

Tocqueville Then & Now:

As Christianity Declines Throughout America, What Possibilities Remain for American  
Democracy?

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Thesis Final Draft

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Originally sent in 1831 with the sole intention of reviewing America's prison system, the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville quickly became intrigued with the America he observed. Resulting from these observations, Tocqueville forged beyond the scope of the American prison system and commenced his seminal work, *Democracy In America*, within which he develops a full and firsthand account of American Democracy based upon his experiences while staying in America. Unlike France's political instability at the time, American Democracy was different, it had succeeded in establishing a stable democratic republic and Tocqueville decided to find out what made America's political system so successful.

While in America, Tocqueville closely observed the progress of equality in its effect over the political make up of America and its influence over the minds of its citizens. Through this process, Tocqueville experienced the imperfections of equality, which arose seemingly in stride with its benefits. The American ideal of equality sought to establish a state where "men will be perfectly free, because they will all be entirely equal; and they will all be perfectly equal because they will be entirely free."<sup>1</sup> Although related, humanity's passions for equality and liberty are distinct and in terms of democratic society are most certainly unequal. Unique to democratic society, equality serves as the principal passion of the people and as such they develop dangerous tendencies in pursuit of greater equality. Equality has the tendency to lead individuals to dissociate with political life and isolate themselves, to relinquish personal liberty, and to promote a tyranny of the majority. Consequently, Tocqueville is concerned about a despotic sort of tyranny where the majority possess absolute political authority as potentially

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc, 2010), 743.

leading American democracy to ruin. Fearful of this reality, Tocqueville shifts his attention to the other institutions of American democracy in hopes of finding a solution. It is here that he settles upon religion, more specifically Christianity, as the greatest defender and preserver of American democracy. Ironically, the unprecedented influence that Christianity experiences throughout America is a result of its separation from state, thus allowing it to remain open to all and affording it the possibility of achieving its highest goal, universality. Ultimately, Tocqueville determines that the success of American democracy is thanks to the positive effects of equality in tandem with the strength of Christianity's influence in cultivating the mores throughout society, which guard against the negative aspects of equality. However, just because America democracy was successful during Tocqueville's time does not guarantee that it will remain as such. Looking forward to contemporary American democracy and employing Tocqueville's analysis it becomes apparent that although America faces its fair share of problems, the fundamentals of American democracy remain the same even in the face of a Christianity in decline. Even as the institution fades and individuals less ardently engage in religion the civil religion of America remains intact, made up the very same mores and values taught by Christianity. Contemporary American democracy has nothing to fear from the decline of institutional religion so long as it is able to maintain the mores of society which serve to guard against the negative possibilities which arise out of its insatiable love for and pursuit of Equality.

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Throughout the remainder of this essay, I will consider, first, how Americans' love for equality results in the possibility of despotism. Then, observe how Christianity effectively serves

to combat this problem. And finally, draw conclusions regarding the stability of American democracy in light of the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere.

Tocqueville, during his time in America, observed how pervasive the prioritization of equality was throughout society as well as how influential the ideas which it spurred could be. Aware of its benefits, Tocqueville was also conscious and apprehensive about the potential negative effects that equality might have regarding American democracy due to its apparent strength throughout society and its nature. With its roots firmly planted in the ideals of the revolution, equality, in tandem with freedom, had come to make up a central tenant of American ideology. Unlike today where it is expected as the cultural norm, equality in 1831 represented a set of ideals, which were still quite new to the world, that established a state of being equal in status, rights, and opportunities among all individuals. Still largely unaccustomed to the ideals of equality, Tocqueville, along with the rest of humanity carried the weight of a long history of oppression, empire building, and inequality. As such, he increasingly found himself confronted by these realized effects of equality, which up to this point have not yet come to fruition. Curious about the true nature of equality, Tocqueville was determined to discover the ways in which this equality contributed to both the benefit and hindrance of American democracy. However, before being able to asses the effects of equality, Tocqueville first needed to understand equality at its most fundamental level and additionally the reason why the American people came to value and prioritize equality so greatly that it became a lasting aspect of American morality and the foundation of American democratic society.

