

7

A Secular Reading of Alexis de Tocqueville

Paul Cliteur

Cliteur, Paul, "A Secular Reading of Tocqueville", in: Raf Geenens and Annelien de Dijn, eds., *Reading Tocqueville: From Oracle to Actor*, Palgrave, MacMillan, Houndmills, New York 2007, pp. 112-132.

Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville is sometimes presented as an almost prophetic political thinker, Annelien De Dijn and Raf Geenens write in their introduction to this book. This is an appropriate observation, indeed. On law, politics, philosophy and other subjects he has presented new ideas that only much later got the recognition that they deserve. According to many commentators this also applies to his ideas on religion. After the relentless onslaught of some radical Enlightenment thinkers on religion (especially Holbach),¹ Tocqueville was one of the most impressive nineteenth-century commentators who tried to reconcile modern democracy with religion.²

My aim in this chapter is to assess the validity of Tocqueville's ideas on religion within the context of the recent upsurge of religious ideas. What can we learn from Tocqueville? Can his approach to religion serve as a source of inspiration to the way modern European states can deal with religion, more particularly religious diversity? Is religion indeed, as Tocqueville contends, important for the maintenance of the democratic political order? If so, why? If not, what are the alternatives? And are Tocqueville's ideas, as is often contended, the counterpoint to the Enlightenment or is his work indebted to the secular tradition as well?

These are the questions I will try to answer in this chapter. I will not concentrate on whether Tocqueville was sincere in his belief. This is the subject of a long discussion among Tocqueville scholars. What exactly did he believe himself? Some commentators speak of his 'indestructible faith'.³ According to Joachim Wach, Tocqueville repeatedly indicated his views on life and politics were 'firmly rooted in religious conviction and religious faith'.⁴ His stance is that liberty cannot be established without

morality and morality not without faith.⁵ This faith is not every faith in general, but religious faith in particular, Wach tells us.

This may be true, but it does not mean that Tocqueville himself was a firm believer. According to other scholars Tocqueville was an 'agnostic' and a 'spiritualist'.⁶ Jean-Louis Benoît points out that, although Tocqueville remained within the Catholic Church, he was very critical of Catholic political parties, severely criticized the papal hierarchy of Pius IX, found dogmatic thinking abhorrent in general and rejected important religious ideas such as the Immaculate Conception and original sin.⁷ He admired the evangelical stories and values incorporated in those stories, but the central idea of the incarnation and divine character of Jesus Christ remained alien to him.⁸ So even as a 'Christian' thinker his claims are not very strong.⁹ In contemporary vocabulary, popularized by secularist thinkers such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, the position of Tocqueville could perhaps best be qualified as 'belief in belief'.¹⁰ Someone who has 'belief in belief' sees belief as a fiction worth maintaining.

The reasons for this can be diverse: rational calculation as in Pascals Wager,¹¹ emotional need as with William James,¹² or political expediency.¹³ Tocqueville's acknowledgement of religion fitted into the last category: religion was necessary to uphold the democratic order. In that sense his ideas were similar to, although not identical with, those of the greatest Enlightenment thinker, Voltaire.

Voltaire was very close to the position that religion, in the sense of belief in the existence of God, is necessary for political reasons (much closer than his reputation as an anti-religious writer warrants).¹⁴ Voltaire calls himself a 'theist'. But this is not belief in the personal God that manifested His will in Holy Scripture and sent his son to the earth to redeem the sins of mankind, but a more abstract almighty God that takes revenge on evil-doers that escape earthly justice.¹⁵ In his 'Epître à l'auteur du livre des Trois Imposteurs', Voltaire presents us his notion of a God that would be socially beneficial.¹⁶ Voltaire thinks that all peoples have sustained the notion of an almighty and perfect God that was the foundation of social order and justice and the terror of the potential criminal (and tyrant). So useful is the belief in such a God that if he would not exist he should be invented ('Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer'). Philosophers in particular should widely circulate this useful belief ('croyance utile').¹⁷ Not only Voltaire, but also many other Enlightenment thinkers took this position. In that sense they were not far from their nineteenth-century conservative detractors, Burke one of the first, who proclaimed: 'We know, and what is better we feel inwardly,

that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and comfort.¹⁸

What is Tocqueville's position in this discussion? The public role of religion is not the subject of a separate volume in the work of Tocqueville but his remarks on religion are dispersed throughout his many writings.¹⁹ The most important passages on the public role of religion are to be found in his main book, *De la démocratie en Amérique*,²⁰ and in his correspondence, in particular the correspondence with another great nineteenth-century thinker: Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882).²¹

In what follows I will first give an overview of Tocqueville's ideas on the public role of religion, analyze his recommendations and present a critique of his stance. The conclusion of my analysis will be that although Tocqueville makes many interesting comments on the historical foundation of the American Republic, some of his ideas on religion as foundational for the political and moral order are difficult to apply to modern societies, living, as we do, in a multicultural and multireligious context. A commonwealth inspired by (and founded in) one specific religion was perhaps a possibility in Tocqueville's time, but it is no longer a possibility in our pluralist times. In modern societies the unifying bond can only be found (as I will try to demonstrate in the following pages) in a set of secular republican ideas.

