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Tocqueville, Democratic Poetry, and the Religion of Humanity

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Abstract

The Religion of Humanity has typically been associated with Auguste Comte's positivism. Within liberal philosophical debate, John Stuart Mill's measured advocacy for it has received some attention, especially given his otherwise well-known emphasis on the tension between religion and liberty. Yet Alexis de Tocqueville's perceptive awareness of the Religion of Humanity as an evolving phenomenon, expressed through his discussion of democratic poetry, remained largely unnoticed. Of course, Tocqueville's essential religio-political task was to promote a modified version of Christianity and buttress the standing of religious morality as an outside barrier against human action motivated by democratic materialism, notwithstanding the secular doctrine of self-interest well understood. Indeed, despite the neutral tone of Tocqueville's discussion of democratic poetry, elsewhere his critique of democratic pantheism, writers and orators, theatre, and historians warned against excessive veneration of humanity, which amounted to a sublimation of the dogma of the sovereignty of the people.

Keywords: Alexis de Tocqueville; democratic poetry; the Religion of Humanity; John Stuart Mill; Auguste Comte

Despite scholarly preoccupation with religion, or its centrality, in the political thought of Tocqueville, his discussion of human-centered democratic poetry in the second volume of *Democracy in America* has not been recognized for its likely references to a nascent worldly religion in democracies that calls to mind the Religion of Humanity. Tocqueville's characteristically reserved treatment of religion, incompatibility between his trademark religio-political project and the Religion of Humanity, and apparent neglect of the Religion of Humanity in contemporary academic-philosophical debate might account for this oversight.

Of course, the Religion of Humanity has been synonymous with the positivism of Comte.¹ Tocqueville's name did not figure in works devoted to Comte's impact in Europe. The positivist movement in France after Comte's death was led by Laffitte and Littré. In Victorian England, the Religion of Humanity was more obviously present as an actual church – with the Spirit of Humanity as an object of worship – rather than

¹For expositions of Comte's positivism and the Religion of Humanity, see Comte ([1830–42] 1853), Comte ([1852] 2009) and Comte ([1854] 1877).

mere theory. The English congregation was established by Congreve, but Harrison later formed a schismatic group. Both of these had almost disappeared by the early twentieth century, with six or seven members attending the main church by 1904. Interestingly, outside London, there were other Churches of Humanity, and the last of them, in Liverpool, survived until 1949. Reportedly, given the stature of Hegelianism, Comte's movement failed to gain a foothold in Germany.

The impact of Comtean positivism and the Religion of Humanity as an abstract moral-philosophical theory has been more complex. Both in France and in England, a wide variety of artists, scientists, and intellectuals contributed to its diffusion, at least by commenting on it. (Their names included, in France, Maurras, Loisy, Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, Faguet, Zola, Anatole France, Renan, Bergson, Taine, Durkheim, and Gambetta; and in England, Eliot, Hardy, Gissing, Arnold, Ruskin, Pater, Morley, Leslie and Fitzjames Stephen, Pattison, Jowett, Kingsley, Seeley, Ward, Meredith, Henry James, Woolf, and Wells.) From another angle, the Religion of Humanity was taken seriously enough to be attacked. Notably, Spencer and Huxley saw it as a closed system, which was detrimental to scientific advance – for example, positivists tended to ignore Darwin because his teaching did not fit Comte's biology. In a similar vein, the earliest disseminators of positivism and the Religion of Humanity as an idea in England, Mill and Lewes, eventually developed misgivings.²

But irrespective of Comte's pervasive indirect influence, the foundational precedent for secular or political religion in late modern political thought came from Rousseau's sense of civil religion in *The Social Contract* ([1762] 1988, book IV, ch. 8). And more recently, notions of secular or political religion have served to describe contemporary totalitarian ideologies, such as Nazism and communism, by the likes of Voegelin ([1938] 2000), Talmon (1960) and Burleigh (2005).

That said, Tocqueville's discussion of democratic poetry with faint outlines of a nascent Religion of Humanity attests to his celebrated powers as a perceptive observer of social-political phenomena and original thinker. According to Aron (1968: 246), Tocqueville was unfamiliar with Comte's project, and although he must have heard about it, Comte apparently had no bearing on his thought and development. And not only that, their visions for the French religio-political landscape essentially differed. Responding to the spread of "fundamental irreligion" in France, Tocqueville regretted the "anticlerical and antireligious" characteristics of the revolutionary democratic spirit (Aron 1968: 273); whereas, for Comte, modern institutions could in no way accommodate "the Catholic, theological, feudal institutions of the old regime" (Aron 1968: 274).

Mill, who wrote extensively on the major works of both Tocqueville and Comte, and who openly sympathized with aspects of the Religion of Humanity, also related the notion to Comte's thought.

The power which may be acquired over the mind by the idea of the general interest of the human race, both as a source of emotion and as a motive of conduct, many have perceived; but we know not if any one, before M. Comte, realized so fully as he has done, all the majesty of which that idea is susceptible. (Mill [1865] 1977c: 333)

In contrast, Mill was always conspicuously silent about religion in Tocqueville's teaching, barring a brief nod to it before concluding his first review of *Democracy in America*.

²For the impact of Comtean positivism and the Religion of Humanity in Europe, see Simon (1963), Reardon (1966), Wright (2008).

We must here pause. We have left many interesting parts of the book altogether unnoticed; and among the rest two most instructive chapters – ‘On the Causes which maintain Democracy in America,’ (among the foremost of these he places the religious spirit, and among the chief causes which maintain that spirit, the removal of religion from the field of politics by the entire separation of church and state,) . . . (Mill [1835] 1977a: 90)

Further, Mill’s subsequent review after the publication of the second volume of *Democracy in America* reflected his essential concern with religion as a major source of social conformity and limitation against individual liberty that would take its mature form in *On Liberty*. “[I]f we would imagine the situation of a victim of the majority, we must look to the annals of religious persecution for a parallel” (Mill [1840] 1977b: 177).³ And Mill’s ([1840] 1977b: 180) commentary on Tocqueville’s discussion of democratic literature did not point to a linkage between poetry and religion but dwelled on the superficiality of intellectual products that are typically created to make money and gain momentary repute, with an eye to quantity instead of quality.