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Equality in its most absolute form is radical and represents sameness in all things and between all people.<sup>2</sup> True equality is a level playing field where the low has been elevated and the high diminished until there is only one even plane of existence. Thankfully, this iteration of equality was not the form which exists throughout America. However, for Tocqueville, it does represent a dangerous possibility which could threaten American democracy. Consequently, the question must be raised: if pure equality is not the equality of America then what is? From Tocqueville's perspective the answer would seem to be an intentionally flawed form of equality based on a set of ideals or hopes, which cascades throughout society reinforcing its mores. The basis of American equality is possibility, the ideal that anything can happen, is in the freedom of everyone to pursue said possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this goal is just that, a goal, and is not always a reality. Ironically, both humanity and equality are quite similar in that the most desirable version of them is flawed. Passed down from generation to generation, the idiom, "I'm only human" conveys this truth about human nature which has long been understood but is often forgotten out of the fear of accepting that humanity is imperfect. Moreover, the idiom, "I'm only human" further represents the individual uniqueness of every human being, their struggle between good and bad, and the way in which human beings find themselves somewhere in between perfection and imperfection. And this somewhere is balance, the importance of which was best articulated by Socrates through his conception of justice where individuals maintain a proper balance of virtue which enable them to engage in the activities for

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<sup>2</sup> Stefan Gosepath, "Equality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans John Waggoner, (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) 31-33.

which they are best suited.<sup>4</sup> Much like humanity and justice, the true value of equality is not found in its perfection or its total absence; however, it makes itself known at the mean where the balance between the two is realized. However, just as absolute perfection is an impossibility so too is perfect balance. It is the nature of balance to exist in constant flux and no matter how much one tries to achieve perfection, there exists an ever-fluctuating scale that cannot be overcome, only narrowed. Understanding this, Tocqueville is forced to accept the reality that equality acts in much the same way, and its influence over the American people waxes and wanes like either side of a scale.

Analyzing the scope of American equality, Tocqueville observes the unique relationship between liberty and equality. Although related and often corresponding, liberty and equality are two distinct priorities, that do not necessarily share the same level of importance amongst democratic peoples. Because the notion liberty is not exclusive and can be found “elsewhere than in democracies, ... it cannot form the distinctive characteristic of democratic centuries.”<sup>5</sup> Conversely, it is the case that within democratic societies equality naturally ingratiates itself as “the principle passion that agitates men in those times is love of this equality.”<sup>6</sup> The very existence of democratic equality propagates love for itself, the like of which Tocqueville refers to as “equality of conditions.” Considering the first instance of equality of conditions, Tocqueville portrays how it is eternally loved from the “moment when old social hierarchy, threatened for a long time, is finally destroyed, after a final internal struggle, when the barriers that separated citizens are at last overturn. Men then rushed toward equality as toward

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Plato Republic*, trans C. D. C. Reeve, (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Company, Inc, 2004) 98-102.

<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 875.

<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 875.

conquest, and they cling to it as to precious good that someone wants to take away from them.”<sup>7</sup> Once obtained, democratic peoples can no longer afford to lose the equality of conditions, because it has become [as necessary to life as oxygen is for breathing]. Explaining how this reality serves and the fundamental distinction between liberty and equality, Tocqueville clarifies how “the good things that Liberty brings show themselves only overtime, and it is always easy to fail to recognize the cause that gives them birth. The advantages of equality make themselves felt immediately and every day you see them flow from their source”. “[Where] political liberty, from time to time, gives sublime pleasures to a certain number of citizens[,] equality provides a multitude of small enjoyments to each man every day.”<sup>8</sup> Akin to the distinction made by Tocqueville regarding dogmatic beliefs, between the few who are capable of developing their own, and the many who would waste their lives trying, the equality of conditions supersedes liberty within the hearts of democratic individuals by providing instant gratification and benefit, while ensuring that its presence is known. This is not to say that the passion for liberty among democratic peoples is not great, it is simply the case that this passion is eclipsed [by their appetite for equality]. Further articulating this idea, Tocqueville describes this passion for equality as being an “insatiable, eternal, invincible passion for equality; they[, the democratic peoples,] want [equality in Liberty], and if they cannot obtain that, they still want equality in slavery. They will suffer poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not suffer aristocracy.”<sup>9</sup> Born out of this refusal to return to an inequality of

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<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 877.

<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 876.

<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 878.

conditions, the citizens of America establish equality of conditions as the foundation of American society and democracy.

