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Aaron Hoffman
Bellarmino University

Fr. Joseph O'Keefe
Boston College

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Supporting Theoretical Habits: Democracy, Science, and Education in American
Catholic Culture

Aaron D. Hoffman

Bellarmino University

Author Note

Aaron D. Hoffman is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Bellarmine University.

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Correspondence: Aaron D. Hoffman, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Political Science, Department of History and Political Science, Bellarmine University, 2001 Newburg Road, Louisville, Kentucky 40205, ahoffman@bellarmine.edu

Abstract

Catholic colleges and universities are an invaluable resource for American society. However, there is often a tension between the culture of Catholicism and the culture of higher education. Although their ultimate commitments may differ, their attitude towards knowledge need not differ. Indeed, Catholicism should have nothing to fear from the advancement of knowledge and should continue to make contributions to its development. This is evident if one highlights certain elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition. The writing of the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville best addresses the modern condition of Catholics who live in a world where there is no politically desirable alternative to democracy. Though not often thought of as a Catholic political philosopher in the same way that Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas are, Alexis de Tocqueville is a better guide in figuring out the modern relationship between Catholicism, science, and education. Catholicism has and is influenced by the democratic elements in American political culture, but it also can contribute much to that same democratic culture. According to Tocqueville, a democracy needs to support and promote scientific and theoretical knowledge for its own sake. This is exactly what Catholic institutions of higher learning, at their best, will do. Catholic higher education can help promote the theoretical habits that do not come easily in a modern commercial society and are needed for the spiritual and intellectual health of our nation.

Keywords: Catholicism, democracy, education, Alexis de Tocqueville

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This paper examines the contrast between the way that scientific advancement works and the culture of the Roman Catholic Church. The question addressed is whether there is an unbridgeable gap that separates scientific and Catholic culture. The apparent differences between the scientific method and the decision-making processes of the Catholic Church will be examined for its greater philosophical implications. Specifically, the paper takes off from a quote by Richard Blackwell that science is “pluralistic, democratic, public, fallibilistic, and self-corrective” where Catholicism is “monolithic, centralized, esoteric, resistant to change, and self-protective.”

The entire quote is contained in Don O’Leary’s book *Roman Catholicism and Modern Science: A History*. The whole quote clearly lays out the differences between the scientific method and the type of decision-making that can often characterize the Catholic Church:

Richard Blackwell argued that there is a potential for future conflict and that it is to be found in the characteristics of two disparate cultures. Religious authority, at least in Catholicism, is “monolithic, centralized, esoteric, resistant to change, and self-protective.” In contrast, authority in science is “pluralistic, democratic, public, fallibilistic, and self-corrective.” Blackwell did not proceed to claim that conflict is inevitable, only that there is a possibility – and a small one at that – because science and technology are now so much stronger relative to religion as agents of change. However, he did conclude that illiberal influences and a lack of

intellectual honesty in the Catholic Church may give rise to another incident similar to the Galileo affair (O’Leary, 2006, p. 257).¹

This two-culture framework posits a fundamental cultural division between science and Catholicism.

However, the framework is in need of some further nuance. There can be an obvious tension between a scientific method that is more democratic and the hierarchical decision making process of the Church, but this need not be the end of the story. At its best, the scientific method will be both democratic and open, where, at its worst, it can be closed and resistant to natural change and development. This is also the case with the Church. At its best, the Church is open to the contributions of the laity, the positive aspects of modern world, operates by the principle of subsidiarity, is philosophically rigorous, welcomes the advancement of knowledge, and is open to development and change.

The danger is not only a tendency in the Church to be closed off to the benefits of the scientific process, but also that the scientific community must resist a parallel tendency towards an authoritarian scientific outlook that closes itself off to the possibility of understanding spiritual truths and the full range of the human condition. Although the methods of science and Catholicism may often differ, their attitude towards knowledge need not differ. Indeed Catholicism, like science, should have nothing to fear from the advancement of knowledge and can contribute to its advancement. This is evident if one highlights certain elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

¹ O’Leary is quoting and referring to Blackwell, Richard. (1998). “Could there be another Galileo Case?” In Peter Machamer (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Galileo* (pp. 348-366). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Method

This paper addresses these questions from the perspectives of the discipline of political theory, one of the foundational pillars of the field we in the contemporary university call political science. My specific purpose is to address what the major figures in the history of Western political thought, specifically those figures recognized as canonical in the study of political theory, have to contribute in helping us achieve a conceptual grasp of the relationship of science and education in Catholic culture.