Within this context, Kahan’s recent book *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion* is noticeable for its attention to Tocqueville and the Religion of Humanity, despite some degree of ambiguity. On the one hand, Kahan (2015: 98) acknowledged Tocqueville’s point concerning democratic poetry as an organic alternative to religion. “Poetry could help or even substitute for religion in balancing democratic society’s materialism, and the artistic inspiration to greatness Tocqueville attributed to poetry can easily be applied to other forms of art.” On the other hand, Kahan never distinctly recognized Tocqueville’s vision or awareness of a Religion of Humanity but called attention to his misgivings about it. “Tocqueville, however, doubted the efficacy of a Patriotism of Humanity just as he doubted the possibility of a Religion of Humanity” (Kahan 2015: 108). And while never having claimed Tocqueville knew of Comte or a Religion of Humanity, Kahan (2015: 153) elsewhere remarked that Tocqueville was reaching out to a France under various influences on religion, including “Comte’s Religion of Humanity.”

The overall silence or – at best – the ambiguity about a connection between democratic poetry and the vague outlines of a Religion of Humanity in *Democracy in America* is well justified. For all the thematic convergence between his discussion of democratic poetry and religion in terms that evoked a sacrosanct humanity and worldly religion, Tocqueville was characteristically reserved or tactical in discussing religious matters (Kessler 1977: 123; Kelly 1995: 845; Kahan 2015: 150). Indeed, without a retrospective awareness of his contemporaries Auguste Comte, who invented the Religion of Humanity, and Mill, who promoted it as an emotive inspirational concept but absolutely ridiculed Comte’s institutionalized and regulated structure, Tocqueville’s instinctive vision of the nascent phenomenon could easily pass unnoticed. Moreover, approaching Tocqueville’s discussion of democratic poetry from a perspective informed by Comte’s and Mill’s cases for the Religion of Humanity runs the risk of superimposing an unintended meaning.

In this connection, although a broad comparison of the aforementioned post-Enlightenment thinkers on secular religion or the Religion of Humanity is beyond the

³For Mill, the Religion of Humanity, and the tension between his *Three Essays on Religion* ([1854a], [1854b], [1870] in [1874] 1998) and *On Liberty* ([1859] 2002), see Hamburger (1999), Raeder (2002) and Daglier & Schneider (2007).

scope of the present study, it should be briefly remarked that Tocqueville, through his discussion of poetry, did highlight the past, present, and future of humanity as possible emotive and behavioral inspiration for humankind, at a time when traditional religiosity with belief in the afterlife declined because of democratic skepticism, and this was a source of both commonality and opposition between him and the other two. Despite the common understanding of a sacrosanct sense of humanity that could possibly be the basis of worldly religion, Mill ([1865] 1977c: 363–71) specifically objected to Comte's detailed plans for institutionalizing it, and there is no indication that Tocqueville ever foresaw such a regulated structure. Yet Tocqueville's vision differed from Comte and Mill's in an altogether important respect. He could not have endorsed a Religion of Humanity because it fundamentally contradicted his trademark religio-political project, which was to buttress extant otherworldly barriers against the menace of democratic materialism, through religious adaptation or reform. Spirituality and traditional religious morality functioned as an elevated barrier against human action motivated by the pursuit and enjoyment of material well-being, whereas the poetic sanctification of humanity or – even worse – covering the distance between the people and transcendent theistic deities through pantheism were absolutely anathema to it. Situating the source of religion, God, on earth necessarily stifled freedom and hampered individual greatness by enforcing conformity to an increasingly materialistic democratic society.

After a basic account of Tocqueville's religio-political project, meaning his civil religion, the article will consider his observations on the historical phenomena of alternative secular religions that are thoroughly worldly and will culminate in the Religion of Humanity via democratic poetry. In the rest of the article, an examination of Tocqueville's grave misgivings about pantheism and several branches of American arts and humanities, including writing, oratory, theatre, and historians, will signal his fundamental objection to the Religion of Humanity. Before the conclusion, given the so-called uncertain prospects of Tocqueville's civil religion in the long term due to the influence of modern skepticism, there will be a brief speculation on the natural compatibility between Tocqueville's ethical notion of self-interest well understood and an indefinite democratic Religion of Humanity.

Tocqueville's religio-political project

Tocqueville's principal religio-political task was to promote a modified version of Christianity, a civil religion, which could best correspond to the needs of emerging democratic societies, characterized by equality of conditions and opportunities that facilitated the pursuit and enjoyment of material well-being. Scholarly opinion has converged on this point. Lively (1962: 193) referred to "the model of a democratic religion which he put forward," Kessler (1977: 144) to his "teaching on civil religion," and Manent (1996: 82) to his attempt to make "Christianity a 'secular religion.'" Likewise, Wolin (2001: 474) equated Tocqueville to a "theorist actor" or a "prophet." Yet Hinckley (1990: 47–48) claimed that he was essentially promoting the American Protestant consensus and touting French Catholicism's evolution in that direction, and Mitchell (1995: 129–32) pointed to his preference for the Protestant emphasis on "the word," or dogma, over Catholic ritualism.

Further, Tocqueville scholarship has amply problematized the future viability of modified Christianity, especially when sustained on utilitarian grounds. Most famously in this

context, Lively criticized Tocqueville for hypocrisy and conflicting tendencies in his thought: Tocqueville promoted a belief system, which he personally did not subscribe to, for its presumed social utility (1962: 248),⁴ and he did so despite explicit awareness of religion as an instrument of conformity (1962: 249).⁵ In parallel, Ceaser (1990: 32) and Kessler (1994: ix, 19, 149) noticed Tocqueville's apprehension about the potentially negative impact of democratic public opinion on the future hold of religion. And Mansfield (2010: 60) and Mitchell (1995: 206) remarked on the tension between unswerving religious obedience and freedom in Tocqueville's liberalism. However, Zuckert (1981: 279), Herold (2015: 532), Kahan (2015: 44, 87–88), and Kitch (2016: 948) dwelled on Tocqueville's confidence with regard to the conjunction between religion and freedom, given humanity's innate spirituality. Meanwhile, from an historical point of view, Kelly (1982: 134) and Galston (1987: 515) criticized Tocqueville for an insufficient appreciation of the perpetual strength of religion in American society and politics.