Equality in its influential role as the primary passion of democratic societies, unsurprisingly, makes itself known a great many ways. Some lend themselves to the benefit of democracy while others remain a hindrance, even going so far as to pose a threat to its very existence. Looking first at the positive aspects that equality imparts upon democracy, Tocqueville references how “democracy is favorable to good morals even apart from religious beliefs,” and he cites equality of conditions as contributing toward the regularity of morals through its facilitation and augmentation. Tocqueville believes that the best example of this throughout America can be seen by the way in which society and its people treat women. In America women are fundamentally ascribed honor, which is subsequently respected by all. Acknowledging the difference between the sexes, it is here that Tocqueville observes equality at work and praises it not because “equality of conditions can ever succeed in making men chaste; but [because] it gives to the disorderliness of their morals a less dangerous charter.”<sup>10</sup> For Tocqueville the strength of equality resides in its universal appeal thus granting it the strength to hold sway over the whole of society at any given moment. Additionally, it has the secondary benefit of making the habitual relations of individuals throughout society easier. To explain this, Tocqueville portrays an image of England where status that was once solely determined by birth is now also determined by wealth and subsequently, “a hidden war is immediately established among all the citizens” as a competition for determining greater status

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<sup>10</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 1057.



within society.<sup>11</sup> However, “in America where privileges of birth have never existed, and where wealth gives no particular right to the one who possesses it, people who do not know each other routinely get together in the same places, and find neither advantage nor danger in freely sharing their thoughts. ... in a foreign country, two Americans are immediately friends, by the very fact that they are Americans.”<sup>12</sup> Equality in its grand scale unites individuals together and forms a people who share a similar mindset and are forever united within a common relationship. The forces of equality, while hindering the autonomy of the individual, serve society at large and in doing so, equality not only benefits the many and thus promotes the stability of democracy, but makes possible a new world of potentialities for its people. Unlike Christianity which strives to teach and cultivate positive mores within society, the strength and benefit of equality makes itself known through the tempering of society’s innate and negative appetites and through the revelation of yet unexperienced possibilities. Moreover, equality plays a vital role in distracting the masses from their unsavory desires and works to reduce them to a station where they can no longer serve as a source of disorder throughout society. Unfortunately, however, as explained earlier, the equality of conditions is itself imperfect and as such just as it reveals unexplored horizons, it brings with it the possibility of even greater threats to American society and democracy.

No matter how forceful or influential equality becomes, the truth is that it will never be able to completely overcome the divide that is unavoidably implanted through education, birth,

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<sup>11</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 996.

<sup>12</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 997-8.

and individual desire. Closely observing its effects, Tocqueville determines “that equality of conditions produces three things [that are of principal interest]:

1. It isolates men from one another, prevents the reciprocal action of their intelligence and allows their minds to diverge in all directions.
2. It gives to nearly all men the same needs, the same interests, the same sights, so that in the long run, without knowing it or wanting it, they find themselves having on a host of points the same ideas and the same tastes.
3. It creates the moral power of the majority. ... That gives to common opinion a power over minds that it never attains to the same degree amongst aristocratic peoples.”<sup>13</sup>

In the first instance, it becomes clear how equality is fundamentally a give and take. On the one hand it enables individuals to think freely, but on the other, it restricts their freedom to pursue their passions to their own ends by isolating individuals from one another. The reality is that “whatever the general effort of a society to make citizens equal and similar, the particular pride of individuals will always try to escape from the level, and will want to form somewhere inequality from which he profits.”<sup>14</sup> Just as society’s love for equality drives it toward its pursuit, the individual and the individual’s ambitions refuse these notions in search of personal benefit. Consequently, the individual in its determination will never fully be suppressed by equality and inevitably finds itself at odds with it. It is in between these two opposites, society and the individual, that smaller private associations inevitably form alongside society and are

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<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 720.

<sup>14</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 1070.

united by the similar standing of which said individuals find themselves. As the scope of equality expands, individuals find themselves to be increasingly similar to one another within these groups and their bonds amongst each other grow while their bonds with the rest of society begin to degrade. This tendency stemming from the bonds of equality is the first appearance of political dissociation and isolationism within democracy. Having observed how groups of individuals seeing greater similarity amongst themselves that the rest of society form private associations within the whole, Tocqueville explains how it is only natural that “as the circle of public society expands, it must be expected that the sphere of private relations will narrow,” and from this, he expresses his fear that this process “will finally end up by forming nothing more than very small cliques.”<sup>15</sup> Thus is the case, that equality of conditions has a paradoxical effect upon individuals as it brings them together while it simultaneously dividing them.

