

Alexis de Tocqueville on Liturgical Christianity in America

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In *Democracy in America* (1838) the French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville offered insightful and occasionally wry insights into American life. He outlined the key features of the American democratic temper that shaped its religion and politics, and to my mind his observations are still relevant 180 years later. I have excerpted some comments which de Tocqueville makes about American Christianity, noting in particular his comments about the reception of liturgical traditions. In reading them, one may remark that the same features of American religion that were present in the America of his day, can be observed today, its pluralism and pragmatism, the spirit of equality which dominates all religious ideas. Of particular interest to traditional Anglicans are his trenchant comments on the lack of interest in religious 'forms', read liturgy.

On his analysis, the spirit of equality is too powerful, and liturgical forms of worship appear too external and unnecessary, to make sense to a people who think that there is nothing superior to their own immediate judgement as to the truths of the faith, and whose religion is primarily subjective. Consequently, the liturgically minded Christian finds himself something of an oddity. This is what he wrote 1838:

"[A] truth appears very clear to me: that religions should be less burdened with external practices in democratic times than in others." (II.1.5)

"As [Americans] see that they manage to resolve unaided all the little difficulties that practical life presents, they easily conclude that everything in the world is explicable and that nothing exceeds the bound of intelligence." (II.1.1)

(I am reminded of a report in the newspaper of a church that cancelled its Sunday morning worship in order that the congregation find time to paint a run-down school.)

"Amidst the continual movement that reigns in the heart of a democratic society, the bond that unites generations is relaxed or broken; each man easily loses track of the ideas of his ancestors or scarcely worries about them."(II.1.1)

(It is reported now that more than one if four Americans have swapped religions.)

"...to take tradition only as information, and current facts only as a useful study for doing otherwise and better; to seek the reason for things by themselves and in themselves alone...these are the principle features that characterize what I shall call the philosophic method of the Americans."(II.1.1)

(It is interesting to note the degree to which Bible study, often advertised as a means for helping people find practical solutions to the problems of life, seems to have replaced Sunday worship as the central act of Christian worship.)

"Although Christians of America are divided into a multitude of sects, they all perceive their religion in the same light. This applies to Catholicism as well as to other beliefs." (II.1.5)

(This is marked by the liturgical revolution of the mid-twentieth century when all the mainstream denominations came under the influence of the same ideas, drawing all towards conviction that

the Christian religion is a single, simple idea.)

"Men who live in times of equality are therefore only with difficulty led to place intellectual authority to which they submit outside and above humanity. It is in themselves or in those like themselves that they ordinarily seek the sources of truth."(II.1.2)

(It would be quite easy to argue that the 1960's liturgical revolution was produced by the conviction that the only intellectual authority that anyone requires is that which they find in themselves.)

"...nothing so revolts the human mind more in times of equality than the idea of submitting to forms. Men who live in these times suffer [representational] figures with impatience; symbols appear to them to be puerile artifices that are used to veil or adorn for their eyes truths it would be more natural to show to them altogether naked and in broad daylight....the sight of ceremonies leaves them cold, and they are naturally brought to attach only a secondary importance to the details of worship."(II.1.5)

"I believe firmly in the necessity of forms; I know they fix the human mind in the contemplation of abstract truths, and by aiding it to grasp them forcefully, they make it embrace them ardently. I do not imagine that it is possible to maintain a religion without external practices; but on the other hand, I think that in the centuries we are entering.... A religion that would become more minute, inflexible, and burdened with small observances at the same time that men were becoming more equal would soon see itself reduced to a flock of impassioned zealots in the midst of an incredulous multitude."(II.1.5)

(Not wanting to appear as zealot, as no doubt I do, I find it continually necessary to remark that my attachment to the historic *Book of Common Prayer* is entirely connected to its dogma, rather than rite. This is what one must say in America.)

Another old book showing its value for understanding?