In brief, although Tocqueville firmly believed in the natural basis and social utility of religion, he also acknowledged the damaging legacy of the Roman Catholic Church's alliance with the old régime. He observed that democratic equality fostered intellectual skepticism in society because free and equal individuals fended for themselves, were intellectually self-reliant by habit, and did not recognize superiorities by dogmatic conviction and pride. Accordingly, inspired by his understanding of the American model of modified Christianity for democracies, Tocqueville made several points: He enjoined that religion in democracies should go with the flow of current democratic sentiments and ideas, or public opinion, unless it was absolutely necessary. He noted that traditional ascetic Christian morality, which suppressed the quintessential democratic passion for material well-being, was not viable for the new times. Religion in democracies had to accommodate people's desire for well-being by moderating and regulating it. He urged religion to keep within narrow bounds and stay away from politics. He objected to authoritative insistence on homage to secondary religious powers, meaning saints and the clergy. Such traditional expectations harmed the credibility of religion because democratic social equality fostered a strengthened sense of monotheism. Finally, as

⁴Tocqueville's alleged religious disillusionment is richly commented on. From a reading of Tocqueville's personal correspondence, Goldstein (1960: 382–84) concluded that Tocqueville, to his chagrin, had become an unbeliever; he could not accept Roman Catholic doctrines but always held to Christian ethical concepts (Goldstein 1960: 390). For Abbé (Louis) Baunard, this was half-Catholicism, for Albert Salomon, "existential Catholicism," and for Jacob-Peter Mayer, "Christian deism" (quoted in Goldstein 1960: 390). For Kahan (2015: 7), Tocqueville was "a sort of Deist." In parallel, Lamberti (1989: 4) referred to his troubled Catholicism due to the influence of Descartes and the eighteenth-century *philosophes*. Arguably, Tocqueville's ([1835] 2000: 286) depiction of loss of religious faith in modern times and concurrent grief among morally sound characters indicated a personal experience in *Democracy in America*. See Zuckert (1981: 261).

⁵According to Schleifer (2000: 244–45) Tocqueville was aware that public pressure for conformity in the United States most strongly exerted itself in the realms of religion and conscience. Then Tocqueville's case for religion in democracies, despite its likely harm to individuality, reflected a preference for the lesser evil. According to Kessler (1994: 54), Tocqueville's preference for intolerance rather than the absence of religious dogma was tempered by his insistence on the separation between church and state. Plausibly from Tocqueville's ([1835] 2000: 242–45) theoretical standpoint, it was not religion *per se* but democratic public opinion that was potentially oppressive. Lively (1962: 197, 249) conceded that a religious society might provide a relative sense of relief for minority groups and individuals, but he called attention to the tension between the moral dignity of individual independence and adherence to a fixed social morality that was based on the dictates of religion, a useful myth.

democratic individuals were engaged in an incessant quest for material well-being, he warned that burdensome religious forms, ceremonies, and obligations would backfire.⁶

In this way, by freeing it from problematic entanglements, Tocqueville worked to maintain popular belief in the immortality of the soul. Notwithstanding his impressive presentation of democratic poetry, he logically could not have agreed with secular or worldly religion, including the Religion of Humanity. As he saw it, traditional religion, including Christianity, above all taught the immortality of the soul and, thereby, directed human desires away from material well-being and worldly satisfaction, promoted noble and lofty ends, and led to pure sentiments and great thoughts. Commenting on democracy, the immortality of the soul and metempsychosis, he famously wrote: “I would judge that its citizens risk brutalizing themselves less by thinking that their soul is going to pass into the body of a pig than in believing it is nothing” (Tocqueville [1840] 2000: 520). After all, democratic materialism was a politically disturbing force. Its most alarming consequence for peoples was to erect a tyranny over themselves. A less enlightened and experienced people than the Americans could have delivered their freedom to potential tyrants who promised quick economic returns. Everywhere, however, democratic people had the tendency to immerse themselves in the pursuit and enjoyment of material well-being in isolation, and isolation ran counter to the appeal of human association, which stood against tyranny. Thus, when Tocqueville emphatically sought to demonstrate in *Democracy in America* that “the *spirit of liberty*” and “the *spirit of religion*” were “combining marvelously” ([1835] 2000: 43, italics in the original) and elsewhere confessed his “sole passion for 30 years’ was to bring about the harmony of ‘liberal sentiment and religious sentiment’” (quote in Kelly 1995: 845 from Tocqueville 1951: XIV. 2, 80), he was not thinking of religion without spirituality in the metaphysical sense.

Secular religions as modern historical phenomena

Tocqueville’s discussion of democratic poetry with its implicit stress on the pseudo-religious sanctification of humanity was not the only occasion when he broached the topic of secular religion. His remarks on the French Revolution, patriotism, the modern administrative state, the sovereignty of the people, and the authority of public opinion bore similarities.

In *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, he likened the French Revolution, with its universal principles and appeal, to a religious revolution. “Since it appeared to aim at the regeneration of the human race much more than at the reform of France, it kindled

⁶Despite Tocqueville’s avowed preference for Christianity, his recommendations for its modification in some ways contradicted it. As Kessler (1977: 120) and Galston (1987: 508) indicated, Tocqueville’s modification of Christianity went beyond eliminating its nonessentials and related to its basic teaching. Above all, Kessler (1977: 120–21), Galston (1987: 509), and Zuckert (1981: 275) pointed to the incompatibility between the moderately accommodating attitude towards materialism in Tocqueville’s civil religion and Christianity. Furthermore, Kessler (1992: 787, 789) and Kahan (2015: 23–24) stressed the irreconcilability of self-interest well understood and Christian love. In this connection, Kahan (2015: 73) noted, self-interest well understood lacked the ability to foster greatness, due to its materialistic foundations. And both Kessler (1977: 143–45) and Galston (1987: 509) evoked Tocqueville’s awareness of lack of stress on public virtues and patriotism in Christianity. Finally, notwithstanding his reconciliatory rhetoric, Tocqueville ([1840] 2000: 604) openly recommended pride against humility, a Christian virtue and a democratic egalitarian imposition. Pride, a sin according to Christianity, was the antidote to democratic conformity, which potentially threatened the historical progress of humanity.

a passion . . . Or rather it became itself a species of new religion, barely formed, it is true. Godless, without ritual or an afterlife" ([1856] 2008: 27). Indeed, during the revolutionary era, an incarnation of "the Goddess of Reason" was introduced to "a secularized Notre Dame" with fanfare (Kahan 2015: 148), and this historic event must have left an impression on Tocqueville.

Tocqueville's discussion of patriotism in *Democracy in America* also evoked worldly religion. "[L]ove of native country is further exalted by religious zeal. . . It is a sort of religion itself; it does not reason, it believes, it feels, it acts" ([1835] 2000: 225). And although this discussion of patriotism did not resemble a systematic attempt to relate it to religion, for Kahan (2015: 2012) nowhere did Tocqueville come closer to admitting a viable secular religion.

Then, Tocqueville likened the increasingly centralized and powerful administrative state to a secular divinity. "All conceive the government in the image of a lone, simple, providential, and creative power" ([1840] 2000: 642). Secondary powers, those between the sovereign power and subjects, could not exist in the democratic state and administration, just as they could not in democratic civic religion. There was instead "[t]he unity, ubiquity, and omnipotence of the social power, the uniformity of its rules. . ." ([1840] 2000: 642). For the enervated democratic individual, the state was "the immense being that rises alone in the midst of universal debasement" ([1840] 2000: 644). A worldly godlike entity, the state was "the same master" that atomized neighbors commonly depended on ([1840] 2000: 645). To these modern people, democratic equality suggested "lone, uniform, and strong" government ([1840] 2000: 645); to repeat, "a single, all-powerful government" ([1840] 2000: 648).

However, for the purposes of comprehending the true essence of Tocqueville's discussion of democratic poetry, nothing is more important than his remarks on the sovereignty of the people as the supreme dogma in modern democracies, arguably because the poetic sanctification of humanity in democracies, which evoked the Religion of Humanity, was its sublimated form. To begin with, in modern democracies, the principal source of political and intellectual authority and moral dogma was the people. In this sense, sovereignty in America was "disengaged from all the fictions" that one saw elsewhere. "The people reign over the American political world as does God over the universe" ([1835] 2000: 55). Practically, democratic people expressed their sovereign will "by elections and decrees" ([1835] 2000: 117). Tocqueville broadly referred to this collective act of expression as public opinion. In democracies, "faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority" ([1840] 2000: 410). As an extension of the sovereignty of the people, the legitimacy of public opinion in democracies was based on equally dogmatic grounds. From the principal dogma that all are equal ensued the subsidiary dogma that the majority is always right. "The moral empire of the majority is founded in part on the idea that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in many men united than in one man alone. . . It is the theory of equality applied to intellects" ([1835] 2000: 236). The theory of equality as it applies to the intellects offended a minority, but as democracy transformed itself from a recent development to the established state of things, as human equality became deeply ingrained in society's mores, and the aristocratic notion of inequality disappeared from the collective consciousness, the grounds for individual resistance to public opinion became harder to fathom, let alone maintain. Accordingly, in America nothing could resist the legislature, "not even the authority of reason, for it [the legislature] represents the majority that claims to be the unique organ of reason" ([1835] 2000: 84). Those who philosophically defied the democratic majority could be ostracized from their

communities, denied the means of a livelihood. The dogma of the sovereignty of the people and the consequent faith in the legitimacy of public opinion were intolerant.

Democratic poetry and the Religion of Humanity

Up until now, scant attention has been paid to Tocqueville's treatment of democratic poetry. However, those who did, including both Kahan (2015: 95) and Kessler (1994: 44), interpreted it as partially a discussion of religion. Kahan (2015: 45) suggested that Tocqueville's linkage between poetry and religion must have been born of Chateaubriand's ([1802] 1856) *The Genius of Christianity*: "For Chateaubriand, more romantic than Tocqueville, poetry is about the marvelous, the sublime, the exalted – and hence naturally about God." But, Kessler (1994: 44) remarked, the idea of a dichotomous parallelism between philosophy and poetry, the latter in token of religion, was rooted in ancient philosophy. Indeed, the concluding chapter of Plato's *Republic* could be cited among its foremost expressions. In his related commentary, Bloom (1991: 426–27, italics in the original) wrote:

Poetry is *the* opponent, and there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy. Homer is read or listened to by all the Greeks; he speaks of all things in their interrelations, and he tells of the gods. Homer and the other great poets constitute the respectable tribunal before which philosophy is tried. Socrates is afraid of being denounced to them . . .

And in conjunction, before presenting the Religion of Humanity in the *Utility of Religion*, Mill ([1874] 1998: 103–04) also made a comparison between poetry and religion, or "the poetry of the supernatural."

Specifically, Tocqueville's conjoined treatment of poetry and religion was titled "On Some Sources of Poetry in Democratic Nations" (vol. II, part 1, ch. 17). It began with a definition of poetry, which was not to represent the truth but, with the aid of imagination, to embellish it. Thus, poetry was the imagination of the ideal. Aristocracies, characterized by a fixed order, had a taste for the ideal and its depiction, and displayed poetic tastes. Their spirits could rise beyond and above their surroundings, whereas democracies were largely immersed in the competitive pursuit of material enjoyments, and democratic souls and imaginations were given over to utility and depictions of reality. While imagination was not extinguished in democracies, its object changed. Thenceforth, Tocqueville articulated the declining appeal of traditional religions for democratic societies, which typically contained skeptical individuals. "Doubt then brings the imagination of poets back to earth and confines them to the visible and real world" ([1840] 2000: 459).

