

CHAPTER 15^a: *How from Time to Time Religious Beliefs Divert the Soul of the Americans toward Non-Material Enjoyments*^b

[≠However animated the Americans are in the pursuit of well-being, there are moments when they stop and turn away for a moment to think about God and about the other life. ≠]

In the United States, when the seventh day of each week arrives, commercial and industrial life seems suspended; all noise ceases. A profound rest, or rather a kind of solemn recollection follows; the soul, finally, regains self-possession and contemplates itself.

During this day, the places consecrated to commerce and industry are deserted; each citizen, surrounded by his children, goes to church; there strange discourses are held forth that do not seem much made for his ears. He hears about the innumerable evils caused by pride and covetousness. He is told about the necessity to control his desires, about the fine enjoyments attached to virtue alone, and about the true happiness that accompanies it.

Back at home, you do not see him run to his business ledgers. He opens the book of the Holy Scriptures; there he finds sublime or touching portrayals of the grandeur and the goodness of the Creator, of the infinite magnificence of the works of God, of the elevated destiny reserved for men, of their duties and their rights to immortality.

This is how, from time to time, the American escapes in a way from himself, and how, tearing himself away for a moment from the petty passions that agitate his life and from the transitory interests that fill it, he enters suddenly into an ideal world where everything is great, pure, eternal.

[So I am constantly led to the same subjects by different roads; and I discover more and more the close bond that unites the two parts of my subject.]

In another place in this work, I looked for the causes to which the maintenance of political institutions in America had to be attributed, and religion seemed to me one of the principal ones. Today, when I am concerned with individuals, I find religion again and notice that it is no less useful to each citizen than to the whole State.

The Americans show, by their practice, that they feel the entire necessity of moralizing democracy by religion. What they think in this regard about themselves is a truth that must penetrate every democratic nation.

I do not doubt that the social and political constitution of a people disposes them to certain beliefs and to certain tastes in which they easily abound afterward; while these same causes turn them away from certain opinions and certain tendencies without their working at it themselves, and so to speak without their suspecting it.

All the art of the legislator consists in clearly discerning in advance these natural inclinations of human societies, in order to know where the effort of the citizens must be aided, and where it

would instead be necessary to slow it down. For these obligations differ according to the times. Only the end toward which humanity must always head is unchanging; the means to reach that end constantly vary.

[≠There are vices or erroneous opinions that can only be established among a people by struggling against the general current of society. These are not to be feared; they must be considered as unfortunate accidents. But there are others that, having a natural rapport with the very constitution of the people, develop by themselves and effortlessly among the people. Those, however small they may be at their beginning and however rare they seem, deserve to attract the great care of the legislator. ≠]^c

If I were born in an aristocratic century, amid a nation in which the hereditary wealth of some and the irremediable poverty of others diverted men from the idea of the better and, as well, held souls as if benumbed in the contemplation of another world, I would want it to be possible for me to stimulate among such a people the sentiment of needs; I would think about finding more rapid and easier means to satisfy the new desires that I would have brought about, and, diverting the greatest efforts of the human mind toward physical study, I would try to excite the human mind in the pursuit of well-being.^d

If it happened that some men caught fire thoughtlessly in the pursuit of wealth and exhibited an excessive love for material enjoyments, I would not become alarmed; these particular traits would soon disappear in the common physiognomy.

Legislators of democracies have other concerns.

Give democratic peoples enlightenment and liberty and leave them alone. They will easily succeed in drawing from this world all the [material] goods that it can offer; they will perfect each one of the useful arts and daily make life more comfortable, easier, sweeter; their social state pushes them naturally in this direction. I am not afraid that they will stop.

But while man takes pleasure in this honest and legitimate pursuit of well-being, it is to be feared that in the end he may lose the use of his most sublime faculties, and that by wanting to improve everything around him, he may in the end degrade himself. The danger is there and nowhere else.

So legislators in democracies and all honest and enlightened men who live in democracies must apply themselves without respite to lifting up souls and keeping them pointed toward heaven. It is necessary that all those who are interested in the future of democratic societies unite, and that all in concert make continual efforts to spread within these societies the taste for the infinite, the sentiment for the grand and the love for non-material pleasures.

If among the opinions of a democratic people there exist a few of these harmful theories that tend to make you believe that everything perishes with the body, consider the men who profess them as the natural enemies of the people.

