

Book Reviews

Laurie M. Johnson: *Honor in America? Tocqueville on American Enlightenment*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. Pp. xxxii, 154.)

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One of the central themes of *Democracy in America* is the critical importance of religion to the health of American democracy. Beginning with Tocqueville's praise of the Puritans early in volume 1 and continuing through his account of the perils of materialism in volume 2, Tocqueville presents Christianity as the moral anchor of the American polity. But Tocqueville also indicates that American religion was weakening over time, and he foresaw even greater decline in the future. He never suggests that religion will wither away entirely; on the contrary, he maintains that religion has permanent roots in the human soul. But he argues that certain circumstances—political, social, and economic—promote religious belief more than others. And the modern democratic era, he makes clear, is inhospitable to belief, such that whatever longings or impulses might lead the human soul to religion in other eras may, in our era, lead to nothing more than restless dissatisfaction with materialism. And so, while Tocqueville's treatment of American religion initially seems to indicate that Christianity is America's saving grace, that treatment turns out, in the end, to be the expression of a problem.

If Tocqueville is correct in his assessment—both of the role of religion in democratic America and of the inevitable decline of religion in modernity—how should we respond to that problem? Should we try to shore up religious belief, doing what we can to postpone the inevitable? Or should we simply accept a slide into moral decline? In *Honor in America? Tocqueville on American Enlightenment*, Laurie M. Johnson offers another alternative. Contemporary Americans could embrace an “honor code,” an informal set of principles on the basis of which we praise and blame ourselves and each other. She makes her case by way of an analysis of Tocqueville's arguments on topics connected with honor. She does not look to Tocqueville for all the answers; she differs with him on some key points relating to women and the moral value of war (43, 58–59, 65–67). But she does attend carefully to his arguments, taking up his discussions of religion, family, women, the military, slavery, and the treatment of Native Americans. On some topics, Tocqueville's arguments highlight a principle or ideal that contemporary

Americans undervalue in Johnson's view. She argues, for example, that we ought to learn from Tocqueville that we could do more to make space for individual greatness (42). We could embrace a notion of democratic leadership that would celebrate individuals naturally suited to positions of political prominence (43). In other cases, such as Tocqueville's accounts of slavery and the treatment of Native Americans, Johnson argues that he helps us to see moral pathways to avoid, by highlighting shameful American behavior and the reasons for it (104–12).

Johnson does not insist that America could or should embrace an honor code, but she does insist on *asking* whether Americans might not call ourselves and one another to be our better selves. One area of particular focus is our economic life. Could we encourage people to set limits on profit seeking even as we readily acknowledge the benefits of the free market? Could we hold ourselves to account for the persistence of economic inequality and resurrect a sense of obligation in the privileged to those less fortunate than themselves? Johnson argues that we have lost something of the sense originally observed by Tocqueville that, in America, all honest callings are honorable. Perhaps it is time to remind ourselves of the dignity inherent in all paid work. She further argues that liberal democracies, like all societies, need key traits in their citizenry: toughness, courage, and self-restraint. But capitalism promotes the abandonment of self-restraint in so many ways. It encourages selfishness and a taste for instant gratification. It saps toughness by nurturing a desire for commodious living. Perhaps, then, we ought to recognize that modern democratic society needs character traits that it does not produce, and encourage these virtues by expressing our admiration of them.

A secular honor code of our own design could even, Johnson argues, have some advantages over religion as a source of morality and restraint. An honor code would not be subject to the difficulty of sectarian division. And it would be free of a great challenge faced by American Christianity, that of having to transform itself in order to survive in modern times. Christian leaders had to put Christian doctrine through contortions to make it compatible with the American way of life. Tocqueville marvels at their success, but as Johnson points out—and as I think Tocqueville would acknowledge—that process of accommodation entailed some dilution of Christian teaching and diminished the ability of Christianity to promote moral restraint (19). An honor code of our own devising would not need to undergo distortion or dilution to survive in our era. On the contrary, it would be tailored to our era, and informed by our own ideals. Could it not, then, offer a better, more robust defense against moral decline than that of a weakened but perpetually propped-up Christianity?

It must be said that, at times, Johnson's idea of an honor code takes on something of the character of a wish list. For, in addition to the suggestions listed so far, her envisioned honor code includes an elevated and enlightened patriotism, strengthened expectations for parents and children, self-mastery,

kindness, and even chastity (41). One cannot help but wonder whether contemporary Americans *could* reach consensus on these ideals, as attractive as such consensus might be. It is certainly true that an honor code would not suffer from the sectarian divisions that beset the Christian faith. But what about sectarian divisions within the realm of moral opinion?

Still, the first step toward any positive change is to think it out. Johnson charts a course in her book gracefully and thoughtfully, building on the work of other scholars rather than engaging in petty squabbles, taking measured positions, and making well-reasoned arguments. She also readily acknowledges difficulties with her ideas. The promulgation of an honor code might be seen to run afoul of commitments to individual rights, privacy, and, above all, equality. A code of behavior on the basis of which we praise and blame is a code that distinguishes some people from others. But perhaps she is right to remain undeterred. For it may be that it is only by allowing ourselves to draw some moral distinctions—only by acknowledging, in other words, some limits on our freedom and our equality—that we can sustain the freedom and equality that we have.

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Forrest A. Nabors: *From Oligarchy to Republicanism: The Great Task of Reconstruction*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017. Pp. 420.)

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This book applies the insights of Aristotelian political science to the coming of the Civil War and the era of Reconstruction. Accordingly, a political regime in all of its complexity is the basic unit of analysis. Forrest A. Nabors's introductory condensation of this concept directly from Aristotle's *Politics* into two paragraphs of crisp English prose is itself a worthy achievement. From this point of departure, the war's approach and aftermath are reframed as a struggle between the oligarchic South and republican North. We are familiar with the latter as the American Founders' modern version of a republic: a regime based on the equal natural rights of all, in which the majority rules through settled laws that limit power for the sake of those rights. Nabors argues convincingly that in the antebellum period the South abandoned the republican founding and devolved into an oligarchy in the Aristotelian sense. It was a regime in which a rich minority ruled for its own advantage, and in which