Within his discussion of sources of poetry, Tocqueville further elaborated on how democratization redefined religion. First, paralleling the influence of democratic politics to the detriment of aristocracy, democratic religion rejected secondary or intermediate holy powers and principally focused on the sovereign master. "Even if equality does not shake religions, it simplifies them" ([1840] 2000: 459). Second, aristocracies, typically static, were devoted to the past. By the same logic, democracies were unfit for the veneration of the past. "In that, aristocracy is much more favorable to poetry: for things ordinarily become larger and are veiled as they move away; and in this double relation they lend themselves more to the depiction of the ideal" ([1840] 2000: 459). Third, sharp differences within aristocratic societies, involving the clear distinction between

layers of society, had fed the imagination of the lower classes and fostered poetic idealization of the privileged great, whereas such poetic idealization of superior contemporaries was unsuitable for democracies, as all were equally small. "Thus equality, in establishing itself on the earth, dries up most of the old sources of poetry" ([1840] 2000: 460).

Arguably, this much had been stated in other roundabout ways earlier in *Democracy in America*, throughout sections on the evolution of traditional supernatural religion and the democratic eradication of aristocratic distinctions. Yet Tocqueville's continuing discussion of how democratic equality uncovered new sources of poetry, which culminated in a subtle suggestion of the Religion of Humanity, was possibly unique. Even so, the first source of democratic poetry Tocqueville mentioned was nature. Initially, democratic poetry was fascinated by nature.

When doubt had depopulated Heaven and the progress of equality had reduced each man to better known and smaller proportions, the poets, still not imagining what they could put in place of the great objects that were fleeing with aristocracy, turned their eyes toward inanimate nature. Losing sight of heroes and gods, they undertook at first to depict rivers and mountains. ([1840] 2000: 460)

Nevertheless, realistic descriptions of nature, which accorded well with the predominantly material concerns of democratic peoples, was a passing phase of their poetry. In the long run, nature would be unable to contain the democratic imagination. Embodying the poetic object and inspiration of democracies, that role was essentially reserved for mankind. "Democratic peoples can amuse themselves well for a moment in considering nature; but they only become animated at the sight of themselves" ([1840] 2000: 460). Mankind was the sole unending source of poetry in democracies.

In contradistinction to aristocracies' static attachment to the past, democratic imagination was concerned with "the idea of progress and of the indefinite perfectibility of human species" ([1840] 2000: 460). Democratic imagination had no limit with regard to the future. However, individual citizens of democracies were equal and alike and, therefore, too dull to be subjects for poetry. But their sameness allowed poets to conceive of the people collectively, or the nation, with great impact. "Democratic nations perceive more clearly than others their own shape, and that great shape lends itself marvelously to the depiction of the ideal" ([1840] 2000: 460). Within this context, Tocqueville sought to undo a misconception: although Europeans were engrossed in the American wilderness, American eyes were filled with the magnificent spectacle of their struggle to subdue nature.

Democratic sameness helped mature the notion of a people, or a nation. To go a step further, democratic sameness and mobility brought individuals and even nations together; it assimilated them, and aristocratic distinctiveness gave way to the prevalent notion of humanity.

Therefore not only do members of the same nation become alike; nations themselves are assimilated, and in the eyes of the spectator all together form nothing more than a vast democracy of which each citizen is a people. That puts the shape of the human race in broad daylight for the first time. ([1840] 2000: 461)

Put differently, the vastness of humanity surpassed that of the nation and more so attracted the poetic imagination. “All that relates to the existence of the human species taken as a whole, its vicissitudes, its future, becomes a very rich mine for poetry” ([1840] 2000: 461).

Tocqueville was apparently oblivious to a potential tension between democratic poetry’s emphasis on the future of humanity, on the one hand, and belief in God, on the other. He maintained that the majesty of God and the vastness of humanity reinforced each other. Aristocracies’ decline and the emerging standardized unity of humankind could not be taken separately from the decline of intermediary divinities and an unmistakable sense of divine involvement in human affairs.

Perceiving the human race as a single whole, they [men] easily conceive that one same design presides over its destiny, and they are brought to recognize in the actions of each individual the tracing of a general and constant plan according to which God guides the species. ([1840] 2000: 462)

In other words, democratic leveling and political centralization found an echo in an undisputedly unique and impartial notion of the Divinity. The democratic imagination, not attuned to direct godly intervention on earth, more so agreed with the notion of “the general designs of God for the universe” ([1840] 2000: 462).

And the immaterial nature of mankind, or a glimpse into the human soul, was the ultimate object of democratic poetry. A focus on human passions and ideas trumped interest in persons and deeds. “I have no need to travel through heaven and earth to discover a marvelous object full of contrasts, of infinite greatness and pettiness, of profound obscurities and singular clarity, capable of giving birth at once to pity, admiration, scorn, and terror” ([1840] 2000: 462). Such an inward-looking poetry, largely lacking in supernaturalism and personified virtues, arguably touched democratic peoples because of their constant lifelong quest to comprehend themselves.

Tocqueville’s final words on democratic poetry, which adverted to God, nevertheless communicated an overwhelming interest in humanity. “Human destinies, man, taken apart from his time and his country and placed before nature and God with his passions, his doubts, his unheard-of prosperity, and his incomprehensible miseries, will become the principal and almost unique object of poetry for these peoples” ([1840] 2000: 463). Hence democratic peoples, characteristically skeptical, were disinclined to trust in supernatural beliefs, but the notion of humanity would become sufficiently captivating for their imagination.

In sum, Tocqueville’s decision to bind religion and poetry, as expressed in his joint remarks on the prospects of poetic inspiration based on the appeal of humanity and on the decline of religion founded on supernaturalism, arguably suggested the natural evolution of a Religion of Humanity in democracies. Yet Tocqueville’s case lacked the force and clarity of the proponents of the Religion of Humanity, who were not interested in saving traditional religion, such as Mill ([1854b in 1874] 1998: 106):

Let it be remembered that if individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short; its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness; and being combined with indefinite capability for improvement, it offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration. If such an object appears small to a mind accustomed to dream of infinite and eternal beatitudes, it will expand into far other dimensions when those baseless fancies shall have receded into the past.

