid.*, p. 636.
- [53] Tocqueville to Gobineau, October 2, 1843, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, Doubleday, Ann Arbor, 1959.
- [54] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 635.
- [55] See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002.
- [56] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- [57] *Ibid.*, p. 830.
- [58] *Ibid.*, p. 638.
- [59] This finds confirmation in some contemporary theories in the sociology of knowledge. See, e.g., Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Knowledge: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin, London, 1991.
- [60] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 332.
- [61] Fukuyama makes this point. See Fukuyama, *Identity*, pp. 68-69.



- [62] Olivier Roy argues that Islam as a set of dogmas is secondary among third-generation French immigrants to its role as a source of communal identity. (See the Roy-Kepel debate: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/kepel-vs-roy-arguing-about-islam-and-radicalization/>.) Pratap Bhanu Mehta has a similar argument to make about India, maintaining that Narendra Modi uses Hinduism instrumentally, as a unifying force aimed at dismantling the caste system of party support. (See Isaac Chotiner Q & A with Pratap Bhanu Mehta, “An Indian Political Theorist on the Triumph of Narendra Modi’s Hindu Nationalism,” *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2019.) In both cases, therefore, religion can be seen as primarily a structure for self-definition, in defiance of what is considered to be the mainstream position, be it the *l’Etat laïque* in France or the Anglicized secularism of the Congress Party in India.
- [63] See Lilla, *The Stillborn God*.
- [64] For a sociological analysis of the role of religion in defining Polish identity, see Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer, *Ordinary Celebrations, Reshaping Poland’s Community after Communism*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019.
- [65] Ivan Krastev, *The Light that Failed*, p. 71. It is quite probable that religion serves a similar, reactionary function in the left-behind areas of the United States, against the coastal, secular elites.
- [66] Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Free Press, New York, 2012, p. 236.
- [67] *Ibid.*, p. 513.
- [68] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, Chicago, 1979.
- [69] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 503.
- [70] Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, pp. 89-90.
- [71] *Ibid.*
- [72] Christianity contains a whole assortment of important, unresolved dichotomies. These include: the finite world as an emanation of God against an image of this world understood as God’s negation, the human nature of Christ against his divine nature, free will against predestination and grace, the visible Church against the invisible, the Law against love (agape), Word against Spirit, knowledge against belief, salvation through deeds against salvation through faith, the state against the Church, earth against Heaven, God-the-creator against God as Absolute. Leszek Kołakowski argues that this unresolvable tension had an important influence on the development of European thought, dissuading it from accepting definitive solutions and stimulating an incessant questioning of the epistemological limits to reasoning. See Leszek Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless trial*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997, pp. 14-31.
- [73] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 513.

## ABSTRACT

I argue that revisiting Alexis de Tocqueville's interpretation of the role of religion in maintaining civil liberties in democracies allows for a more nuanced understanding of the crisis that liberal democracy finds itself in around the world. I use Christopher Lasch to link this insight with the Identity Politics theories that attempt to explicate our current predicament, and contrast the function assigned religion in rightwing movements today with Tocqueville's understanding of its salutary function.