For that, I have narrowed my contribution down even further in order to only examine those canonical political philosophers who could be identified as Catholic political thinkers. Not only are these figures relevant to the study of political theory proper, but they also exemplify the main approaches to the relationship between Catholicism and science. The three figures that will be examined are Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Alexis de Tocqueville; one representing the late ancient world, one representing the medieval, and one part of the modern world. Each of them also represents an ideal type when dealing with the relationship of science and religion.

Augustine

Though eschewing any absolute progressive model of history, this paper contends that the ancient approach of Augustine, which relegates science as the “handmaiden” of theology, though philosophically interesting, is unable to adequately address the contemporary relationship of science and religion. It will be most appealing to those who have chosen to turn their backs on the potential and value of independent scientific thought and the scientific method.

According to David C. Lindberg, the mindset of Augustine was that “knowledge of natural phenomenon acquires value and legitimacy insofar as it serves other, higher purposes” (p. 52).² The higher purposes of course being the Truths and teachings of Christianity as interpreted through the Catholic Church. This model of science is of historical interest only and does not adequately capture or represent the dynamics of the Church and science today. Lindberg writes:

In Augustine’s view, then, knowledge of the things of this world is not a legitimate end in itself, but, as a means to other ends, it is indispensable. Natural philosophy must accept a subordinate position as the handmaiden of theology and religion: The temporal must be made to serve the eternal. Natural philosophy is not to be loved, but it may be legitimately used. This attitude toward scientific knowledge was to flourish throughout the Middle Ages and well into the modern period (p. 53).

Thus, in an Augustinian view, natural science serves as a tool for the overarching purposes that are best determined through theology.

Although this view may live on in some way among some Catholics, its vision of knowledge is far too holistic for the divisions inherent in the modern world, divisions not only between Church and state, but also in the very practices of knowledge accumulation. Catholic universities and colleges today are even too pluralistic in their intellectual structure and goals to adopt this as a working model.

² Lindberg, David C. (2002). “Early Christian Attitudes toward Nature.” In Gary B. Ferngren (Eds.), *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (pp. 47-56). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Thomas Aquinas

Considered by many Catholics to still be the final word on Catholic philosophy, the approach of Thomas Aquinas also does not provide an adequate answer to the relationship of science and Catholicism, although it will be of greater interest to those Catholics attempting to reconcile faith and reason into one overarching intellectual system. This reconciliation may seem like a worthy goal, but, to pursue it, one has to ignore developments of the modern world that have rendered science and religion into different spheres separated in both their practices and their purposes.

Again, Lindberg is a valuable resource in explaining the conclusions of Thomas Aquinas regarding scientific knowledge:

What Albert and Thomas accomplished (assisted, of course, by Grosseteste, Bacon, and many others) was to find a solution to the problem of faith and reason – perhaps not a permanent solution but one that proved satisfactory to many in the Middle Ages and that continues to attract a significant following at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They produced an accommodation between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology by christianizing Aristotle (correcting Aristotle where he was theologically unacceptable or had otherwise gone astray) and “Aristotelianizing” Christianity (importing major pieces of Aristotelian metaphysics and natural philosophy into Christian theology) (p. 68).³

As with Augustine, Thomas’s solution was a novel contribution to philosophy in its time, but is woefully inadequate in light of the challenges to Aristotelian metaphysics by modern science and the developments in theological understanding since medieval times.

³ Lindberg, David C. (2002). “Medieval Science and Religion.” In Gary B. Ferngren (Eds.), *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (pp. 57-72). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

It may be tempting to freeze one moment in time as the ultimate standard for our thinking. However, the vast array of theological inquiry available to us now, and the contribution that many other branches of knowledge make today to both philosophy and theology foils any attempt for there to be one master reading of Thomas Aquinas that operates as the ultimate guide for the practice of science and religion for all time.

Like all thinkers in the Catholic intellectual tradition, Augustine and Thomas have much to teach us, but their teachings must also be relevant to our own modern condition, a condition that they were neither aware of nor in many ways even anticipated. A more applicable and relevant analysis of the relationship of science and Catholicism than their overly theological approaches has to come from a thinker who shared both the experiences of our modern world and our democratic sensibilities.

Tocqueville

The writing of the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville best addresses the modern condition of Catholics who live in a world where there is no desirable alternative to democracy. Not often thought of as a Catholic political philosopher in the same way that Augustine and Thomas are, Alexis de Tocqueville is a better guide in figuring out the modern relationship between science and Catholicism. This can be demonstrated through a close textual analysis of certain passages in Tocqueville's classic two-volume book *Democracy in America*

According to Tocqueville biographer Hugh Brogan, Tocqueville was "profoundly Catholic" (p. 162). In fact, Tocqueville does not make sense outside of a Catholic context, because "he was never able to transcend the cultural limitations of his cradle Catholicism" (p. 361).