Does that make Tocqueville's ideas on religion and social cohesion obsolete? Certainly not, because, as we will see, Tocqueville's work includes many clues to the possibility of a more 'secular reading'. In some passages Tocqueville does not exclusively refer to one specific religion as the source of social cohesion (Christianity), but seems to leave open the option of a purely secular 'religion' or a public philosophy as a 'civil religion'. In this last interpretation, his ideas are not only relevant for contemporary discourse, but may well be indispensable.

The correspondence with Gobineau

The correspondence with Gobineau starts with Tocqueville's assignment of Gobineau as what we would now call his 'research assistant'.²² When the correspondence starts (in 1843) Tocqueville is 38 years old and their exchange of letters continues to his death in 1859. At the start of their relationship Gobineau is 27 years old, an ambitious young philosopher, eager to be accepted by the French intellectual public and hoping for the help of the 'arrivé' Tocqueville. Gobineau is expected to inform Tocqueville on new developments in the field of ethics and morals in

the broad sense of these words (so also covering political philosophy).²³ The result is an impressive exchange of letters on religious thought, contemporary philosophers and related matters. In particular the public role of Christianity is discussed by these two giants of the nineteenth century.

Regarding the public role and essence of Christianity the two thinkers vehemently disagree. Gobineau is critical of Christianity; Tocqueville is a defender of the Christian faith, especially the thesis that Christianity is in some form essential for the maintenance of American democracy. Tocqueville contends that Christianity has caused a revolution in the field of rights and duties of the people. Christianity, Tocqueville says, did not bring new duties into existence, but it changed the relationship of the duties among each other. The 'soft virtues' ('*vertus douces*'), such as compassion, humanity and forgiveness were not held in high esteem in antiquity. Christianity changed all this.²⁴ Moreover, Christianity not only meant a revolution for the *substance* of morals, but also for its *foundation*. After Christianity, the sanctioning of morality had completely changed. The meaning of life was seen not in this life any longer, but in the life hereafter ('*Il plaça le but de la vie après la vie*'). And because of this change of emphasis, morality got a firm foundation, much better than would be the case when morality had to stand on its own feet, as was the case in classical antiquity.²⁵ All the ingredients of Christianity were preexistent before the appearance of Christ, but because of Christianity they got a different colouring and they were seen as a unity.²⁶ It made of these moral elements a 'religion', Tocqueville writes. This new appreciation of religion as the basis of morals was widespread in the nineteenth century. After the onslaught on religion made by some of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* many nineteenth-century political philosophers reevaluated the role of religion as the necessary social bond of society.²⁷ In France this can be found with Chateaubriand,²⁸ Joseph de Maistre²⁹ and even Benjamin Constant.³⁰

Tocqueville is most impressed by the supernatural foundation of morals in religion. A more worldly foundation of morals seems to him – in the correspondence with Gobineau – a mere 'second best'. When the supernatural foundation of morality had become shaky, he writes, only self-interest rightly understood was seen as a basis for morals. This 'revolution'³¹ was accomplished by the British utilitarians (Bentham,³² later Mill³³), who made it a focal point of their moral theory. Tocqueville's intention is to counter this development, which had started in the eighteenth century.³⁴ Gobineau cannot agree with his older mentor on this specific topic. 'I have to confess you that I have a completely different

opinion on Christianity than you,' Gobineau wrote.³⁵ Sometimes the temperature rises in the correspondence and the reader wonders whether their relationship will survive the deep theoretical differences. But the letters always end with the good wishes to the mutual wives.

The two correspondents also tackle the difficult question how to cope with the misdeeds that have been perpetrated in the name of religion.³⁶ Tocqueville indicates that the Christian religion has gone through barbaric times and has been affected by those times. But we should not reproach Christianity with that. All the criticism that has been made of Christianity has no relevance for the central message of the Christian creed, which is that we should love our neighbour like ourselves.³⁷

There is much discussion regarding whether Tocqueville was a sincere believer. As we have seen, Wach speaks of the 'Frenchman's indestructible faith'.³⁸ This faith is certainly not just faith in general, but *religious* faith in particular. In a letter to one of his friends he writes:

What has always struck me about my country ... has been to see lined up on one side the men who prize morality, religion, order, and on the other those who love freedom and the equality of men before the law. This sight has struck me as the most extraordinary and most deplorable ever offered a man's view; for all these things which we separate are, I am certain, indissolubly united in the eyes of God. They are all *holy* things, if I can express myself so, because the greatness and happiness of man in this world can come only from the simultaneous combination of them all.³⁹

Wach notes: 'This combination was the great Frenchman's ideal all through his life.'⁴⁰ Wach is only one commentator of many who emphasized the religious, almost apologetic nature of Tocqueville's writings. There is, of course, a firm basis for such an interpretation, as we will see, but there is some counter-information as well.

Why is religion so important for a democracy like the United States of America? And would religion also be indispensable for all modern democracies? To answer these questions we have to put the ideas of Tocqueville in the context of his view on the development of American democracy as described in his major work on the subject.

