

DISPUTATION CLIX

February 9, 2017

Dearest Peucinians,

Last week we engaged in a probing discussion about whether or not political correctness, narrowly defined, advances social justice. We leave behind one timely controversy to touch upon another:

RESOLVED: RELIGION STRENGTHENS DEMOCRACY

Affirmative: Will Donaldson '20

Negative: Lewis Carrol '18

(Please take note of the late start time below)

As Alexis de Tocqueville notes in *Democracy in America*, a work as insightful as it is voluminous, democracy functions best when its citizens share a metaphysical foundation. On the one hand, democratic societies require active citizens. Individuals have a responsibility to participate in politics and provide for their families. The individual *qua* citizen, then, cannot afford to indulge in Cartesian musings about first principles and the nature of reality. He would exhaust himself trying to understand the mysteries of being without every find solid ground to stand upon. He must accept certain foundational principles — that is, certain dogmas — before he can act deliberately and with confidence. Religion is one system of meaning that tries to order the world according to intelligible principles, and by accepting these wholesale man can cease contemplation and begin living.

Tocqueville adds that religion is also indispensable in establishing the proper conditions for collective action, for “if everyone undertook to form all his own opinions and to seek for truth by isolated paths struck out by himself alone, it would follow that no considerable number of men would ever unite in any common belief.” As the history of philosophy shows us, it is almost impossible to get even the most rational and intelligent individuals to arrive at the same conclusions. Suspending rational inquiry and deferring to sacred ideas, however, may put us on the path to unifying culture.

Not to mention that every society lives or dies according to the virtue of its citizenry. Particularly in liberal democracies, where the laws permit a large degree of freedom, it is important that individuals regulate their own actions and show moral restraint. Freedom can only last as long as a free people eschew libertinism. However, while the law permits much, religion allows for relatively little. Faced with the choice of eternal bliss or eternal damnation, man will inevitably alter his conduct to conform with the dictates of religion, which promote peace and harmony in a democracy.

Tocqueville’s vision of a religious democracy finds a worthy adversary in Marx’s utopian scheme. Because Marx stares into the heart of a Germany where Christians have political privileges that are denied to religious minorities, he comes to very different conclusions about the role religion plays in the socio-political sphere. The right to practice religion freely, Marx astutely notes, is merely a means of cementing a fundamental and impenetrable barrier between men. The right to one’s own religion is the right to disregard the unity of the human species and to elevate instead distinction and difference. Rather than uniting people behind a common cause, religion is more likely to divide us to the point that we forget what we do have in common, the argument goes.

John Stuart Mill also has something to say about the matter. Only truth heralds progress in enlightened societies and indeed, throughout history. This is why, rather than adhering to dogmas and superstitions, we

ought to bring our diverse ideas into public spaces and allow them to engage in battle. Surely the best ideas will rise to the top, and the consensus that forms thereafter will provide solid ground for collective action. Don't most democracies protect the freedom of speech precisely to create this marketplace of ideas?

Whose vision controls the fate of the West: Tocqueville or Marx? Does it matter what religion is being practiced, so long as everyone is practicing it together? How do we inspire virtue in an entire people without recourse to divine law? Are appeals to religion our best recourse when a monopoly forms in the marketplace of ideas?

*Thursday February 9th, 8:30 PM -PLEASE NOTE THE LATE START TIME-
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire*

Yours,
μὲνω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus