Alexis de Tocqueville, *Man Needs Religion for Political Reasons*

[Excerpt from *Democracy in America*: “How Religion in the United States Avails Itself of Democratic Tendencies.”]

I HAVE shown in a preceding chapter that men cannot do without; dogmatic belief, and even that it is much to be desired that such belief should exist among them. I now add that, of all the kinds of dogmatic belief, the most desirable appears to me to be dogmatic belief in matters of religion; and this is a clear inference, even from no higher consideration than the interests of this world.

There is hardly any human action, however particular it may be, that does not originate in some very general idea men have conceived of the Deity, of his relation to mankind, of the nature of their own souls, and of their duties to their fellow creatures. Nor can anything prevent these ideas from being the common spring from which all the rest emanates.

Men are therefore immeasurably interested in acquiring fixed ideas of God, of the soul, and of their general duties to their Creator and their fellow men; for doubt on these first principles would abandon all their actions to chance and would condemn them in some way to disorder and impotence.

This, then, is the subject on which it is most important for each of us to have fixed ideas; and unhappily it is also the subject on which it is most difficult for each of us, left to himself, to settle his opinions by the sole force of his reason. None but minds singularly free from the ordinary cares of life, minds at once penetrating, subtle, and trained by thinking, can, even with much time and care, sound the depths of these truths that are so necessary. And, indeed, we see that philosophers are themselves almost always surrounded with uncertainties; that at every step the natural light which illuminates their path grows dimmer and less secure, and that, in spite of all their efforts, they have discovered as yet only a few conflicting notions, on which the mind of man has been tossed about for thousands of years without every firmly grasping the truth or finding novelty even in its errors. Studies of this nature are far above the average capacity of men; and even if the majority of mankind were capable of such pursuits it is evident that the leisure to cultivate them would still be wanting.

Fixed ideas about God and human nature are indispensable to the daily practice of men’s lives; but the practice of their lives prevents them from acquiring such ideas.

The difficulty appears to be without a parallel. Among the sciences there are some that are useful to the mass of mankind and are within its reach; others can be approached only by the few and are not cultivated by the many, who require nothing beyond their more remote applications: but the daily practice of the science I speak of is indispensable to all, although the study of it is inaccessible to the greater number.

General ideas respecting God and human nature are therefore the ideas above all others which it is suitable to withdraw from the habitual action of private judgment and in which there is most to gain and least to lose a recognizing a principle of authority.

The first object and one of the principal advantages of religion is to furnish to each of these fundamental questions a solution that is at once clear, precise, intelligible,
and lasting to the mass of mankind. There are religions that are false and very absurd, but it may be affirmed that any religion which remains within the circle I have just traced, without pretending to go beyond it (as many religions have attempted to do, for the purpose of restraining on every side the free movement of the human mind), imposes a salutary restraint on the intellect; and it must be admitted that, if it does not save men in another world, it is at least very conducive to their happiness and their greatness in this.

This is especially true of men living in free countries. When the religion of a people is destroyed, doubt gets hold of the bigger powers of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Every, man accustoms himself to having only confused and changing notions on-the subjects most interesting to his fellow creatures and himself. His opinions are ill-defended and easily abandoned; and, in despair of ever solving by himself the hard problems respecting the destiny of man, he ignobly submits to think no more about, them.

Such a condition cannot but enervate the soul, relax the springs of the will, and prepare a people for servitude. Not only does it happen in such a case that they allow their freedom to be taken from them; they frequently surrender it themselves. When there is no longer any principle of authority in religion any more than in politics, men are speedily frightened at the aspect of this unbounded independence. The constant agitation of all surrounding things alarms and exhausts them. As everything is at sea in the sphere of the mind, they determine at least that the mechanism of society shall be firm and fixed; and as they cannot resume their ancient belief, they assume a master.

For my own part, I doubt whether man can ever support at the same time complete religious independence and entire political freedom. And I am inclined to think that if faith be wanting in him, he must be subject; and if he be free, he must believe.

Karl Marx, from “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law”

“Man makes religion, religion does not make man.”

“[Religion] is the opium of the people.”

“To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs in the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions.”
Friedrich Nietzsche, from *Genealogy of Morals*

“It was the Jews who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God) and to hang on this inversion with their teeth, the teeth of the most abysmal hatred (the hatred of impotence), saying ‘the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone—and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblesed, accursed, and damned!’”

Sigmund Freud, from *Civilization & Its Discontents*

“The derivation of religious needs from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it seems to me incontrovertible”

“I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection.”

“The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness.”

And so the common man’s religion is in the form of a Providence “in the figure of an enormously exalted father.” “The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life. It is still more humiliating to discover how large a number of people living to-day, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of pitiful rearguard actions.” For example, they will replace God with “an impersonal, shadowy and abstract principle.”

Since life is so intensely hard, disappointing, and frustrating, we need palliative measures. “There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. Something of the kind is indispensable.”

* * *