

Interpretation

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Sanford Kessler, *Tocqueville's Civil Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), xiv + 238 pp., cloth \$59.50, paper \$19.95.

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According to Sanford Kessler, author of *Tocqueville's Civil Religion*, previous studies of Tocqueville have not dealt extensively with the role of religion in American life, and those studies that have seriously addressed his theological-political thought have not related his reflections to the urgent issues and controversies of the present day. Previous scholars have, therefore, largely neglected a stratum of Tocqueville's thought most revealing of the American character and historic experience and have failed to appreciate fully Tocqueville's remarkably subtle analysis of matters which bear upon understanding of the origins, development, and future course of American democracy.

In emphasizing the religious theme in Tocqueville's study of American democracy, Kessler's work is often provocative and always thoughtful and timely. He offers a perspective from which those who "superintend" the nation's morality (fathers and mothers, political figures and public persons, teachers and artists, among others) can address the complex problems dividing the civic culture and undermining the national character.

The beginning of Kessler's study quotes Tocqueville who, toward the end of his life, gives vent to his distress aroused by the spectacle of disunion in France. Nothing so "weighed upon" or "oppressed" his soul. "I feel it today as sharply as I did when young," he wrote. Indeed, no thought "had been more present" to his mind (p. 1).

The source of this disunion and distress was the wound, still unhealed, which the French Revolution had opened in French society. The violence of those events still reverberated in the virulent opposition between the liberal partisans of democracy and the aristocratic partisans of the Ancien Regime who vied for influence in post-Napoleonic France. The possibility of civil war remained latent there. Ultimately it reflected a "war" of ideas, espoused by rival parties, which had fundamentally different conceptions of man, his responsibilities to God, and his relation to political society.

In the context of this "war," which touched many if not all political fronts, Tocqueville declared himself a "liberal of a new kind," and attempted to bring peace and reconciliation to his homeland in a project that would dampen the fires of partisan controversy. To the reactionary partisans of the old order, he revealed the triumph of democracy as historically inevitable, indeed pleasing to

the sight of God, and taught the necessity of accommodating the new order. Extremism in the defense of their cause was not only quixotic but would bring their unequivocal defeat.

But to the party destined to triumph, he brought caution. If democracy was to be compatible with human freedom and dignity, it would have to replicate and adapt certain institutions and practices of the Ancien Regime in the context of modernity. In the face of liberal skepticism and anticlerical animus, he argued that religion remained an important element for the psychic health of individuals, political well-being, and freedom itself. Tocqueville called America the “freest” and “most religious” country in the world. He turned to it for lessons to enlighten and guide his France.

Today, Kessler writes, “traditionalists and liberals are adversaries” once again. America is in the grips of a “culture war” which, as in Tocqueville’s time, is “currently being fought on many fronts—the family, the churches, the schools and universities, and, most important, the court of public opinion” (p. 5). The battles are so fierce because the stakes are so high. It is the “public culture” that is at issue, the understanding of ourselves as a people—who we were in the past, who we are now, and what we should aspire to become.

At the heart of the controversy is the question of “ultimate authority.” Traditionalists blame the current problems in America on moral failings, a loosening of respect for standards of human conduct ultimately based in the orthodoxies of our Biblical faiths. Liberals, on the other hand, hold that private, rational judgement is the only authority consistent with American principles. Our current problems reflect, not the moral shortcomings of our citizens, but the failure of our democracy, as presently constituted, to overcome historic prejudices inimical to individual fulfillment and to respond effectively to pressing economic and social needs.

The culture war in America began to crystallize in the 1960s and has since then hardened into the adamant fronts we witness today. According to Kessler, the legacy of the 1960s is ambiguous. It idealistically advanced the nation’s core principles of equality and freedom by achieving greater justice for women and blacks and expanded the opportunities for personal development. But it also encouraged selfish materialism and eroded family, social, and political ties. The obvious cause of Kessler’s distress as he surveys the contemporary scene is his vision of America, now largely free of external military threat, but in the throes of an internal moral decay that is not only ominous but palpable.