In contrast to Mill, Tocqueville's relative reticence, his unwillingness to make a radical expression of his train of thought, may be related to his characteristic tact in discussing religious matters, the relatively recent origins or premature form of the phenomenon in hand, and, ultimately, the irreconcilable difference between his religio-political project and religion without immortal soul. As Kahan (2015: 98) remarked, secular poetry could not serve as a sufficient counterweight against democratic materialism.

Pantheism and critique of the Religion of Humanity

The glorification of humanity, be it through poetry or religion, had another defect in that it placed a moral and psychological obstacle against individuality. This can best be inferred from Tocqueville's critical treatment of pantheism (vol. II, part 1, ch. 7). There, Tocqueville observed, beyond belief in the unqualified unity of God,⁷ democratic equality fostered pantheistic doctrines in European intellectual and artistic circles. That is, democratic equality had eroded distinctions and privileges; the disappearance of fragmentation had fostered an all-encompassing notion of humanity; and when the same logic was pushed to its extremes, notions of humanity and heavenly divinity merged with each other, amounting to pantheism.

The idea of unity obsesses [the mind];⁸ it seeks it on all sides, and when it believes it has found it, it willingly wraps it in its bosom and rests with it. Not only does it come to discover only one creation and one Creator in the world; this first division of things still bothers it, and it willingly seeks to enlarge and simplify its thought by enclosing God and the universe within a single whole. ([1840] 2000: 426)

Yet the pantheistic unity between the Creator and the people threatened human individuality and greatness. The emerging divinity of humankind provided for conformity, particularly as it undermined the moral and psychological foundations of individuality and resistance against the many.

If I encounter a philosophic system according to which the things material and immaterial, visible and invisible that the world includes are considered as no more than diverse parts of an immense being which alone remains eternal in the midst of the continual change and incessant transformation of all that composes it, I shall have no trouble concluding that such a system, although it destroys human individuality, or rather because it destroys it, it will have secret charms for men who live in a democracy. . . ([1840] 2000: 426)

The pantheistic unity between God and humankind was detrimental to the foundations of freedom and greatness in that individual resistance against a divine humanity would be perceived as practically futile and morally equivalent to heresy. Otherwise stated, the

⁷Tocqueville reasoned that democratic equality, which promoted a strengthened sense of monotheism by eradicating intermediaries, advantaged Catholicism over Protestantism, because the former had a more unified government. Tocqueville's argument concerning the progress of Catholicism over Protestantism in America, contested from a historical standpoint, was plausibly related to his wish to present democracy in a favorable light to a primarily French readership. For Kahan (2015: 133–34) this was among Tocqueville's best-known mistakes, due to his over-optimistic sources. Ahlstrom (1972: 540–54) and Kessler (1994: 100–101) have explained the visible growth of American Catholicism in the Jacksonian era, driven by Irish immigration and proselytization, when Tocqueville was traveling in the United States.

⁸Brackets in original translation.

pantheistic unity between humanity and holiness relieved conformists from possible misgivings. By covering the distance between the people and theistic deities, pantheism ruined a last resort for modern democracies.

The sharp tension between democratic pantheism and individuality in Tocqueville's thought has been interpreted in comparable ways by scholars. Ceaser (1990: 150) argued: "By tracing the springs of human activity to abstractions such as humanity or history, this doctrine made human choice meaningless." He added: "[P]hilosophic pantheism" and its "negation of the conditions for choice" is a paradoxical consequence of "philosophe rationalism," which is constantly after universal principles of explanation (*ibid.*). Kahan (2015: 95) warned that the spiritual unity symbolized by pantheism and its challenge to individuality corresponds to "a moral catastrophe." Kessler (1977: 138) noted that pantheism, "which destroys the individuality of man, is a powerful rival of Christianity in democratic times." And Manent (1996: 102–03) claimed that pantheism emerges as "the democratic spirit 'expands and simplifies' its ideas to deliver the diversity of the world to uniformity," and this comes "at the expense of the only difference that natural religion maintains, that between creation and creator."

Democratic arts and humanities and critique of the Religion of Humanity

Tocqueville's damning critique of pantheism was theoretically relevant for the poetic sanctification of humanity, which eclipsed supernaturalism and elevated the collectivity across time and space but gravely belittled individuality. Even so, Tocqueville's treatment of democratic poetry carried no value judgment in itself. But the following four chapters (18–21) on democratic writing and oratory, theatre, tendencies of historians, and parliamentary eloquence further elaborated on the progressively sacrosanct value, growing appeal, and intellectual influence of humanity, and they conveyed a largely critical message. Thus, for example, American writers and orators were bombastic because the people, outside of their mundane existence, solely perceived "the immense image of society or the still greater figure of the human race" ([1840] 2000: 464). In effect, they were disposed to demand vast conceptions and excessive depictions from their poets. As poets sought recognition and obliged the public, their imagination forsook the great and reached the gigantic. And as the public lacked the requisite time and taste for discerning literary disproportion, both parties mutually corrupted each other. Effectively, democratic poets created monsters. "I fear that the works of poets will often offer immense and incoherent images, overloaded depictions, and bizarre composites, and that the fantastic beings issuing from their minds will sometimes make one long for the real world" ([1840] 2000: 464).

In parallel, Tocqueville's observations on humanity-centered democratic theatre, a more accessible form of literature, had critical aspects to it. Characteristically, Tocqueville presented his argument through a contrast between aristocratic and democratic theatre. In this context, the first vice of democracy in theatre emanated from its relative ignorance. "Democratic peoples have only a very mediocre esteem for erudition, and they scarcely care about what took place in Rome and Athens; they mean to be spoken to about themselves, and they demand a picture of the present" ([1840] 2000: 466). However, aristocratic theatre represented human nature selectively.