Tocqueville makes an important contribution to Catholic thought in an American context, because he was able in his writing on America to fully explain why there is and should be a harmonious relationship between Catholicism, democracy, and science. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote:

By the side of every religion is to be found a political opinion, which is connected with it by affinity. If the human mind be left to follow its own bent, it will regulate the temporal and spiritual institutions of society in a uniform manner, and man will endeavor, if I may so speak, to *harmonize* earth with heaven (Vol. 1, p. 300).

Tocqueville explained what Catholics naturally will do in a democratic culture; that is if Catholics truly allow themselves to practice their commitment to political freedom, free opinions, and religious devotion.

Tocqueville painted an America where Catholics are important members of American political culture. The earliest Americans established “a democratic and republican religion.” American religious practices were both free and democratic. They were not under “the authority of the Pope.” However, many Catholics came to the country with the immigration of the Irish. It is true that Catholics are “faithful,” “fervent and zealous” in their beliefs, yet they are also “the most republican and the most democratic class.” Tocqueville was arguing that Catholicism, properly understood, is not “the natural enemy of democracy.” Catholicism among the divisions of Christianity is even “one of the most favorable to equality of condition among men.” Ironically, this is because under the priest, all members of the Church congregation are equal. In this case, a hierarchical religious practice leads to a democratic sensibility (Vol. 1, p. 300).

The practices of Catholics are in fact naturally democratic, according to Tocqueville. There are no worldly distinctions among Catholics, they all profess the “same creed,” the “same observances,” the “same austerities,” and the “same standards.” The Church teaches “obedience,” but an obedience among its equal members. Protestant thinking makes people “independent,” not equal. In America, the Catholic hierarchy is separated from the government, and this leads Catholic attitudes away from the Church-State mixtures of Europe and towards transferring their belief in spiritual equality to the belief in political equality. Also, being poor minority outsiders, leads American Catholics to be the most enthusiastic proponents and supporters of the beliefs in equality and the democratic and republican “political doctrines” (Vol. 1, p. 301).

Catholics have achieved a natural harmony in America, because they have understood that a separation between religious doctrine and political opinion leads to the strengthening of both. Tocqueville wrote that:

The Catholic priests in America have divided the intellectual world into two parts: in the one they place the doctrines of revealed religion, which they assent to without discussion; in the other they leave those political truths which they believe the Deity has left open to free inquiry. Thus the Catholics of the United States are at the same time the most submissive believers and the most independent citizens (Vol. 1, pp. 301-302)

In his second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville also praised the practices of American Catholic priests for being naturally democratic:

There are no Roman Catholic priests who show less taste for the minute individual observances, for extraordinary or peculiar means of salvation, or who

cling more to the spirit and less to the letter of the law than the Roman Catholic priests of the United States. Nowhere is that doctrine of the church which prohibits the worship reserved to God alone from being offered to the saints more clearly inculcated or more generally followed. Yet the Roman Catholics of America are very submissive and very sincere (Vol. 2, p. 27).⁴

By focusing on the passages that Tocqueville analyzes American Catholics, it is evident that there can be a natural harmony between Catholic and democratic culture.

Scientific and Theoretical Thought

Following Tocqueville, one can say that Catholicism has been clearly influenced by the democratic elements in American political culture. However, a reading of Tocqueville also shows that Catholicism can contribute much intellectually to that same democratic culture, because a democracy needs to support and promote scientific and theoretical knowledge for its own sake. This is exactly what Catholic institutions of higher learning, at their best, will continue to contribute to this democratic nation. Catholic higher education can help promote the theoretical habits that do not come easily in a modern commercial society.

Americans are eminently practical people because of their history and traditions.

Tocqueville wrote:

The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their

⁴ In this, Tocqueville also anticipated the future of Catholicism in America. Tocqueville biographer André Jardin observes that according to Tocqueville “But is it was to be credible, a religion like Catholicism would have to purify itself of secondary observances and superstitions and reduce its dogma to the essentials. This was an astonishing piece of prescience, at least where Catholicism was concerned. The immediate development of the Church was in the opposite direction, and it was not until the twentieth century that it made an about-face” (p. 256).

strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American on purely practical objects (Vol. 2, pp. 36-37).

Americans seek the type of knowledge that is practical and will lead to tangible results.⁵

Even the act of reading in a democracy will be more practical and less elegant.⁶

In Volume 2, Chapter 10 of *Democracy in America* titled “Why the Americans are more Addicted to Practical than to Theoretical Science,” Tocqueville laid out the nature of science in a democratic society. When applied to our contemporary context, he makes the case of why the theoretical sciences are needed in a democracy that values the practical, and how those needs can be met by the Catholic intellectual tradition.