While some sound the alarm in this culture war to rally others to their side of the barricades, Kessler alludes to the same culture war in a spirit of reconciliation and an attempt to overcome the nation’s deep divisions. He would consider himself a partisan of neither the traditionalist nor the liberal camp but among a group he calls “functionalists,” who seek somehow to bridge the gap between them. He stands out among this small but eclectic group in summoning Tocqueville, perhaps the most perceptive observer of the American regime, to

help analyze our present crisis and reflect on the ways available to us today to deal with it prudently and effectively.

The title of Kessler's work is itself controversial. Nowhere in the *Democracy* does Tocqueville explicitly use the term "civil religion" to describe America's religious arrangements. Yet some scholars, including Kessler, have argued that a "civil religion" has existed in the United States since the early days of the Republic. Most others reject the idea that America's public philosophy is grounded in religion. Many would see the idea of a "civil religion" as "distasteful," if not "dangerous," in conjuring up "an uncritical worship of American values." Others see the term as a mere "academic construct" unreflective of social reality. Americans, even in the present day, ground their beliefs in the traditional religions. The idea of a "civil religion" is, for them, more a "threat" to be resisted than the healthy core of public belief. Indeed, the idea of a unique "civil religion" would distort the rich variety of religious experiences that have taken root on the grounds of First Amendment freedoms (pp. 7–8).

Kessler makes explicit what he means by a "civil religion."

If religion may roughly be defined as a means through which human beings recognize and revere God, civil religion refers to a religion (or elements of religious belief and practice) which purports to be theocentric but is in fact designed to serve secular, as opposed to transcendent or otherworldly ends. (P. 7)

He contends that not all faiths but the vast majority of American churches today, as well as the vast majority of churches observed and admired by Tocqueville, have played such a role.

Kessler broadly characterizes our "mainline" religious sects in this regard. In contrast to traditional Christian groups, then and now, they have shifted the locus of moral authority to the individual. Divine revelation is no longer "the ultimate arbiter of duty and faith." Mainline American Christianity is more "anthropocentric" than "theocentric" and more compatible with the secular goals of the American regime than with strict Biblical morality, Kessler argues. "Historically, these faiths strengthened our national character, contributed to our economic prosperity, and muted religious conflict in ways that traditional Christianity could never do." Ours is "no longer a genuine biblical faith." It has been "civilized" in ways that fittingly benefit a modern democracy (p. 9).

Kessler's work has nine chapters where this thesis is fleshed out. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and lays out the considerable ambitions of his study. The next three chapters deal with Tocqueville—his "approach to religion"; his conception of a "new" Christianity; and the "religious statesmanship" he pursued to serve its cause. The next three chapters, 5 through 7, deal with America proper—its "religious horizon"; Christianity's role in America's "political health"; and the "secularization of American morals." The last two chapters, 8 and 9, respectively "sum up" and deal with "future prospects" for the country.

The “common spring” of all human judgements and actions, Tocqueville thought, can be found in “the very general conception men have of God, of His relations with the human race, of the nature of the soul and of their duties to their fellows” (p. 22). It seems fair to apply Tocqueville’s observations about men in this regard to Tocqueville himself, and this Kessler does in Chapter 2. He searches the “common spring” of Tocqueville’s thought by relating it to “three giants” with whom he “lived a bit every day” when writing parts of the *Democracy*—Pascal, Rousseau, and Montesquieu.

Tocqueville remained outwardly the devout Catholic throughout his life and received the Last Sacraments. Even his most intimate correspondence is circumspect on the matter of his religious orthodoxy. His *Democracy* is punctuated with reflections from Pascal and suffused with a Pascalian mood, born of an ardent soul seized by the most important metaphysical questions. Despite Tocqueville’s outward conformity to orthodox Catholicism and a deep affinity for Pascal’s confrontation with the implications of the modern world view, Kessler sees Tocqueville ultimately as a skeptic, the “springs” of whose thought are found in the religious reflections of Rousseau and, to an even greater degree, Montesquieu.

His contention is based on Tocqueville’s writings themselves, particularly the *Democracy*. The argument therein is in no way “Scripturally based” nor does it aim at establishing a regime of Biblical piety. Its aim is democratic freedom, and the author is willing to modify traditional orthodoxies when the requirements of freedom would be compromised. Religion is to serve the interest of society and a prideful citizenry conscious of their equal rights. Such thought represents a radical inversion of former orthodoxies and the old order of things.

