

**‘A mesure que j’avançais dans cette étude, je m’étonnais en revoyant à tous les moments dans la France de ce temps beaucoup de traits qui frappent dans celle de nos jours’**

Tocqueville notes that the Old Regime was *si près de nous par le nombre des années, mais que la Révolution nous cache*. Yet part of the reason why he published this book was to demonstrate that the Revolution was hiding the fact that several factors in society, supposedly new, were anything but new. He says immediately after the quote in question that when looking at the Old Regime, *j’y retrouvais une foule de sentiments que j’avais crus nés de la Révolution* - sentiments which implied a direct linkage between the pre-Revolutionary era and his own, in the Second Empire.

Therefore one of Tocqueville’s most noticeable themes are of a continuation of policy on the part of the French governments, of whatever ideological colour. He says elsewhere of the old regime that *Les hommes de 89 avaient renversé l’édifice, mais ses fondements étaient restés dans l’âme même de ses destructeurs* and thereby they were able to rebuild it more solidly than ever before. As a man who genuinely believed in the liberating actions of the early Revolution (so much so that he served as foreign minister for the Second Republic), it is hardly surprising that he should take the view of the Revolution being progressive. However it is also clear that he refers to the men of 1789 and not of 1790 onwards, when he considered that much that had been achieved in terms of liberty was wasted in the pursuit of equality.

Two of the principal themes which he saw as leading directly to his own time was the centralisation of the French state, and the growing anti-clericalism in France. Yet though he asserted that the Revolution was *la terminaison soudaine et violente d’une œuvre à laquelle dix générations d’hommes avaient travaillé*, it is difficult to see how the centralisation process continued in the 19th century, if the Revolution really had marked its completion.

However, this is not to say that there was remotely the same society in France before and after 1789, a problem which Tocqueville had to wrestle with. It is noticeable that though he saw *beaucoup de traits qui frappent dans celle de nos jours*, he also tempers this by saying that *pour bien comprendre la Révolution, il fallait oublier un moment la France que nous voyons, et aller interroger dans son tombeau la France qui n’est plus*. The contradiction seems obvious.

**‘Plusieurs m’accuseront peut-être de montrer dans ce livre un goût bien intempestatif pour la liberté, dont on m’assure que personne ne se soucie plus guère en France.’**

Tocqueville’s preoccupation with liberty, however anachronistic he might have felt it was, was a lasting and heart-felt one. He says that *il y a plus de vingt ans que, parlant d’une autre société, j’écrivais presque textuellement ce qu’on va lire*, referring to his book on democracy in the New World. In both America and Britain, Tocqueville stresses that the political liberty of the country and therefore of all the citizens produced better government and better citizens. As he says here, *seule elle [la liberté] est capable de les arracher du culte de l’argent...pour leur faire apercevoir...la patrie; seule elle substitue à l’amour du bien-être des passions plus énergiques et plus hautes*. In other words, liberty reduced the social exclusion and therefore friction of different parts of society, to a common goal in the shape of *la patrie*.

Yet was he showing an inclination for liberty beyond what was necessary? To my mind no, because throughout the final two years of Louis XVI’s reign, such an attitude would certainly not have been out of place. Tocqueville’s insistence on the men-of-letters as social arbiters in the *fin-de-siècle* period seems to be borne out by the government of the time’s constant desire not to appear despotic. But in Tocqueville’s stance there also seems to be something of a feeling of persecution. As he says later, *Ayant montré la bonne opinion que j’avais de la liberté dans le temps où elle était en faveur, on ne trouvera pas mauvais que j’y persiste quand on la délaisse*.

Yet this same quote also makes a side swipe at the government of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, now Napoleon III, in whose reign this book was published. Certainly for Tocqueville there can have been no doubt that as well as criticising the regime from the point of view of a social commentator, there must have been personal bitterness towards it. Tocqueville had served in the Cabinet of Odilon Barrot in the radical days following the February Revolution, a Revolution which he considered Napoleon to have betrayed. It is noticeable how later on in this same preface, he goes on to talk about *les sociétés démocratiques qui ne sont pas libres*, again a covert criticism of Napoleon III’s manipulation of universal suffrage at his election to the Imperial title.

From a modern perspective it is difficult to see that Tocqueville’s idea that liberty produced a society based less on self-interest is valid. Certainly, the removal of privilege eased social transaction, but as the Revolutions of 1848 and even more so 1870 showed, it certainly did not solve the problem. As for his idea that liberty reduced self-interest, evidence - from Voltaire’s description of the various creeds and colours of the traders at the London Stock Market in his *Lettres Philosophiques* to the scene there at present - shows that is not so.