Democracy, equality and Christianity

The first sentence of *De la démocratie en Amérique* is well known: 'Among the new things that attracted my attention during my stay in the United

States, none struck me more forcefully than the equality of conditions.'⁴¹ Equality is a broad principle for Tocqueville. It seems to encompass also individual freedom and autonomy. In words that prefigure John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* (1859)⁴² Tocqueville proclaims that each individual is the best judge of what concerns himself alone.⁴³

Another observation that Tocqueville made and that is closely connected to his comment on equality is that the social state of the Americans is eminently democratic. It has had this character since the birth of the colonies and it had it even more at the time Tocqueville was writing *De la démocratie en Amérique*.⁴⁴ The principle of popular sovereignty 'looms over each and every aspect of the Anglo-American political system', Tocqueville asserts.⁴⁵ Every page of his book will reveal new applications of this doctrine, the writer tells us.

His views on political equality and democracy are clearly based on a view of man. 'Each individual is supposed to be as enlightened, as virtuous and as strong as every other individual.'⁴⁶ Why does the individual obey society? He obeys society because union with his fellow men seems useful to him, and because he knows that such union cannot exist without a regulatory power.

In everything to do with the duties of citizens to one another, he has therefore become subject. In everything that regards himself alone, he remains master. He is free and owes an account of his actions only to God. Whence this maxim: the individual is the best as well as the only judge of his own interest, and society has the right to direct his actions only when it feels injured by his activities or when it requires his cooperation.⁴⁷

What has this to do with religion, Christianity in particular? The relation between democracy and its core principle equality on the one hand and Christianity on the other, is made clear when Tocqueville writes: 'Christianity, which made all men equal in the sight of God, will not shrink from seeing all citizens as equal in the eyes of the law.'⁴⁸ This observation had been made before by Tocqueville and would be reiterated after him countless times:⁴⁹ Christianity is the most egalitarian religion.⁵⁰ So 'champions of freedom' should hasten to invoke the aid of religion, 'for they must know that without morality freedom cannot reign and without faith there is no basis for morality'.⁵¹

In some ways Christianity is identical to the American founding idea: equality. All the great writers of antiquity belonged to the slave-owning aristocracy. It took the coming of Jesus Christ to make people understand

that all members of the human race are by nature similar and equal, Tocqueville writes.⁵² Not only Christ is the linchpin between equality and religion, the same could be said of God. 'Men who are similar and equal readily conceive of the notion of a single God who imposes the same rules on each of them and grants them future happiness at the same price.'⁵³ The idea of the unity of the human race continually brings men back to the idea of the unity of the Creator, Tocqueville contends. Sober, skeptical and sometimes even cynical political commentator as Tocqueville is, he sounds lyrical when he sketches a common future under one God:

It seems to me that the more the barriers that divide the nations of mankind and the citizens of each nation disappear, the more the human mind tends, as if by its very nature, to embrace the idea of a single, all-powerful being imposing the same laws in the same way on everyone equally.⁵⁴

As can be expected, Tocqueville also dwells on the historical origin of the American Republic and the significance religion had for the founding fathers. There is, as is well known, the relation between the Christian colonies and democracy.⁵⁵ 'All the new European colonies invariably contained at least the germ, if not the mature form, of a complete democracy', Tocqueville tells us.⁵⁶ Those immigrants or 'pilgrims' belonged to an English sect with austere Christian principles. Tocqueville is perfectly right that Puritanism was not just a religious doctrine, but that it virtually coincided with the most absolute democratic and republican theories.⁵⁷ When the immigrants landed on the shores of the new country in 1620 they adopted a covenant, which read:

We, whose names follow, who, for the glory of God, the development of the Christian faith, and the honor of our fatherland have undertaken to establish the first colony on these remote shores, we agree in the present document, by mutual and solemn consent, and before God, to form ourselves into a body of political society, for the purpose of governing ourselves and working towards the accomplishment of these designs; and in virtue of this contract, we agree to promulgate laws, acts and ordinances, and to institute as needed officials to whom we promise submission and obedience.⁵⁸

Here we see the new spectacle of a society 'homogeneous in all its parts', Tocqueville writes.⁵⁹ Not even classical democracy could

dream of such a social cohesion, based on the acceptance of common principles.

These facts are of course well known. There is a historical connection between Christianity and the birth of America and there are conceptual correlations between Christianity and the ideal of equality (all believers equal in the eyes of God). But that does not imply, to be sure, that religion was the sole or even the most important factor contributing to the success of the American Republic. Neither does it imply, of course, that religion would still be the most viable candidate for fostering social cohesion in contemporary democracies. In the remainder of this chapter I want to elaborate on the significance of Tocqueville's ideas for contemporary society. Many followers of Tocqueville, or those inspired by his thought, seem to think that on the basis of what Tocqueville wrote in the nineteenth century they can still contend that religion or Christianity could be useful as an instrument for social cohesion. Is that true? Why, in contemporary pluralistic society where Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and unbelievers live under the protection of the American Constitution, should one specific religion be acknowledged and privileged as the supposed foundation of the democratic order? That requires some explanation indeed. And would Tocqueville, if he had lived in the twenty-first century, still have attributed to Christianity the prominent place it took in mid-nineteenth-century America? These are some questions I hope to answer in the pages that follow.