In the chapter, Toqueville observed how democracies guide scientific pursuits in certain directions. Democratic science is characterized by being grounded, not accepting of authority, not based on precedent, subtlety, or vocabulary, and direct in its methods and speech. There are three parts of science: (1) “theoretical principles” (2) “general truths,” and (3) “methods of application and means of execution” (Vol. 2, p. 41-42). Americans

⁵ “When hereditary wealth, the privileges of rank, and the prerogatives of birth have ceased to be and when every man derives his strength from himself alone, it becomes evident that the chief cause of disparity between the fortunes of men is the mind. Whatever tends to invigorate, to extend, or to adorn the mind rises instantly to a high value. The utility of knowledge becomes singularly conspicuous even to the eyes of the multitude; those who have no taste for its charms set store upon its results and make some efforts to acquire it” (Vol. 2, p. 39).

⁶ “People do not read with the same notions or in the same manner as they do in aristocratic communities, but the circle of readers is unceasingly expanded, till it includes all the people” (Vol. 2, p. 39).

neglect the types of theoretical principles that do not easily lead to practical results. This is for cultural reasons, because there is no time for “meditation” in a chaotic democratic society (Vol. 2, p. 42). Democratic societies are also dominated by men of action, not men of contemplation. Tocqueville wrote that:

the world is not led by long or learned demonstrations; a rapid glance at particular incidents, the daily study of the fleeting passions of the multitude, the accidents of the moment, and the art of turning them into account decide all its affairs” (Vol. 2, p. 43).

America, being a large commercial society with democratic sentiments, does not naturally have a theoretical temperament; rather this temperament must be cultivated. Democratic people neither possess the character of men who revel in the cultivation of the abstract, yet a democracy is still in need of this for its sciences and knowledge.

Tocqueville wrote that:

There are several methods of studying the sciences. Among a multitude of men you will find a selfish, mercantile, and trading taste for the discoveries of the mind, which must not be confounded with that disinterested passion which is kindled in the heart of a few. A desire to utilize knowledge is one thing; the pure desire to know is another. I do not doubt that in a few minds and at long intervals an ardent, inexhaustible love of truth springs up, self-supported and living in ceaseless fruition, without ever attaining full satisfaction. It is this ardent love, this proud, disinterested love of what is true, that raises men to the abstract sources of truth, to draw their mother knowledge thence (Vol. 2, pp. 43-44).

Tocqueville thought that this theoretical disposition is not likely in democratic societies.

For “the aristocratic aim of science” is theoretical not practical, beautiful rather than useful; “In aristocratic ages science is more particularly called upon to furnish gratification to the mind; in democracies, to the body,” wrote Tocqueville (Vol. 2, p. 45). With the flourishing of practical science in democracies, general truths will develop, more people become involved in science, and geniuses will rise up. However, society can stagnate without higher theory.

If those who are called upon to guide the nations of our time clearly discerned from afar off these new tendencies, which will soon be irresistible, they would understand that, possessing education and freedom, men living in democratic ages cannot fail to improve the industrial part of science, and that henceforth all the efforts of the constituted authorities ought to be directed to support the highest branches of learning and to foster the nobler passion for science itself. In the present age the human mind must be coerced into theoretical studies; it runs of its own accord to practical applications; and, instead, of perpetually referring it to the minute examination of secondary effects, it is well to divert it from them sometimes, in order to raise it up to the contemplation of primary causes (Vol. 2, p. 46).

This cultural need for the theoretical in a democracy is how the Catholic intellectual tradition can assist modern democratic culture and the scientific community in general.

Ironically, the aristocratic character of the Catholic intellectual tradition with its respect for the abstract makes it a necessity in a democratic culture. The abstract and theoretical nature of much of Catholic thought is something that should be cultivated

today rather than compromised away in the quest for the type of relevance and practicality that will always be in abundance in democratic culture.

Even beyond the educational aspects of culture, Tocqueville makes a greater point about the need for theory. Matthew Mancini writes that, “For him, an aptitude for theory was actually a political necessity, because theory, in the send of grand intellectual conceptions, can serve as a shield against despotism” (p. 61). Therefore, abstract thinking in a democracy also has political as well as cultural importance.

Conclusion

Tocqueville’s writings demonstrate that science and Catholicism are compatible in a modern democratic context. At its best, the scientific method will be both democratic and open. At its best, the Church’s intellectual tradition helps to further the type of thinking needed by science. This is clearly evident if one highlights the theoretical elements that Tocqueville posits as so important to a democratic society.

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