It is principally interested in certain social conditions, and it is pleased to find them depicted on the stage; certain virtues and even certain vices appear to it to deserve more particularly to be reproduced. . . . At the theatre, as elsewhere, it

wants to encounter only great lords and it is moved only on behalf of kings.
 ([1840] 2000: 466)

Beyond selectivity, aristocracies' representation of human nature could be unrealistic. "The theater thus often comes to depict only one side of man, or sometimes even to represent what is not encountered in human nature; it lifts itself above and departs from it" ([1840] 2000: 466). Democracy produced a truer theatre, but for that reason Tocqueville's characterization was not necessarily flattering. "[T]hey like to find on the stage the confused mixture of conditions, sentiments, and ideas that they encounter before their eyes; the theatre becomes more striking, more vulgar, more true" ([1840] 2000: 467). Paradoxically, democratic writers' narrow sense of authenticity and quest for detail occasionally led them to depart from human nature, or to "forget to trace the general features of the species" ([1840] 2000: 467). And unlike aristocracy and its reading audiences, democratic spectators were less concerned with plausibility and more concerned with emotional effect. "Most of those who attend the acting on stage do not seek pleasures of the mind, but lively emotions of the heart" ([1840] 2000: 467).

Tocqueville's treatment of some tendencies of democratic historians was particularly laden with warnings against an exaggerated conception of humanity and its dangerous challenge against individual action and freedom. Given their apparent prominence, aristocratic historians focused on the wills, humors, and actions of great personages, and had an excessive idea of their influence. Due to the intellectual influence of equality, democratic historians suffered from the opposite. "[I]ndividuals seem absolutely powerless over it, and one would say that society advances all by itself – by the free and spontaneous concourse of all the men who compose it" ([1840] 2000: 470). In effect, democratic historians magnified general factors. "He prefers to speak to us of the nature of races, the physical constitution of the country, or the spirit of the civilization" ([1840] 2000: 467). Tocqueville himself believed in a variable formula, involving the relative contributions of both particular and general factors, depending on the social state. Nevertheless, democratic historians, who, in contradiction to aristocratic historians, turned a blind eye to individual factors and looked for great causes, had an aptitude for establishing big methodical historical systems. By dissociating the movement of society from individual actions, these general theories undercut the moral and psychological foundations of singular determination and greatness to an extreme degree.

Historians who live in democratic times, therefore, not only deny to a few citizens the power to act on the destiny of a people, they also take away from peoples themselves the ability to modify their own fate, and they subject them either to an inflexible providence or to a sort of blind fatality. ([1840] 2000: 471)

Put differently, aristocratic historians had glorified the commandingly excellent individual, and democratic historians promoted obedience. Their complete success "would paralyze the movement of the new societies and reduce Christians to Turks" ([1840] 2000: 472). When a sense of individual weakness restrained free will, at least people still granted force and independence to united social bodies. But the democratically elevated esteem for humanity, with or without the blessing of pantheism and human-centered poetry, emaciated individuality and threatened society.

The last chapter of the series, on parliamentary eloquence, reaffirmed a crucial aspect of Tocqueville's treatment of poetry. That is, prevalently influential appeals to

humanity in parliamentary eloquence were laudatory and attested to the forceful appeal of the phenomenon. The nature of representative democracy inevitably dictated that mediocre deputies occupy the congressional stage. This was the petty side of American political discourse. In contrast, appeals to humanity or its equivalent corresponded to the great side of political discourse. Given democratic equality, which in principle did not recognize hereditary distinctions and privileges, representatives, to be effective, spoke to the whole nation in the name of the whole, and that enlarged thoughts and elevated language. “Hence in the political discussions of a democratic people, however small it is, a character of generality arises that often makes them attractive to the human race. All men are interested in them because it is a question of man, who is the same everywhere” ([1840] 2000: 476). Therefore, political oratory in American and French democratic assemblies was moving, admirable, and powerful whereas parliamentary oratory in aristocratic England did not have broad repercussions.

Thus, although Tocqueville’s respective treatments of democratic poetry and parliamentary eloquence drew attention to the magnificently emotive and inspirational potential of humanity, his discussion of democratic pantheism, writing and oratory, theatre, and tendencies of historians dwelled on the downsides of the same phenomenon. Democratic writers, including poets, and orators were bombastic precisely because they were excessively focused on the greatness of humanity – rather than on human greatness – in effect creating disproportionate monsters. In parallel, democratic theatre, in principle secularly human-centered and realistic, practically lacked plausibility and relied on emotional impact. Democratic historians, in turn, with their excessive emphasis on historical causation or determinism, ignored and undermined critical individual contributions. Imposing invincible fatality, their harm resembled that of pantheism.

Ethics of self-interest well understood and the Religion of Humanity

Mill ([1865] 1977c: 335) was an uncompromising critic of the essentially self-denying morality of Comte’s Religion of Humanity, whose golden rule was “to live for others, ‘vivre pour autrui,’”⁹ which contrasted with his own utilitarianism:

Our conception of human life is different. We do not conceive life to be so rich in enjoyments, that it can afford to forgo the cultivation of all those which address themselves to what M. Comte terms the egoistic propensities. On the contrary, we believe that a sufficient gratification of these, short of excess, but up to the measure which renders the enjoyment greatest, is almost favorable to the benevolent affections. (Mill [1865] 1977c: 361)

Indeed Mill ([1840] 1977b: 184–85) briefly acknowledged that Tocqueville’s doctrine of self-interest well understood – also translated as the doctrine of enlightened self-interest – was more suitable for modern democracies: “With regard to the tone of moral sentiment characteristic of democracy, M. de Tocqueville holds an opinion which we think deserves the attention of moralists.”¹⁰

⁹Comte coined the word “altruism” to signify the antithesis of “egoism.” See Mill ([1865] 1977c: 358).

¹⁰Mill ([1840] 1977b: 185) quoted “the doctrine of enlightened self-interest” and its variant “the principle of enlightened self-interest” from Reeve’s (1835–40) translation of *Democracy in America*.

To go a step further in logical progression, an indefinite Religion of Humanity and the ethics of self-interest well understood were possibly natural counterparts. At least Tocqueville, who maintained that increased belief in monotheism and the progressive advent of a unified humanity reinforced each other, or that human-centered democratic poetry and belief in God were harmonious, also claimed that the doctrine of self-interest well understood and religious morality were compatible. Of course, Tocqueville himself never had cause to admit that his doctrine of self-interest well understood could be the gold standard of conduct for secularly religious individuals who were considerably less altruistic than Comte wished, although he occasionally referred to “the sovereignty of the human race” ([1835] 2000: 240) above that of particular peoples, to “the duties of each individual toward the species” ([1840] 2000: 483), and to “the great bond of humanity” ([1840] 2000: 674). Nevertheless, in arguing that Americans combat individualism by the doctrine of self-interest well understood, he discerned an ethical system that came naturally to modern democracies and was distinct from traditional religious ethics.