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This process culminates in individuals who, as iterated in the second product of equality, in perceiving absolute sameness in themselves and society as a whole, turn inward, disassociate from society becoming selfish and hardened against one another. This selfishness develops as equality levels the conditions of individuals and evokes conflicting notions which arise out of the sameness one sees when they look out at others. Tocqueville simplifies this and explains how “as conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more similar to all the others, weaker and smaller, you get used to no longer envisaging citizens in order to consider only the people; you forget individuals in order to think about only the species.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 1069.

<sup>16</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 757.

Confronted by this reflection of themselves, the individual comes to both trust and distrust their fellow citizens as they become overwhelmed, lost in a sea of the other. Individuals, finding solace in their many similarities with society, are easily able to trust that their interests align in a general and broad sense. However, an insatiable desire to be individually superior than others sews the seeds of distrust amongst individuals who have disassociated and isolated themselves. And out of this distrust and selfishness—what Tocqueville names “the doctrine of interest well understood,” leads “each man to search for what is useful to himself alone,” which only serves to separate individuals by making one’s instincts toward devotion obsolete. Following the introduction of this doctrine, Tocqueville outlines a possibility where this sense of morality is broadly praised and practiced. Once again the citizens of America are able to find comfort in their sameness because of the universal understanding that individuals will act in their own self-interest, and it just so happens that on occasion the interest of individuals align. Consequently, individuals, believing everyone to be similar in goal, opinion and desire, foolishly place their trust in the masses and in the infallibility of their judgement.

This error serves to strengthen the isolation of individuals as they, in believing that the masses represent their interest, no longer see the necessity of engaging in the political sphere. Tocqueville explains that “as men become more equal, the disposition to believe in one man decreases, the disposition to believe in the mass increases, and is more and more the opinion that leads the world.”<sup>17</sup> Taking its toll individualism and one’s beliefs regarding the similarity of all democratic peoples result in democracy’s deference to the majority. Speaking to the degree

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<sup>17</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 720.

of authority, Tocqueville explaining that at this point, “Not only is common opinion the sole guide that remains for individual reason among Democratic peoples; but also it has among these peoples and infinitely greater power than among any other. In times of equality, men, because of their similarity, have no faith in each other; but this very similarity gives them an almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public.”<sup>18</sup> It is from this point of complete reliance upon public opinion that Tocqueville’s observations come full circle and cascades into a tyranny of the majority which exists unopposed as the moral authority over all individuals.

According to Tocqueville, all of the dangers which threaten the survival of American democracy culminate in the possibility of a despotic tyranny of the majority, the very same possibility that Tocqueville is determined to guard against.

In search of a solution, Tocqueville shifts his gaze away from equality to the other primary aspects of democratic ideology which pervade and support American democracy. Throughout his time in America, one of these ideals, more than others, happened to capture Tocqueville’s attention, religion, and more specifically, Christianity. America had developed a unique approach to the institution of religion, and in becoming particularly interested, Tocqueville dedicated considerable attention to understanding and exploring the influence strength and that Christianity maintained throughout the country. Moreover, to best understand and accurately assess its value, it is imperative to grasp the full range of Christianity’s strengths and weaknesses. Tocqueville’s analysis of American religion commences from one of the most fundamental aspects of humanity, the notion of belief itself. Tocqueville’s

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<sup>18</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 718-19.

inquiry into the notion of democratic belief begins with his examination of dogma, or dogmatic beliefs, which he uses in reference to the specific collection of beliefs that individuals come to accept and hold as unquestionably true. Tocqueville further explains how these dogmatic beliefs are profoundly necessary for individuals since these beliefs serve as the basis of thought. Without such beliefs, there would not be any social or common belief systems, and most individuals, unsure of where to be, would waste away their entire lives fruitlessly attempting to grasp any semblance of absolute truth. In the end the vast majority of these individuals would only come away with hazy, incomplete concepts effectively stagnating social and political progress.<sup>19</sup> Greater than simply a need, dogmatic beliefs function as the cornerstone of identity and provide the common ground needed for individuals to communicate and share ideas. Having established the necessity of dogmatic beliefs he further explains how religions are at an advantage when compared to all other dogmatic beliefs because they provide the human mind with ... clear and precise answer[s] to a very great number of questions.<sup>20</sup>