**‘C’était bien moins comme doctrine religieuse que comme institution politique que comme institution politique que le christianisme avait allumé ces furieux haines’**

Tocqueville’s attitude towards the institution of the church seems to be one which is of grudging respect. While expecting it to be reactionary and backward in its thinking, his analysis of the *cahiers* showed that it was largely not. He recognised that it survived the revolutionary period with its spiritual power undamaged. Since anticlericalism was such a powerful force, this required a closer scrutiny.

His two reasons for saying that the church was hated as an institution rather than as a doctrine are as follows. The most important of these is that as he saw it, Christianity was not contradictory to the fashionable new ideas of democracy, nationhood and equality. Or in his own words, *rien dans le christianisme n’est absolument contraire à l’esprit de ces sociétés, et plusieurs choses y sont très favorables*. An example of which was the easy way in which the Church could accept the principle of equality in a nation, since its existing doctrine was that all men are equal in the eyes of God. Indeed if one looks at the *cahiers* of 1789, and the consequent struggle in the Estates-General, the first order was in fact one of the most radical parts of society. It follows from this that if the Church was hated so much, it could not be because it was ideologically opposed to the Revolution, and so therefore the opposition arose from the Church’s temporal power in the context of the *ancien régime*.

Since the church could not from an ideological perspective be lumped together with the rest of the *ancien régime*, is it surprising that *à mesure que toutes les anciennes institutions politiques qu’elle a attaquées ont été détruites... que la clergé s’est mis plus à part de tout ce qui était tombé avec lui?* He goes on to mention the fact that everywhere in post-Revolutionary Europe saw the church’s spiritual power increase. Indeed, Tocqueville makes the point about democratic societies that *Toutes les religions qui ont péri ont eu là leur dernier asile*, that freedom of belief strengthens the power of religion, and not diminish it.

And so we are therefore left to explain why of all the aims of the Revolution, *la première allumée et la dernière éteinte a été la passion irréligieuse*. As Tocqueville says, it was not because priests claimed to govern matters relating to the next world, *mais parce qu’ils étaient propriétaires et seigneurs dans celui-ci; qu’elle occupait alors la place la plus privilégiée et la plus forte dans cette vieille société qu’ils s’agissait de réduire en poudre*. According to Tocqueville therefore, since the Church’s temporal power was based in the old society, if one wanted to destroy the old society, it was inevitable that the Church should be attacked as well.

**‘La révolution française est donc une révolution politique qui a opéré à la manière et qui a pris en quelque chose l’aspect d’une révolution religieuse.’**

To say that the French Revolution, a revolution of entirely secular and humanist outlook, was akin to a religious revolution, must have been a fairly radical new view-point. Yet as Tocqueville points out, its international and universal appeal derived from the fact that its aims of destroying the vestiges of feudalism and appealing to basic human rights were applicable throughout most of Europe. *Elle a formé une patrie intellectuelle commune dont les hommes de toutes nations ont pu devenir citoyens*, he says, though how large this community was is a matter of contention. Certainly the Revolutionary armies considered it their duty to spread their message by force of arms, in the manner of the Thirty Years War: though if Germany appreciated this being taught to them at the point of a bayonet more two centuries later is debatable

His second point is that the French Revolution had its missionaries, preaching its message as if it were a religious doctrine. For the ideals of the revolution he sees were essentially human and not French: therefore applicable to all. The concept of equality and freedom were, as I have already mentioned, ones which most Europeans could share. He compares the fact that *elle a considéré le citoyen d’une façon abstraite, en dehors de toutes les sociétés particulières, de même que les religions considèrent l’homme en général, indépendamment du pays et du temps*. By also saying that *elle est devenue une sorte de religion nouvelle* he is able to further stress the view that this a new wave of thinking which will not die quickly.

Yet although it is true that *la révolution française n’a pas eu de territoire propre*, that does not by itself make the revolution remotely like previous reforms of Christianity. Tocqueville quotes Schiller saying that it brought people together who scarcely had heard of each other beforehand. But unlike the French revolution, the Reformation was spread by means of local rulers, fighting for as much their own interests as that of the new thinking. It is therefore by comparing the revolutionary period to that of the first advance of Christianity into formerly pagan areas that the true sense of the change is felt.