Following Rousseau and Montesquieu, Tocqueville did not think traditional Christianity appropriate for free, democratic societies and sought to replace the Biblical faith with a modern civil religion, “Christian in name but secular in orientation” (p. 42). In the end, Kessler believes Tocqueville less indebted to Rousseau than Montesquieu, who designed his civil religion primarily to protect the rights of individuals and to counter despotism in a mild and tolerant commercial republic. His differences with Rousseau come into sharpest focus in his discussion of the “tyranny of the majority” and other threats to freedom posed by the radical equality upon which Rousseauan politics is based. Like Montesquieu, Tocqueville is also much more open than Rousseau, to say the least, to human acquisitiveness and the pursuit of a fuller panoply of human pleasures. On the other hand, his treatment of sexual morality and the family is redolent with themes from the author of *Emile*.

Tocqueville does not present his thoughts on religion systematically, Kessler observes in Chapter 3. He sees him as cautiously proceeding “to fashion a democratic version of Christianity which retained only the elements of the traditional faiths compatible with freedom” (p. 51). Kessler objects to certain critics who see his efforts as leaving the ancient faiths pale and bloodless and

ted to salutary myths. Some claim he is so obvious in his utilitarian approach to religion as to undermine the convictions he wishes to sustain.

Kessler sees Tocqueville as both subtler and bolder than generally allowed. By “silently eliminating illiberal doctrines or replacing them with democratic counterparts” (p. 51), he avoids upsetting “settled convictions” while putting “new life” in society’s beliefs. Ours is an age little receptive to new prophets. Tocqueville seeks to reinvigorate as well as reform the religious spirit in a manner compatible with the times.

To bring Christianity into the new age, Tocqueville downplays the significance of dogma. But in emphasizing practice, he shades our understanding of certain Christian virtues, such as humility, which is inimical to the character of a politically assertive citizenry. He transformed the “traditional indifference” in the Christian attitude toward government to one of support for liberal democracy. Finally, and most importantly, he de-emphasized the otherworldly, altruistic character of Christian morality, appropriate to aristocratic times, by grounding it firmly in the doctrine of “self-interest, rightly understood.”

According to Tocqueville, the ideals and rhetoric of Christianity must change. God’s will is to be seen in history, not by miraculous interventions, but by the inevitable development toward democracy and material progress, born of human science. The intermediate powers in Church organization would be better eliminated, while the intermediary powers of angels and saints in the heavenly organization should be downplayed in our secular age. No less than a new “poetry” is required to shape the imagination and educate the sentiments of man. Such considerations are born of the Rousseauian insight, crucial to Tocquevillian thought, that mores are more fundamental than laws and institutions in determining the character of men and regimes. “Tocqueville’s Religious Statesmanship,” the title of Chapter 4, can best be appreciated against the background of the history of postrevolutionary France. The Catholic Church in France was an integral part of the Ancien Regime, lending its support to the monarchy and the aristocratic principles on which it was based. The monarchy, in turn, gave to the clergy considerable powers, both direct and indirect, in helping it govern the affairs of the realm. This union of Church and State was the situation in which religious statesmanship was called upon to operate. But the Catholic clergy fatally erred in supporting the historic alliance when the Ancien Regime clashed with the emerging demands of democracy and freedom.

At the revolutionary moment, the Church was singled out for attack for having earlier antagonized and persecuted those who stood for change. It was the most exposed element in the old order, and its previous intransigence precipitated the violence that was brought to target its fall. As the example of America indicates, however, there is no inherent or inevitable tension between religion and democracy. To a large degree, the sorry spectacle that France had presented, the opposite of America’s happy experience in this regard, can be traced to particular circumstances and the shortcomings of religious and politi-

cal authorities who did not see the situation clearly or who sought to maintain their former privileges in spite of it.

The lessons to draw are many. These include the necessity of a separation of the affairs of Church and State. This preserves the arenas of public policy from being embroiled in sectarian controversies. But it is even more important for religious associations in freeing them from divisive political controversies and allowing the full force of their teachings to enter the souls of their listeners unclouded by the passions and vanities of the day. In the spectacle of revolutionary France, we contemplate the self-defeating intransigence of the forces of reaction. But we also contemplate a democratic politics, once having cut the moral tie to its religious anchor, buffeted into violence and despotism.