From the onset of life, individuals find themselves enveloped by uncertainty and for the average person this sort of existence is beyond their ability to bear and as such they develop a vested interest in the formation of dogmatic beliefs. Unlike philosophers who due to their questioning are constantly surrounded by uncertainties and doubts, the common man is unable to live his life this way and as such requires fixed ideas of God and human nature which can be relied on through the day to day. However, following this, Tocqueville questions what happens when these fixed ideas of religion become uprooted? Under these circumstances doubt

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<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 743.

<sup>20</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 743.

completely envelops the minds of common men and inevitably leads them to dread or ignorance, and out of fear of dread they instead find the bliss of ignorance. Amidst this ignorance the common man loses faith in his own will, and is more inclined to servitude, so much so they “eventually allow their liberty to be taken.”<sup>21</sup> Ironically, out of this loss of faith in oneself the first semblance of faith in religion begins to emerge, instead of painstakingly spending one’s life in search of an absolute truth from which to embark, religion functions as an already established and pleasant alternative to thinking for oneself. As a collection of dogmatic beliefs, religions hold great sway over the hearts of individuals by invoking strong feelings and providing comfort in their aptitude for providing succinct and, if so believed, precise answers to many of life’s most weighing questions. To express the severity of this reality, Tocqueville goes so far as to speculate and express his doubts that, “man can ever bear complete religious independence and full political liberty at the same time, ... if [individuals do not have faith, they must serve, and, if they are free, they must believe].”<sup>22</sup> The gravity of this statement should not be overlooked because if taken to be true, Tocqueville here is prescribing, to some degree, monarchy or theocracy, or some balance between the two. However, before we digress too far, we must further elaborate on Christianity and the role of religion Tocqueville observed within American democracy.

Serving as the foundation of thought and the arbiter of dogma, religion captivates the hearts of individuals and in doing so finds itself in the privileged position to ascribe the mores of society. In the case of America, Christianity appears to be the religion given this privilege and,

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<sup>21</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 745.

<sup>22</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 745.

as Tocqueville will further explain, thus serves a vital function in terms of preserving the democratic republic in America. More explicitly, Tocqueville posits that the mores of America are “one of the great general causes to which maintaining the democratic republic of the United States can be attributed.”<sup>23</sup> Embracing a broad interpretation of the meaning of mores, Tocqueville explains that in shaping the morals of society, Christianity maintains a hold on the notions, opinions, and ideas of Americans ultimately influencing their habits and world view. Pursuing a better understanding of these mores, which are prevalent throughout America, Tocqueville begins with these notions of religion and resolves to follow their trail and seek out the instances where its influence can be observed. Attempting to shed some light as to why religion is so influential, Tocqueville explains in a footnote how religion is universal in its relationship to humanity resulting from its ability to transcend class and race. Taking this a step further, he explains how “the people see in religion the safeguard and the divine origin of liberty; the rich, the guarantee of their fortune and their life; the statesman, the safeguard of society; the pioneer, something like his companion in the wilderness.”<sup>24</sup> Not only does religion accept everyone, it fosters a community and home where one can belong, while also serving to protect that which each individual and or class holds most dear. It is this democratic type of religion that Tocqueville sees as promoting the cultivation of democratic and republican mores throughout America. Because of its universal acceptance, and the scope to which it influences the hearts and minds of Americans, religion, specifically Christianity, develops a mutually beneficial and prosperous relationship between itself and politics.

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<sup>23</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 466.

<sup>24</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 467.