The doctrine of self-interest well understood was a secular alternative to traditional virtue and divinely backed ethical systems. In aristocracies, the prevalent notion of virtue was without self-interest, as sublime duty for its own sake. Utility-based estimations of virtue or its practice were entertained in secret, whereas the democratic frame of mind, individualistic and skeptical, was incompatible with selfless notions. “[A]s the imagination takes a less lofty flight and each man concentrates on himself moralists become frightened at this idea of sacrifice and they no longer dare to offer it to the human mind” ([1840] 2000: 501). That being the case, modern moralists elaborated on the convergence of individual advantage and the happiness of all, or of particular and general interest. “[O]ne finally believes one perceives that man, in serving those like him, serves himself, and that his particular interest is to do good” ([1840] 2000: 501). Less subtly stated, the recognized unity between virtue and self-interest was exaggerated, albeit not false.

The democratic modern ethical doctrine’s ability to turn self-interest against itself, or to defy selfishness through utility, guaranteed its dominance. “Self-interest well understood is a doctrine not very lofty, but clear and sure” ([1840] 2000: 502). A byproduct of equality, it did not facilitate extraordinary virtues, but it effectively discouraged gross depravity. It had an overall leveling effect. In an age when utility was increasingly becoming the dominant motive of human action, an enlightened understanding of self-interest and concomitant habits of moderation, farsightedness, and restraint elevated humanity.

All the same, Tocqueville believed that the secular doctrine of self-interest well understood was insufficient in itself. A fully reliable ethical system needed to be backed by religious supernaturalism. “If the doctrine of self-interest well understood had only this world in view, it would be far from sufficient; for there are a great number of sacrifices that can find their recompense only in the other world” ([1840] 2000: 504). In Kahan’s emphatic terms, self-interest well understood – especially without religion – was “useful” but it “was not the moral equivalent of greatness” (2015: 25). Fortunately, Tocqueville sensed, the secular utilitarian doctrine of self-interest well understood and religious notions of otherworldly recompense reinforced each other.

Mansfield (in Tocqueville [1840] 2000: part 2, ch. 8) consistently translated the same as “the doctrine of self-interest well understood.” James T. Schleifer’s translation ([1840] 2012) opted for “the doctrine of interest well understood.” The original French usage is “la doctrine de l’intérêt bien entendu.” See Tocqueville ([1840] 1848).

He did not think that religious people practiced virtue solely for the sake of otherworldly recompense. Christianity commended self-sacrifice for the love of God, and believers reveled in contributing to his order. Yet religion did wield self-interest to bring the crowd into the fold. “I therefore do not see clearly why the doctrine of self-interest well understood would turn men away from religious beliefs” ([1840] 2000: 505).

Conclusion

In the end, the principal task of this article has been to demonstrate the extent to which Tocqueville acknowledged the possibility of human-centered worldly religion. Apparently, Tocqueville was unfamiliar with Comte’s Religion of Humanity, but his understanding of the French Revolution, patriotism, the modern administrative state, the sovereignty of the people, and the authority of democratic public opinion distinctly albeit not systematically reflected a preoccupation with the idea of worldly religion and secular God. Indeed, speaking conjecturally, Tocqueville’s understanding of the sovereignty of the people and intellectual authority of public opinion, which issued from dogmatic faith in human equality, might have led him to mark those as the groundwork of a sanctified humanity. But regardless, Tocqueville’s discussion of democratic poetry, which conspicuously evoked religion, suggested the advent of a sanctified humanity as, in parallel, his discussion of parliamentary eloquence confirmed the emotional impact of rhetorical appeals to humanity.

However, Tocqueville’s insightful observations on the possible evolution of human-centered worldly religion in democracies, or the ultimate sanctification of humanity through poetry, should not be confused with endorsement in any sense. His discussion of democratic writing and oratory, theatre, tendencies of historians, and pantheism – also based on empirical observations – communicated grave misgivings about the same phenomenon, out of proportion and pitted against individuality.

More importantly, Tocqueville’s expressly new political science, neither value-free nor in denial of observed facts, had an instructive dimension with an eye to democratic improvement. And religion obviously had a crucial role for Tocqueville in this context. At the same time, he could not readily have brought himself to endorse an exclusively secular or worldly belief system. Tocqueville’s religio-political ambition was to promote a modified Christianity, a civil religion, which maintained the essential distinction between the worldly and the divine. This traditional distinction, he believed, buttressed the standing of religious morality, safe from democracy or its degrading materialism; religion was the prerequisite for human freedom and greatness.

Yet Tocqueville was well aware that democratic skepticism was shaking ancient beliefs and democratic public opinion was redefining morality. Despite his wholehearted case for it, the ethical doctrine of self-interest well understood in democracies was an imperfect ally of traditional religious morality, because it essentially did not promote self-sacrifice for the sake of otherworldly rewards. To boot, Tocqueville’s doctrine of self-interest well understood could readily have been fitted to religio-political ends discordant with his own, including the Religion of Humanity.

Specifically, the attention that the doctrine of self-interest well understood paid to worldly well-being made it suitable for a Religion of Humanity in tune with liberal individualistic sensitivities. It was an ethical doctrine that checked crude selfishness but did not intrinsically provide an outside barrier against worldly materialism and associated harms. Its ascendancy illustrated the diminished standing of religion as the fixed moral anchor of democracy outside of human intervention.

So, notwithstanding Tocquevillean misgivings about the natural evolution of an indefinite Religion of Humanity in democracies – such misgivings that emanate from the comparative believability, or appeal, and social utility of secular worldly religion vis-à-vis traditional supernatural faith – the potential of poetic, literary, and philosophical concern with the destinies of the human race, with the past, present, and future progress of humanity, in furnishing meaning to human life, thwarting nihilistic sense of purposelessness, and supporting secular ethics may be deemed remarkable.

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