How America achieved a “happy combination of religion, enlightenment, and freedom” that escaped France is the subject of Chapter 5 in Kessler’s study. Tocqueville attributes America’s success in advancing religion to four interrelated causes: the Puritan origins, which made Christianity an integral part of the American character; the absence of a destructive social revolution, as in France; America’s ongoing appreciation of religion’s usefulness; and the separation of Church and State.

Kessler’s commentary gives due consideration to the Puritans, America’s true founders, according to Tocqueville. Tocqueville anticipates later scholarship in pointing to the large contribution Puritan principles and practice made to forming our political institutions and national character.

As described by Tocqueville, Puritanism was a unique blend of “the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*.” It was Biblical Judaism that inspired the Puritan “passion for orthodoxy” and “respect for religious authority.” But the “spirit of freedom” is derived from the New Testament and is deeply democratic. It can be traced to the historic figure of Christ, who taught that human beings had an “equal right . . . at birth to liberty” (p. 83). The God-intoxicated Puritans were the most radical of democrats, as communitarian self-rule coexisted with the sternest strictures of Biblical morality.

According to Tocqueville, this “mixed regime” was inherently unstable, and the Puritan’s peculiar synthesis was not to last. The Puritan “spirit of freedom” eventually held sway and was embedded in American constitutionalism. As it worked itself out, it transformed the Biblical Protestantism of our origins into a pragmatic, anthropocentric faith.

Thomas Jefferson, according to Kessler, introduced an “enlightenment version of this spirit” to America. He best articulated the thinking that inspired the First Amendment attempt to separate Church and State and elevate individual reason, in place of the Bible, as the ultimate source of religious authority. Kessler’s comparison of Jefferson and Tocqueville is particularly acute and helpful. He shows how Jeffersonianism actually worked out in practice. The rationally autonomous individual who is to arbitrate the ultimate truth and relevance of

religious matters in fact capitulates to widely held religious opinion, ready at hand.

The democratic dogma is not severe or demanding. Among other tenets, it fervently believes in both the sovereignty of the people and the autonomy of individual reason; it holds that self-interest is honorable, if “rightly understood”; it looks to the indefinite improvement of the species. These beliefs made Americans, for the most part, “thisworldly rather than otherworldly, proud rather than humble, selfish rather than altruistic, and rational rather than pious” (p. 97).

Because such beliefs are so facile and serviceable, they were likely to persist, and America would benefit for a long time from its religion, such as it is. Here we look in vain for a Blaise Pascal, whose body and soul were “racked” by the intensity of metaphysical inquiries that brought his early death. Americans, in contrast, are a rather easygoing lot. Their metaphysical longings are cut short by received opinion or forgotten in other pursuits. In America, the concerns of the body leave very little time or space for the higher concerns of the soul. In Chapter 6, Kessler indicates the considerable contribution that this “new” Christianity nevertheless made to the political health of the regime.

Religious ideas enhanced the public morality and sensitized overweening majorities to minority rights. They fostered political moderation in the public forums where interests and parties clashed. They erected “insurmountable barriers” to the politically ambitious, “forcing them to respect rights in word and deed” (p. 121).

But this religion’s greatest benefit to America lies in its effects on the characters of men and women. It counters the most pernicious tendency for men to abandon public affairs and broader concerns while concentrating on private interests and the narrow circle of those closest to them. It sustains traditional feelings of obligation and interconnectedness in a society where they would otherwise wane. It stimulates the growth of voluntary associations devoted to Christian purposes that draw men together in moral or charitable enterprises. It impresses on men the seriousness of their marital obligations. Through such conventions as holidays and the “Judaical” observation of the Sabbath, it has elevated American tastes, has helped purify sentiments, and has restrained excessive materialism.

Kessler distinguishes himself in his commentary by giving due consideration to the status of women and the role of the family in Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy. “The secularization of morals,” the subject of Chapter 7, has affected the sexual mores of the nation. The women Tocqueville observed had little in common with their Puritan forbears. Nor were they like their counterparts in the better classes of France, who were cosseted by their men but ridiculed and disdained in private meetings with their fellows.