Developing an interest in their cooperative relationship, an interest that only intensified through the dedication and passion Americans display in their observance of Christianity, Tocqueville decided to discover for himself, the ways in which politics and Christianity interacted. Throughout history Christianity and the various ruling political institutions have often found themselves at odds with one another, where because of competing goals or discrepancies in dogma, religion and politics historically do not associate well with one another. Throughout history this tension between the church and the state could be compared to leaving matches next to a powder keg. Turning to the crusades, a series of bloody wars lasting from 1095 until 1291, it can be observed how they were a result of political and ideological differences between the European culture of the west, spearheaded by the Church, and the Islamic culture of the Middle East, which happened to inhabit the holy land. This path of tension between the church and state can further be observed throughout the reign of King Henry VIII of England, where in 1538 as punishment for disobeying papal orders and issuing an Act of Supremacy declaring himself the only supreme head of the Church of England, King Henry VIII was excommunicated from the Church. Eventually this dispute would result in the English Protestant Reformation, ultimately paving the way for the English Bill of Rights in 1689. Serving as an even greater example of the discontent between the church and politics is the French Revolution which commenced in 1789 with the storming of the Bastille. The revolution, at least in part, came to pass because of the disproportion of wealth between the First Estate, the clergy, who made up only 5% of the populace and controlled close to 15% of all French lands, and the Third Estate, the peasants and other non-nobility, who constituted 80% of France's population. Tocqueville, having grown up in France in the era following this revolution,

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describes how the Third Estate's view of the clergy, was filled with hatred and contempt.

Through Sieyes, Tocqueville explains how the Third Estate at the time of the revolution viewed the Church and its clergy to be even worse than the nobility, since in terms of considering the makeup of France the clergy was meaningless.<sup>25</sup> Aware of the tumultuous history between religion and politics, Tocqueville is amazed and confused by the degree and intensity to which the observance of Christianity is prevalent throughout America.

Eventually, Tocqueville is able to find the twofold answer to Christianity's strength throughout America. He discerns that the first aspect of its strength resides within Christianity itself, for there no other reason that the Christianity could have captured the hearts of individuals and flourished for two millennia. The reason for its prowess becomes clear in that no religion before or after Christianity has so strongly looked down upon the use of physical force, and as Tocqueville further explains, "wherever physical force is not honored, tyranny cannot endure."<sup>26</sup> The staying power of Christianity consists in its promotion of mores that by their very nature guard against tyranny, abuse, and despotism, thereby protecting the opportunity of freedom for all of its followers. Yet the question remains, why these mores have so successfully weaved themselves throughout American culture and society. After a number of conversations with clergy and laypeople alike, Tocqueville became convinced and "attributed the peaceful dominion that religion exercises in [America] to the complete separation of Church and State."<sup>27</sup> Unlike other countries, by establishing a hard separation between church and

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<sup>25</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime And The Revolution Vol II: Notes on the French Revolution and Napoleon*, ed. Francois Furet & Fransoise Melonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 98.

<sup>26</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 468.

<sup>27</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 480.

state, America had in doing so, ironically, strengthened Christianity's position throughout. This separation ensures Americans have nothing to fear from the Churches' authority, instead remaining free to experience Christianity, unencumbered. Additionally, Tocqueville discovered that the priests and other church officials of America held no public office, and that "the law, in several states, had closed a political career to them; opinion, in all others."<sup>28</sup> In accordance with the separation of church and state, Tocqueville observed a clear divide between the political in all of its aspects and Christianity. This notion and the degree of its separation were held so tightly within the ideology of Americans that Tocqueville explains how the priests "seemed to remove themselves voluntarily from power, and to take a kind of professional pride in remaining apart from it."<sup>29</sup> In America, the separation of church and state is absolute, and through this separation America effectively curtails the possible negative aspects of Christianity while furthering the promotion of its mores as being universal. Employing his understanding of human nature and the nature of religion, Tocqueville explains an unsettling reality that we as human beings simultaneously despise existence, crave life, and find terror in nihilism.<sup>30</sup> As such, hope is quintessential to our being and all that religion is, is hope. Establishing this, he moves on to explain how, "when a religion seeks to found its domination only on the desire for immortality that equally torments the hearts of all men, it can aim for universality; but when it comes to unite with a government, it must adopt maxims that are applicable only to certain peoples. Therefore, by allying itself to a political power, religion increases its power over some

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<sup>28</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 481.

<sup>29</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 481.

<sup>30</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 482.

and loses the hope of reigning over all.”<sup>31</sup> In America the strength of Christianity comes from the separation it maintains from the state, which affords it the freedom to retain its primary function of universality and amplifies its strength as a champion of hope and mores.