An analysis of Tocqueville's ideas and assessment of his significance for contemporary social problems

In order to answer these questions, let us now turn to a more close analysis of Tocqueville's ideas on the importance of religion for the political order. The first thing to be noted is that Tocqueville presupposes more than he explicitly argues for. In the correspondence with Gobineau, for instance, he presupposes that moral ideas would float in the air, so to say, if they did not have the support of religion. This is the grist of his critique of English utilitarians like Bentham and Mill.⁶⁰ After the supernatural foundation of morals had been demolished, the only thing that was left was a secular or utilitarian foundation for morals. Tocqueville considers this to be a shaky foundation. But is such a negative judgement justified? And what would be the alternative?

The obvious alternative for a purely philosophical or secular foundation of morals as provided by the utilitarians is, of course, an ethical theory known as divine command morality.⁶¹ Why is something good? Because it has been commanded by God. Why is something morally rejectionable? Because it has been forbidden by God. According to adherents of divine command morality only the divine will can provide us with a secure basis for morality. But is that true? Further analysis of the theory presents us with a host of problems.⁶² First, there is the problem of the arbitrary character of the divine will. God has forbidden theft and violence, but what if God had commanded the torture of innocent children? Would that make torture morally right? Most people, including believing Christians, will have problems with that position. But if they do, they presuppose an autonomous idea of good and evil. And this means that they subscribe to the position that religion is not the basis of morals, but rather morals the foundation of religion. This simple objection⁶³ is in fact a substantial critique of the religious foundation of morals.⁶⁴

That Tocqueville did not recognize this point as something that discredits his ideas on the social and political significance of religion is strange, because he was well aware of the vicissitudes of lawmaking based on religion. In *De la démocratie en Amérique* Tocqueville comments on the plans of Connecticut's lawmakers to base their law on sacred texts. Tocqueville calls that a 'strange idea' ('In drafting those laws, they hit on the strange idea of drawing upon sacred texts').⁶⁵ But is this really so strange after Tocqueville's eulogizing of the Christian influence on law and politics? 'Whoever shall worship any deity other than the Lord God shall be put to death', the Connecticut lawmakers proclaimed. They continued with provisions taken literally from Deuteronomy, Exodus and Leviticus. In harmony with what they had learned from those sacred texts they also declared blasphemy, witchcraft, adultery and rape punishable by death.⁶⁶ A son who failed to honour his father and mother? This was subject to the same penalty, and social intercourse between unmarried individuals was subject to severe censure.⁶⁷

Tocqueville comments: 'Thus the laws of a rude and half-civilized people were carried over into a society of enlightened spirit and gentle mores.'⁶⁸ These penal laws were 'profoundly marked by narrow sectarian thinking'.⁶⁹ He seems shocked because these Puritan legislators proclaimed 'even death for Christians who wished to worship God in some way other than their own'.⁷⁰ Apparently Tocqueville does not reckon these precepts from Holy Scripture to be 'Christian' in the sense he is advocating when he declares Christianity indispensable for democracy.

He takes the lawmakers to task because they 'intruded upon the realm of conscience'⁷¹ and 'were totally oblivious of the great principles of religious freedom'.⁷²

These comments could be expected from a consistent secularist as Holbach, but how do they fit in with Tocqueville's approach? How can Tocqueville list all these problematic texts and still say: 'in America, it was religion that showed the way to enlightenment; it was respect for divine law that showed man the way to freedom'? Those lawmakers took the divine will seriously, so it seems, according to Tocqueville perhaps a little too seriously. What his treatment of the Connecticut lawmakers shows us is that a considerable part of divine inspired texts from Scripture has to be ignored and left behind before real freedom and civilization can emerge. So Tocqueville can only maintain his thesis on the intricate connection of religion and politics when being at the same time very selective with regard to the religious sources of inspiration for the American constitutional and political order. When Tocqueville writes that in America somehow the 'spirit of liberty' and the 'spirit of religion' have been combined we have to gauge what exactly is that 'spirit of religion'. Apparently, it is not making penal laws on the basis of God's word. The spirit of religion must be something different from that. But what? Tocqueville does not give us a clear answer to that question.

The position that we need religion for the maintenance of moral and political order, can also be criticized on from a more pragmatic angle. Adherents of this position usually are vague as to the question *what religion* is supposed to fulfil that role. Tocqueville uses the words 'Christianity' and 'religion' interchangeably, but if we canvass his entire oeuvre it is clear that he does not consider every religion suitable for that function. He vehemently rejects Islam for instance.⁷³

The protagonist of the claim that religion should be the basis of the moral order could, of course, take the position that the religion of the majority would be best qualified to fulfil the function of the social bond. But the problem is that most contemporary societies are multicultural or multireligious. And the prospects for one religion gaining the upper hand are not very good, to say the least. Besides, non-establishment clauses like the first amendment of the American Constitution prohibit state-churches and official state religions. In combination with freedom of belief, these are a firm foundation of modern constitutions and this makes the chances of a majority religion very slim. This would imply that Tocqueville's ideas on Christianity as the foundation of American democracy – whatever their value was in the nineteenth century – would

hardly be an option in contemporary societies. Because the pluralistic or multicultural composition of the people is a hard fact in contemporary life, the question is: 'what unites all civilians with different religions?' As religion can only unite people from the same group yet disunites society as a whole, we have to look for a new source of inspiration that can bind the people together.

