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Alan S. Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. x + 246 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-199-68115-0.

Review by Noah Shusterman, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Alan Kahan's recent study of Alexis de Tocqueville's political and moral theories is a strong, well-researched work centered on a thorough and convincing interpretation of Tocqueville as a nineteenth-century thinker and intellect. This is a book which any scholar interested in Tocqueville and his theories should read, and which should also interest intellectual historians of nineteenth-century France. The book's main strength comes from the author's extensive, even encyclopedic knowledge of Tocqueville's writings. Having translated *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* and edited a Tocqueville reader, Kahan brings an enormous amount of Tocqueville's own writings to bear on the questions at hand. Borrowing equally from *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's journals, and his private correspondence, the cumulative impact is doubly convincing to the reader: first, because Kahan has left no stone unturned and second, because Tocqueville spent an enormous amount of time and energy thinking through the issues at the center of this book.

The text which seems to turn up the least is the one with which H-France readers are likely the most familiar: *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. Kahan, as the translator of *The Old Regime*, does discuss the text, particularly in chapter seven, "Religion in France." The Tocqueville that emerges from Kahan's reading, though, is not the Tocqueville which dominated discussions of revolutionary historiography during the Furet and post-Furet eras. Kahan has relatively little interest in Tocqueville as an historian. Nor does Kahan focus on Tocqueville as a theorist of the state and of centralization.

Instead, the Alexis de Tocqueville who emerges from Kahan's reading is above all a moralist—and, more specifically, the creator of a "new moral science" (p. 3). During the book's first three chapters, Kahan traces this moral science. He places Tocqueville in France's moral tradition, following writers like Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld, and even portrays him as a "Corneille for the nineteenth century" (p. 23). Kahan spends quite a bit of time placing Tocqueville in this tradition, with discussions of many other French and Francophone thinkers, including Pascal, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Chateaubriand. Tocqueville's writing, Kahan claims, was in "silent dialogue with French moralists from the seventeenth century to his own day" (p. 48). Again, in Kahan's reading, this moralism was not one aspect of Tocqueville's theories among others, but rather was Tocqueville's central motivation and most important aim.

In Kahan's reading, the goal of Tocqueville's "moral science" was to find a way to maximize both freedom and "grandeur." More specifically, Tocqueville sought a way to maximize the greatness of a new, and democratic, society. This project was, in a sense, an attempt to bring the kind of greatness which, in aristocratic society, had been possible for the very few, into a new age. This was not a simple spreading of the greatness around, as democratic society had new challenges in materialism, mediocrity, and

individualism, all of which could work to suppress greatness (p. 55). Democracies therefore offered greater possibilities but also new challenges.

Such a project necessitated particular attention to religion—hence the focus, in five of the book’s nine chapters, on religion. “If human greatness is Tocqueville’s goal as a moralist,” Kahan writes, “religion is central to attaining that goal in democratic societies...his new moral science is based largely on promoting religion in democratic societies” (p. 67). Comparing Tocqueville to a “new Archimedes,” in Kahan’s reading, Tocqueville saw religion as “the biggest lever there was to help individuals become great, and nations to become, and above all to remain, free” (p. 67). According to Kahan, Tocqueville “wants religion in democratic society to play the aristocratic (perfectionist) role of restoring greatness to democratic souls who would otherwise be unable to conceive of it, much less attain it” (p. 71). This claim sets the stage for the bulk of the book, which consists of one abstract chapter focused on religion’s role, another chapter on alternatives to religion, then chapters focusing on religion in America, religion in France, and a chapter on “Religion Elsewhere” which focuses primarily on Islam and Hinduism.

Chapter seven, “Religion in France,” will probably be of most interest to H-France readers. Tocqueville approached the question with the belief that Catholicism was “the only realistic possible religion for France,” yet France was full of people who “loved freedom...but hated Catholicism” (p. 153). This posed a problem for Tocqueville, who believed that a free society needed religion. Yet his “attempt to end the European *Kulturkampf* between Catholicism and democratic society was a signal failure. Neither side was interested” (p. 154). Kahan traces Tocqueville’s thoughts on French religion and its failures—or rather, the failed attempts at both an overly religious and an overly anticlerical politics—in both Tocqueville’s historical analysis of the Old Regime and his political actions during the nineteenth-century events he lived through. Throughout, Tocqueville regretted the failure of the French clergy to “make itself heard through the party wall that religion shares with politics—through a moral influence that is no less politically effective for being non-partisan” (p. 171).

For all of the details that Kahan brings to his study, though, Kahan acknowledges that Tocqueville “is interested in human greatness and political freedom, not salvation, and for him religion is primarily a means, not a goal....The proof of this is that Tocqueville, in the final analysis, does not care if the religion that serves democracy is true or false” (p. 85). Catholicism and Protestantism alike only serve as means to an end. (So too might Islam, in Kahan’s interpretation of Tocqueville, though it had larger hurdles to climb, but not Hinduism, whose caste system was a “fatal flaw” [p. 190]).

Such an approach to religion was hardly unique to Tocqueville. Since the eighteenth century, writers looked to religion for what role it could play rather than for people’s salvation. Such an approach was shared by both Montesquieu and Voltaire, in their own ways. The increasing tendency to judge religion by external criteria—particularly utility—was one of the great transformations of eighteenth-century thought. Still, this approach—whether one wishes to blame Kahan, or Tocqueville himself—gives the second part of the book a feeling of emptiness. If religion was only a means, why such focus on it in the book? Why not more examination of the themes of greatness and freedom? And why a comparative discussion of religions which is, in the end, only an assessment of their varying capacities to meet political needs?

Kahan ends the book with a chapter on “Tocqueville Today” and a methodological appendix. “Tocqueville Today” is about the potential for using Tocqueville writings as a theoretical approach to modern society. For Kahan, Tocqueville’s approach has an advantage over Weber’s, due to their differing beliefs in the role of religion in society. Tocqueville anticipated—and advocated—a world where religion continued to have a place in the public sphere. Developments like the “de-privatization of religion,” which Habermas accepts reluctantly, become, in a Tocquevillian framework, a welcome development. The methodology appendix is well placed; Kahan’s suggestion that many of his readers “may wish to skip” it seems a fair one. Much of the appendix consists of a discussion of Quentin Skinner’s approach to intellectual history,

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which Kahan for the most part endorses, while noting its limits. Kahan, for instance, defends his decision to use Tocqueville's letters and other unpublished writings to bolster the interpretation he offers of Tocqueville's theories, but most intellectual historians accept the benefits of such an approach.

*Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion* is thorough and, as an interpretation of Tocqueville's priorities and theories, convincing. It is also a very focused book, with an almost Straussian approach to its subject. It is less convincing in its efforts to expand Tocqueville's appeal or his standing among social scientists. This book will have relatively little interest for scholars with only tangential interest in Tocqueville--including historians who find themselves studying the same material on which Tocqueville wrote. It is, however, a book which every scholar interested in Alexis de Tocqueville himself should read.

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