It is exactly these mores, the mores of Christianity which, in line with American ideology, proclaim forgiveness, compassion, redemption, and the equality of all. So, in addition to preserving the possibility of political liberty, Christianity, as compared to other religions, is one of the most favorable to equality. Consequently, as if responding to the tumultuous history that Christianity has endured, Tocqueville illuminates the error often made in regarding “the Catholic religion as a natural enemy of democracy. Among the different Christian doctrines, Catholicism seems to me on the contrary one of the most favorable to equality of conditions.”<sup>32</sup> Resulting from the way in which Christianity evaluates moral worth, where individuals are judged based solely on their own actions, there are no exclusions or class divisions as each and every individual is capable of attaining that which it promises. In the eyes of Christianity all individuals are equal no matter who they are, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, it does not matter. Building upon this notion of equality, Tocqueville addresses Christianity’s influence in shaping the mores of society by observing American home life: the family, husband and wife, and the essential role women play within democracy. Foremost through a comparison between Europe and America, Tocqueville is confronted with the reality that the place of his birth is one in which “nearly all of the disorders of society are born around the domestic hearth and not far from the marital bed. ... Agitated by tumultuous passions that have often troubled his own

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<sup>31</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 483.

<sup>32</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 469.

dwelling, the European submits only with difficulty to the legislative powers of the state.”<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, Tocqueville observed how “when coming from the agitation of the political world, the American returns to the bosom of his family[.] ... There all his pleasures are simple and natural, his joys innocent and tranquil.”<sup>34</sup> The difference between the two arises in the form of discontent: in Europe, the discontent of its citizens is only inflamed by their domestic lives, whereas in America, citizens receive far more support from their home lives, allowing them to better deal with the difficulties of society and political life. It is because of this that Tocqueville praises the women of America as being crucial to the shaping of its morality. A tangible example of this distinction between Europe and America can be seen through Tocqueville’s conviction that the bond of marriage is respected more so and is of greater strength in America than anywhere else.

This separation of church and state, which would seem to limit Christianity by freeing it from the limitations of politics in fact does the opposite. This reality is observed throughout America by Tocqueville where Christianity truly has become all encompassing. Elaborating upon this, Tocqueville describes how, only within America, is “religion [able to regulate] not only mores; it extends its dominion even to the mind. ... So, [as to ensure, that] Christianity rules without obstacles, with the consent of all; as a result, ... everything is certain and fixed in the moral experiments of men.”<sup>35</sup> By inhabiting the hearts, minds, and mores of all Americans, Christianity is unrivaled and unquestioned as it goes about instilling and maintaining the mores of American society and equality. In accomplishing this throughout America, Christianity’s

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<sup>33</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 474.

<sup>34</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 474.

<sup>35</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 474.

ultimate goal has come to fruition as the mores that it teaches provide the universal foundation for American morality and so much more. Having said all of this, Tocqueville has clearly demonstrated not only the great power and influence of Christianity throughout American in its role of cultivating and maintaining the morality of society and its citizens. Additionally, the teachings and mores of Christianity lend themselves to and promote liberty and equality, which serve as the foundations of democracy. Thus, given the importance of Christianity and religion in general the problems which are capable arising from it and/or its absence must be addressed. What would be the consequences to democracy if Christianity were to decline greatly throughout America? Without Christianity, what is left to maintain the mores of American society and preserve the foundations of democracy? However, before we can truly understand the forces or aspects which threaten American democracy we must first grasp the other aspects of this iteration of democracy that enable its success. As such, Tocqueville observes that equality in tandem with Christianity fosters a balance of mores throughout society which lead to the success of American Democracy.

Having thoroughly considered the workings of American democracy, Tocqueville addresses the possibility of despotism, which threatens the legitimacy and success of American democracy. In every case, but more so among democratic societies, the institution of despotism, an absolute government ruled by one sole individual, signifies a complete failure of the regime. A complete loss of both equality and liberty, despotism represents the worst possible outcome for a government, where without laws, society is ruled by a singular individual in accordance with their will. Elaborating on how despotism follows the progress of equality, thriving off of it, Tocqueville describes how "equality places men side by side, without