There are many things that offend me in the materialists. Their doctrines seem pernicious to me, and their pride revolts me. If their system could be of some use to man, it seems that it would be in giving him a modest idea of himself. But they do not show that this is so; and when they believe that they have sufficiently established that men are only brutes, they appear as proud as if they had demonstrated that men were gods.^e

Materialism is, among all nations, a dangerous sickness of the human mind; but it must be particularly feared among a democratic people, because it combines marvelously with the vice of the heart most familiar to these people.

Democracy favors the taste for material enjoyments. This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that everything is only matter; and materialism, in turn, finally carries them with an insane fervor toward these same enjoyments. Such is the fatal circle into which democratic nations are pushed. It is good that they see the danger and restrain themselves.

Most religions are only general, simple and practical means to teach men the immortality of the soul. That is the greatest advantage that a democratic people draws from belief, and what makes these beliefs more necessary for such a people than for all others.

So when no matter which religion has put down deep roots within a democracy, be careful about weakening it; but instead protect it carefully as the most precious heritage of aristocratic centuries;^f do not try to tear men away from their ancient religious opinions in order to substitute new ones, for fear that, during the transition from one faith to another, when the soul finds itself for one moment devoid of beliefs, love of material enjoyments comes to spread and fill the soul entirely.

[I do not believe that all religions are equally true and equally good, but I think that there is none so false or so bad that it would not still be advantageous for a democratic people to profess.]

Assuredly, metempsychosis is not more reasonable than materialism; but if it were absolutely necessary for a democracy to make a choice between the two, I would not hesitate, and I would judge that its citizens risk becoming brutalized less by thinking that their soul is going to pass into the body of a pig than by believing that it is nothing.^g

The belief in a non-material and immortal principle, united for a time to matter, is so necessary for the grandeur of man, that it still produces beautiful effects even when you do not join the opinion of rewards and punishments with it and when you limit yourself to believing that after death the divine principle contained in man is absorbed in God or goes to animate another creature.^h

Even the latter consider the body as the secondary and inferior portion of our nature; and they scorn it even when they undergo its influence; while they have a natural esteem and secret admiration for the non-material part of man, even though they sometimes refuse to submit themselves to its dominion. This is enough to give a certain elevated turn to their ideas and their

tastes, and to make them tend without interest, and as if on their own, toward pure sentiments and great thoughts.

It is not certain that Socrates and his school had well-fixed opinions on what must happen to man in the other life; but the sole belief on which they were settled, that the soul has nothing in common with the body and survives it, was enough to give to platonic philosophy the sort of sublime impulse that distinguishes it.

When you read Plato, you notice that in the times prior to him and in his time, many writers existed who advocated materialism. These writers have not survived to our time or have survived only very incompletely. It has been so in nearly all the centuries; most of the great literary reputations are joined with spiritualism. The instinct and the taste of humanity uphold this doctrine; they often save this doctrine despite the men themselves and make the names of those who are attached to it linger on. So it must not be believed that in any time, and in whatever political state, the passion for material enjoyments and the opinions that are linked with it will be able to suffice for an entire people.^j The heart of man is more vast than you suppose; it can at the same time enclose the taste for the good things of the earth and the love of the good things of heaven; sometimes the heart seems to give itself madly to one of the two; but it never goes for a long time without thinking of the other.^k

If it is easy to see that, particularly in times of democracy, it is important to make spiritual opinions reign, it is not easy to say what those who govern democratic peoples must do for those opinions to reign.

I do not believe in the prosperity any more than in the duration of official philosophies, and as for State religions, I have always thought that if sometimes they could temporarily serve the interests of political power, they always sooner or later become fatal to the Church.

Nor am I one of those who judge that in order to raise religion in the eyes of the people, and to honor the spiritualism that religion professes, it is good to grant indirectly to its ministers a political influence that the law refuses to them.

[I would even prefer that you gave the clergy a definite power than to allow them to hold an irregular and hidden power. For, in the first case, you at least see clearly the political circle in which priests can act; while in the other, there are no limits at which the imagination of the people must stop, or public misfortunes for which the people will not be tempted to blame the priests.]^m

I feel so convinced of the nearly inevitable dangers that beliefs run when their interpreters mingle in public affairs, and I am so persuaded that Christianity must at all cost be maintained within the new democracies, that I would prefer to chain priests within the sanctuary than to allow them out of it.

So what means remain for authority to lead men back toward spiritualistic opinions or keep them in the religion that suggests these opinions?

What I am going to say is going to do me harm in the eyes of politicians. I believe that the only effective means that governments can use to honor the dogma of the immortality of the soul is to act each day as if they believed it themselves; and I think that it is only by conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs that they can claim to teach citizens to know, love and respect religious morality in little affairs.