For post-Enlightenment thinkers like Edmund Burke, Chateaubriand, Joseph de Maistre and also Tocqueville (although I will qualify this statement hereafter) the republican principles of the French Revolution or Enlightenment could not function as the new civil religion. Some of these nineteenth-century thinkers advocated a return to religion as the foundation of the political and moral order as had been the case in the pre-Enlightenment period. But globalization and demography has now made this nineteenth-century option obsolete. A longing for one religion as the unifying factor of contemporary societies is a romantic illusion, a nostalgic desire for a time and culture that no longer exist.⁷⁴ As we have seen, Tocqueville dreams of 'the idea of a single, all-powerful being imposing the same laws in the same way on everyone equally'.⁷⁵ But this is no longer the world we are living in and probably never will be. The adherents of the different denominations will probably never overcome their differences as to the nature of their God.⁷⁶ More likely is that, if religion is mixed up with politics, a protracted discussion over the nature of God will lead us into wars of religion, as we have witnessed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.

If these critical remarks on the social and political function of religion are justified, then we have to reconsider a kind of secular or denominationally neutral civil religion. And the next question is: do we find hints at such a secular civil religion in Tocqueville's work? Or had he bet all his cards on the religion of Christianity as some other counter-revolutionary thinkers like Joseph de Maistre had done?

The secular reading of Tocqueville

Tocqueville is a complex and, it seems to me, not always consistent thinker. In a majority of passages in *De la démocratie en Amérique* and other books he stresses the need for a religious backup of the moral order and he appears to be skeptical about the autonomy of ethics and politics. Yet there seem to be some footholds for independent politics and ethics in his work as well, more specifically when he uses the word 'religion' in a very broad and non-sectarian way. In Volume One, Part II, Chapter 10, he comments on his favourite subject, popular sovereignty,

as an idea that impregnates the whole American mind. The idea, or, as Tocqueville writes, the 'dogma' of popular sovereignty is 'the last link in a chain of opinions that rings the whole Anglo-American world'.⁷⁷ But then his discourse makes an interesting twist in the direction of reason (and not faith). Tocqueville writes: 'Providence equipped each individual ... with the degree of reason necessary to guide his conduct in matters of exclusive interest to himself alone. This is the great maxim on which civil and political society in the United States is based.'⁷⁸

Let us read these words carefully: Providence endowed man with reason. Tocqueville continues by telling us that reason and the republic seem intimately connected, because the republic penetrates into the ideas, opinions and general habits of the Americans, and 'in order for them to change their laws, they would in a sense have to change themselves through and through'.⁷⁹ Apparently, it is not only uncritical acceptance of dogma that is extolled in the work of Tocqueville. Man can reason about the political order. It is reason that makes it possible to review the laws in the light of the idea of popular sovereignty. And then Tocqueville introduces a new conception of 'religion' that is much broader than Christianity or even theism. He writes:

In the United States, the religion of the majority is itself republican. That religion subjects the truths of the other world to individual reason, just as politics leaves the interests of this world to the good sense of all, and it allows each man free choice of the path that is to lead him to heaven, just as the law grants each citizen the right to choose his government.⁸⁰

Here religion in the traditional sense is completely evaporated. This is the civil religion of the Enlightenment thinkers. Tocqueville does not advocate Christianity or Catholicism as the bond uniting all the citizens of the Republic, but their faith in reason and in popular sovereignty. The republican conviction is here portrayed as the 'religion' that animates the American political order.

In this passage the great aristocratic Frenchman subscribes more to the Enlightenment ideas of the eighteenth-century radicals than to the enlightened conservatism of thinkers like Burke and Chateaubriand that resonates in other parts of his oeuvre. The only thing, even in this passage, that reminds us of his predilection for the 'dogmatism' that animates the rest of his work, is that the republican principle itself is proclaimed as a dogma that cannot be scrutinized by reason: 'The republican principle reigns in America today as the monarchical principle

dominated France under Louis XIV.⁸¹ The republican principle, Tocqueville adds, is accepted in America without combat, without opposition, without proof: 'by a tacit accord, a sort of *consensus universalis*'.⁸²

On the basis of these passages it is possible to interpret Tocqueville not only as the founding father of the 'Christian view' that links the American Republic to Christianity, but also to see him as the expounder of the notion of a 'civil religion' that is much broader than religion in its confessional meaning.

Let us go back to an older commentator on Tocqueville's work, John Nef. Nef writes: 'Beliefs have played and are playing compelling parts in history. All of us believe in something.'⁸³ Indeed, *in something*. But judging from the Tocqueville passage quoted above, this can just as well be a secularist philosophy. It may also be possible to refer to common values as the binding element in contemporary societies, such as faith in democracy, in human rights, or in the rule of law. Apologists for belief tend to ignore or disavow the unifying potential of secular creeds. Yet Nef as well comes very close to the view that secular creeds can fulfil this function, as is clear from the following words:

If belief is an inevitable part of individual experience, nothing is perhaps of greater moment than the question whether men and women generally have accessible any belief capable of uniting rather than dividing them, any belief that will nourish the gentle virtues and help justice, charity, compassion and love, rather than hatred, jealousy, fear, and the lust for power, to gain, and now (if given reign) almost inevitably to destroy the world.⁸⁴

This is indeed the central question: is there 'any belief capable of uniting rather than dividing' the people that have to share the territory of the state? This question cannot be answered by simply proposing your own religious conviction.