a common bond to hold them. Despotism raises barriers between them and separates them. Disposes them not to think about their fellows and makes indifference into a public virtue. So despotism, which is dangerous in all times, is to be particularly feared in democratic centuries.”<sup>36</sup> For Tocqueville, the progress of equality that can eventually lead to despotism is unacceptable because to a democracy, despotism equates to the destruction of society. Peculiarly however, upon reflection, Tocqueville determines that the type of despotism that could establish itself among democratic nations is not the authoritarian despotism of Europe, but a more broad and mild form that “would degrade men without tormenting them.”<sup>37</sup> This sort of democratic despotism could be viewed as being even worse because it “does not break will, but it softens them, bends them and directs them; In really forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses is, ... and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”<sup>38</sup> Despotism is the total annihilation of democratic values, as it slowly suffocates and stagnates the people an their will; despotism is death by a thousand seemingly harmless cuts. Completely unwilling to accept the inevitability of despotism, Tocqueville champions Christianity as well as the mores it cultivates within democracy as its preeminent defender.

As it were, during Tocqueville’s lifetime, Christianity and its influence was strong enough to counteract the negative aspects of equality which lead to despotism and prevent it from ever destroying democratic society. However, that was then, and this is now, which raises the

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<sup>36</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 898.

<sup>37</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 1248.

<sup>38</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 1252.

question, concerning contemporary American democracy and its continual ability to stave off the possibility that is despotism. Although never directly addressing this question, by employing Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy, it is possible to develop a clearer picture of the possible futures that contemporary American democracy might face. The most ominous future for contemporary American democracy would seem to be one very similar in form to today's reality, where the institution of religion and Christianity's influence have begun to decline and possibly even vanish completely sometime in the future.

However, before beginning to make predictions about the future of American democracy, it is only prudent to consider the two great dangers which plague the existence of religions, which Tocqueville recognizes to be schisms and indifference. In addressing schisms, he explains how "men sometimes happen to abandon their religion, but they [escape only to submit to another]. Faith changes objects: it does not die."<sup>39</sup> Even in the face denunciation, faith does not falter it simply changes form. Alternatively, indifference, for Tocqueville, is the process of abandoning "your beliefs by coldness rather than by hatred; you do not reject them, they leave you."<sup>40</sup> However, it becomes clear to Tocqueville that just because one's beliefs are gone, it does not mean that the ideas which once supported said beliefs vanish with them. Arguing for the exact opposite, Tocqueville explains how in "Ceasing to believe religion true, be unbeliever continues to judge it useful. Considering religious beliefs from a human aspect, he recognizes their dominion over mores, their influence over laws, [and] ... he is afraid to take it away from those who still possess it."<sup>41</sup> Akin to an outsider looking inward and longing to take

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<sup>39</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 485.

<sup>40</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 486.

<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 486.



part indifference strips away the comforting aspect of religion while leaving the ideals and mores which it imparted intact. In either case of schism or indifference, regardless if belief remains, the mores that were once instilled by one's former beliefs endure like an unescapable shadow of a former self.

Considering all of this in light of the possibility of the institution of religion and Christianity's influence completely vanishing through American democracy, two possibilities present themselves: in the face of one a heartening image develops; however, in the other, not even Tocqueville is able to see hope. Looking at the more pessimistic alternative first, in a future where all faith in religion has been abandoned and replaced by some alternative which fails to cultivate needed virtue, American democracy, without the positive influence and safeguards of Christianity, is consigned to despotism and forced to endure with only luck as its shield against its slow agonizing destruction. For Tocqueville, democratic society requires a force, like the institution of religion and Christianity, that instills mores strong enough to balance out the negative effects of equality the likes of which democratic people chase so ardently. Without this force democracy is unable to sustain itself as a viable regime and inevitably falls to despotism. Thankfully, however, even as the institution of religion and society's faith in Christianity begin to dwindle, all hope is not lost for American democracy. The future encompassing American democracy's final possibility remains bright thanks to the particular method by which America approached religion. By establishing the separation of Church and state, American democracy afforded Christianity the freedom to remain universal and the power cultivate its mores throughout the whole of society. In doing so American democracy established these mores as its societal religion thus ensuring that even if faith in

Christianity declines its mores and teachings will remain as the sentries that guard against the possibility of despotism. Regardless if it being the past present or future, Christianity in tandem with equality have and will continue to ensure the stability and success of American democracy.

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