The American woman was raised and grew up in unprecedented freedom,

which she used to learn the ways of the world and judge the character of men. Unlike aristocratic customs which persisted elsewhere, she chose her own partner, and physical attraction was considered a natural and legitimate basis of marriage. Such an arrangement presumably reduced the possibility of licentiousness after marriage or at least made it less justified. It also gave to women crucial leverage to control the sexual approaches of men and to shape their behavior.

After marriage, the woman retreated to the home and there played a discreet role that was equal, if not superior, to that of men in many respects. The man had primary influence over the external affairs of the family; the woman presided over its internal arrangements. There was a seriousness to the marriage bond. But the honor and fear which suffused the aristocratic-patriarchal family structure disappeared, and its rigid hierarchies melted into a sweeter harmony in the hands of an artful wife and mother.

If democracy shaped the role of women and the family, they in turn shaped democracy. Within the family, the woman became the custodian of the nation's morality and transmitted the religious heritage to new generations. The woman was drawn to her role as the measure of her dignity and happiness. The chastity which grounds healthy families was ultimately guaranteed by the public opinion she followed and crucially shaped. Tocqueville marvels that in such a rough country women could travel freely in safety. The language of men in the street as well as on the written page would not venture to violate feminine sensibilities.

Kessler's commentary in no way overstates the powers of our religious arrangements, however. As he argues in some detail in Chapter 8, the easygoing American Christianity, grounded in self-interest, was inadequate to the great moral challenge of slavery, which Tocqueville thought could end the American democracy. It did not prevail against the racism that was the legacy of slavery either, although Kessler is somewhat optimistic regarding recent signs of progress in our race relations.

Kessler insists that Tocqueville himself was less sanguine than is commonly thought about the powers of the "new" Christianity to perpetuate itself. Tocqueville stood at two centuries' distance from the small band of dogmatic Puritans when he observed the teeming population of secular and enterprising Americans in the 1830s. We stand at a distance of more than a century and a half from the conditions he observed. To say the least, America has changed dramatically—socially, politically, and culturally. One has only to think of the role of women, then and now, and the status of chastity in contemporary mores.

The civil religion that previously existed has been irrevocably weakened by two historic waves. The first lasted from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s. Among other factors, "the increasing diversity of the American melting pot, the triumph of science, and the gradual popular acceptance of non-Christian beliefs and values made America more secular" (p. 171). The

symbolic event of this transitional era, according to Kessler, was the Scopes trial. The second wave came in the 1960s, which witnessed the weakening hold of all traditions, including, most notably, our religiosity. It was, as another has observed, a time when a marginal “adversary culture” was brought to the very heart of middle-class America.

Kessler ends his work with a statesmanlike appeal to traditionalists, including clergymen, to moderate their rhetoric and curb their impolitic tendencies to crash the wall that has separated them from the political arena. He laments the practices of certain sects to “market” themselves by embracing fashionable social causes and employing the latest fads in popular psychology to brandish their “relevance.”

At the same time, he counsels liberals to end their indiscriminate hostility toward religion. He offers an array of policy initiatives, such as school prayer, which might build a more supportive public environment for religion in a manner that respects the diversity of our religious views and practices. He calls upon public figures to use the power of their office, their secular pulpits, and the example of their persons to reflect religious values.

But such advice, if it is to be effective, presumes an underlying vitality of religious belief that Kessler has largely questioned. Although Kessler probably would not state it so baldly, the weakening of our public faith and the debasement of our public culture are perhaps too far advanced. One gains an impression concerning Kessler analogous to what was said of Tocqueville by a contemporary scholar (whom Kessler approvingly cites), that there is a tension between his recommendations for helping liberal democracy and his analysis of the tenuousness of his own solutions.

The “spirit” of Tocqueville is reflected in Kessler’s brooding forebodings when he contemplates the future in light of the present and what has been irretrievably lost from the past. It is also reflected in his manly refusal to succumb to such a feeling by capitulating before the problems we face.

To sum up Kessler, he has largely achieved what he has set out to do. He has elucidated a most crucial element of Tocqueville’s thought and enriched our understanding of American democracy. He has provided an invaluable framework to view its current crisis. His hope, as he states it, is modest. He wants to contribute in “some small way to strengthening freedom,” while “doing justice to Tocqueville’s noble spirit” (Preface, pp. xi–xii).

Among many of the lasting impressions of this book is one of the thoughtfulness and decency of its author, who writes in a climate that is all too often the opposite.