So Tocqueville is important, not because of what he has written about the specific importance of Christianity for democracy, but because of his emphasis on what we now call a 'civil religion'. Sanford Kessler writes: 'Perhaps the most important conclusion to emerge from the contemporary civil religion debate so far is that religion in some form is essential for a well-ordered democratic polity.'⁸⁵ I stress 'in some form'. Kessler cites Will Herberg, who contends that every society requires a shared religious faith, which gives its citizens the basic ideas, values, rituals and symbols that make common political life possible.⁸⁶ Using one of the existing world religions for that purpose would demean that religion

and cause civil strife in a multireligious society.⁸⁷ Thus, if we want to make Tocqueville relevant for our contemporary democracies we have to interpret him as the propounder of a civil religion, not as advocating Christianity as social mooring. Fortunately, there are several passages that make this 'civil-religion reading' of Tocqueville viable.

Another passage where Tocqueville indicated that the success of the American Republic results from much more than religion, in the narrow sense of the word, is to be found in Chapter 8 of the first book of *De la démocratie en Amérique*. Tocqueville writes:

The thirteen colonies that simultaneously threw off the English yoke at the end of the last century shared the same religion, the same language, the same mores, and almost the same laws; they fought a common enemy; they should therefore have powerful reasons to unite closely with one another and consolidate as a single nation.⁸⁸

It is clear from this passage that the first Americans shared much more than just 'religion', in the confessional sense that Tocqueville, in other passages of *De la démocratie*, singles out as the foremost if not sole factor of social cohesion. What about the motivating factor of sharing a common history, for instance? Tocqueville is aware of a 'harmony between fortune and human efforts' in America.⁸⁹ What was the source of that harmony? Was it a shared religion? Tocqueville answers: 'America was a new nation, yet the people who lived there had long been accustomed to the exercise of liberty elsewhere. These were two great causes of domestic order.'⁹⁰ In other words, it had novelty and the sense of freedom in its genes. That is what distinguished America from other nations – not religion in the narrow sense.

In yet another passage Tocqueville points out that the founding fathers of the American Republic were outstanding and independent thinkers: 'the men who framed the laws of the Union were almost all remarkable for their enlightenment and still more remarkable for their patriotism'.⁹¹

I do not want to contend that my 'secular reading' of Tocqueville is the only one possible. There are many passages where Tocqueville seems to understand confessional religion or even Christianity as the firm foundation of the American republic. In many places Tocqueville presents us with sweeping generalizations such as:

It was religion that gave birth to Anglo-American societies. This must always be borne in mind. Hence religion in the United States

is inextricably intertwined with all the national habits and all the feelings to which the fatherland gives rise. This gives it a peculiar force.⁹²

In such passages Tocqueville apparently overlooks that historical influence and viability for the future are completely different things. It may be true that Christianity exerted a great historical influence on the founding of the American republic but that nonetheless only a secular state has prospects for the future. Tocqueville's admirer and contemporary, John Stuart Mill, understood this very well. He wrote some insightful essays on the relationship between morals and religion that are in some respects more subtle than the ideas of the great Frenchman. Mill wrote:

They say, that religion alone can teach us what morality is; that all the high morality ever recognized by mankind, was learnt from religion; that the greatest uninspired philosophers in their sublimest flights, stopt far short of the Christian morality, and whatever inferior morality they may have attained to (by the assistance, as many think, of dim traditions derived from the Hebrew books, or from a primeval revelation), they never could induce the common mass of their fellow citizens to accept it from them. That, only when a morality is understood to come from the Gods, do men in general adopt it, rally round it, and lend their human sanctions for its enforcement. That granting the sufficiency of human motives to make the rule obeyed, were it not for the religious idea we should not have had the rule itself.⁹³

Mill is not reluctant to acknowledge this: 'There is truth in much of this'. But he adds one important proviso: 'There is truth in much of this, considered as a matter of history.'⁹⁴ Ancient peoples have generally understood their morals, their laws, their intellectual beliefs and even their practical arts of life as revelations from superior powers.⁹⁵ That does not mean, however, that this is necessarily the case. When people were savages, moral precepts needed god-given sanctions. But as civilization advances, it must be possible to uphold moral values without divine sanctions. The secularist position is clearly stated by Mill when he writes: 'Are not moral truths strong enough in their own evidence, at all events to retain the belief of mankind when once they have acquired it?'⁹⁶ Mill points out that much of what is considered specifically Christian morality is equalled in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, which we have no ground for believing to have been in any way

indebted to Christianity.⁹⁷ Yet whatever may be the source of some moral precepts, the relevant question is whether they can stand on their own feet. Even if some of the precepts of Jesus were an original contribution to our moral heritage, it has become the property of humanity and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primeval barbarism.⁹⁸

In his correspondence with Gobineau, Tocqueville indicated that he considered the ideas of the 'utilitaires anglais' as rather shallow.⁹⁹ I do not think this judgement is very judicious. Mill understood better than Tocqueville what the future had in store for us, although also in the work of Tocqueville there are moorings for a civil religion of a non-denominational character. A secular reading of Tocqueville seems possible and probably this aspect of his work has greater significance for the future than many scholars seem to realize.

Notes

- 1 Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, *Histoire Critique de Jésus Christ ou analyse raisonnée des Evangiles* [1770], ed. Andrew Hunswick (Geneva: Librairie Droz SA, 1997). Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, 'La contagion sacrée, ou histoire naturelle de la superstition ou tableau des effets que les opinions religieuses ont produits sur la terre [1768]', in Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, *Premières oeuvres*, ed. Paulette Charbonnel (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1971), pp. 139–75. For other radical currents and thinkers within the Enlightenment tradition, see Catherine Secrétan, Tristan Dragon and Laurent Bove (eds), *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières 'Radicales'? Libertinage, athéisme et spinozisme dans le tournant philosophique de l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2007).
- 2 See Joshua Mitchell, 'Tocqueville on Democratic Religious Experience', in Cheryl B. Welch (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 276–302.
- 3 Joachim Wach, 'The Role of Religion in the Social Philosophy of Alexis de Tocqueville', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 7(1) (1946), pp. 74–90. See p. 75 in particular.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Jean-Louis Benoît in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Notes sur le Coran et autres textes sur les religions*, ed. Jean-Louis Benoît (Paris: Bayard, 2007), p. 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 10: 'In that sense, he had no faith'.
- 9 It all depends, of course, on what makes a 'Christian'. Bertrand Russell writes: 'I think that you must have a certain amount of definite beliefs before you have a right to call yourself a Christian.' These beliefs are: (1) belief in the existence of God, (2) belief in life after death, (3) belief that Christ has a specific significance. Cf. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian. And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

- 10 Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 200–46. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London and Johannesburg: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 301.
- 11 See fragment 233 (in the Brunschvicg edition) of Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670] (Fragment 418 in the Lafuma edition). This fragment is also included in countless introductions to the philosophy of religion, see for instance: Blaise Pascal, 'The Wager', in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger (eds), *Philosophy of Religion. Selected Readings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 63–5.
- 12 See William James, 'The Will to Believe', in William James, *Writings 1878–1899* (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp. 457–79.
- 13 Going back on Plato's 'Noble Lie', a religious myth told to the people to motivate them to do what is good and right. In contemporary political thought this idea was forcefully defended by Leo Strauss. See Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005 [1998]), pp. 65ff.
- 14 According to Burke, Voltaire was a blasphemous thinker. See Edmund Burke, *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, edited and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield Jr (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 268. For Maistre he was the most despicable writer. See Joseph de Maistre, *Du Pape*, 2nd edn (Tournai: J. Casterman, 1820), p. 264.
- 15 Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964 [1764]). See the article 'Theist'.
- 16 Voltaire, 'Epître à l'auteur du livre des Trois Imposteurs', in Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier, 1877–85), Tome 10, pp. 402–5.
- 17 See also Voltaire, 'Athée, athéisme' in Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, eds. Julien Benda and Raymond Naves (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1764), avec introduction, variantes et notes par Julien Benda, texte établi par Raymond Naves (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1764), pp. 36–44. See p. 40 in particular.
- 18 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982 [1790]), p. 186.
- 19 Jean-Louis Benoît brings these texts together and provides excellent commentary. See Tocqueville, *Notes sur le Coran*.
- 20 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004).
- 21 Alexis de Tocqueville and Arthur Gobineau, *Correspondence entre Alexis de Tocqueville et Arthur de Gobineau, 1843–1859*, ed. L. Schemann (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1909).
- 22 See André Jardin, *Tocqueville. A Biography* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), pp. 431–2.
- 23 Cf. 'Qu'y a-t-il en définitive de *nouveau* dans les travaux ou les découvertes des moralistes modernes?' in Tocqueville and Gobineau, *Correspondence*, p. 4.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 25 *Ibid.*: Christianity gave 'un caractère plus pur, plus immatériel, plus désintéressé, plus haut à la moral'.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 6: 'Lui seul en fit un ensemble, en lia toutes les parties et faisant tourner cette nouvelle morale en religion ...'
- 27 As I already made clear, not all of the Enlightenment thinkers were hostile to religion. Only the defenders of what Jonathan Israel has called 'radical

- Enlightenment' were. See Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 28 See his critique on the French *Encyclopédie* and its secularist leanings in: Chateaubriand, *Essai historique, politique et moral sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes, considérées dans leur rapports avec la Révolution française*, ed. Maurice Regard (Paris: Gallimard, 1978 [1797]), p. 358.
 - 29 Joseph de Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques* (Lyon: M.P. Rusand, 1833).
 - 30 See Benjamin Constant, 'De la religion considérée dans la source, ses formes et ses développements', in Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulin (Paris: Gallimard, 1957 [1824]), pp. 1365–95. See p. 1370 on Holbach.
 - 31 On the revolution of the utilitarians, see Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972 [1928]).
 - 32 Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (London and New York: Methuen, 1982 [1789]).
 - 33 John Stuart Mill, 'Utilitarianism', in John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Utilitarianism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman's Library, 1992), pp. 113–72.
 - 34 Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'ancien régime et la Révolution*, ed. J.-P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 242: 'On peut dire d'une manière générale qu'au XVIII siècle le christianisme avait perdu sur tout le continent de l'Europe une grande partie de sa puissance.'
 - 35 Tocqueville and Gobineau, *Correspondence*, p. 12: 'Je vous avoue que je professe une opinion absolument contraire à la vôtre sur le christianisme.' Tocqueville and Gobineau also clashed on Islam. Gobineau had a rather favourable opinion of Islam, Tocqueville was a vehement critic. See Tocqueville, *Notes sur le Coran*, pp. 37ff.
 - 36 A matter that was, of course, widely discussed among Enlightenment authors. See: Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, 'La Contagion Sacrée, ou Histoire Naturelle de la Superstition ou Tableau des Effets que les Opinions Religieuses ont produits sur la Terre' [1768], in Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, *Premières oeuvres*, pp. 139–75. On p. 170 he writes: 'on nous dira peut-être que ce n'est point à la religion elle-même, mais à l'abus de la religion, que sont dus les excès dont nous avons parlé.'
 - 37 Tocqueville and Gobineau, *Correspondence*, p. 13: 'Aimez Dieu de tout votre coeur et votre prochain comme vous-même, ceci renferme la loi et les prophètes.'
 - 38 Wach, 'The Role of Religion'. See p. 75 in particular.
 - 39 Alexis de Tocqueville, 'Letter to Eugène Stoffels, on His Love of Freedom and New Kind of Liberalism' (24 July 1836), in *The Tocqueville Reader. A Life in Letters and Politics*, ed. Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 152.
 - 40 Wach, 'The Role of Religion', p. 76.
 - 41 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 3.
 - 42 Mill, *On Liberty*.

- 43 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 72.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 49 And criticized for that, for instance by Nietzsche. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, [1888–9], in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Band 6*, ed. Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari (Munich: De Gruyter, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), pp. 165–255.
- 50 Page Smith, *Rediscovering Christianity. A History of Modern Democracy and the Christian Ethics* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), p. 132.
- 51 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 12.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 505.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 506.
- 55 See George Jellinek, *Die Erklärung der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte*, ed. Walter Jellinek (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1927).
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Mill had also reviewed *De la démocratie en Amérique* with enthusiasm. He asked Tocqueville to contribute to a magazine he had started. See Jardin, *Tocqueville*, p. 235.
- 61 For a historical overview of the different forms, see: Janine Marie Idziak, 'Divine Command Morality: A Guide to the Literature', in Janine Marie Idziak, *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), pp. 1–38.
- 62 See Kai Nielsen, 'Ethics without Religion', in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger (eds), *Philosophy of Religion. Selected Readings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 536–44.
- 63 Only roughly formulated here. For a more elaborate treatment, see the texts comprised in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality*, or Philip Quinn, 'The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50 (Supplement) (1990), pp. 345–65.
- 64 Already developed in Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4e. See also A.E. Taylor, *Plato. The Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1977 [1926]), p. 151.
- 65 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 42.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 68 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 Tocqueville, *Notes sur le Coran*, p. 37.
- 74 Some of the romantics were well aware of this. See Novalis, *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 1984 [1799]).

- 75 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 506.
- 76 As the German theologian Hans Küng advocates in: Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Erklärung zum Weltethos. Die Deklaration des Parlamentes der Weltreligionen* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1993).
- 77 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 458.
- 78 *Ibid.* On the use of the term 'providence', see Benoît: 'Quand on étudie en détail l'ensemble du *corpus* tocquevillien, il apparaît clairement que cette croyance à la 'Providence' est diffuse; Tocqueville est bien éloigné du providentialisme de Bossuet ou des penseurs contre-révolutionnaires: Bonald et Joseph de Maistre, contrairement à ce que peut penser le lecteur.' Tocqueville, *Notes sur le Coran*, p. 21.
- 79 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 458.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 459.
- 81 *Ibid.*
- 82 *Ibid.*, p. 460.
- 83 John Nef, 'Truth, Belief and Civilization: Tocqueville and Gobineau', *Review of Politics*, 25(4) (1963), pp. 460–82. See p. 463 in particular.
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 464.
- 85 Sanford Kessler, 'Tocqueville on Civil Religion and Liberal Democracy', *The Journal of Politics*, 39(1) (1977), pp. 119–46. See p. 120 in particular.
- 86 Kessler, 'Tocqueville on Civil Religion', p. 120.
- 87 By concentrating on the political utility of religious belief to the point of indifference as to its content, Lively and Zetterbaum argue, Tocqueville undermines the very belief he finds necessary to the preservation of liberty. As a result, Tocqueville's position is untenable according to these authors. See Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 196–7. Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 120–4. According to Catharine Zuckert, by contrast, Tocqueville's position is internally consistent. See Catherine Zuckert, 'Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy', *Review of Politics*, 43(2) (1981), pp. 259–80.
- 88 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 126.
- 89 *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- 90 *Ibid.*
- 91 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 92 *Ibid.*, p. 486.
- 93 John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1998 [1874]), p. 96.
- 94 *Ibid.*
- 95 *Ibid.*
- 96 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 97 The same idea is elaborated with a wealth of material in Joseph McCabe, *Sources of the Morality of the Gospels* (London: Watts & Co., 1914).
- 98 Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, p. 98.
- 99 Tocqueville and Gobineau, *Correspondance*, p. 7.