

Imperiling Religious Liberty

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In the latest round of WikiLeaks emails, leading Democrats discuss religion in a manner that highlights the disdain that Progressive Democrats hold for traditional religious beliefs.

With the subject line “Conservative Catholicism,” the exchanges between Clinton campaign spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri, Center for American Progress senior fellow John Halpin, and former Clinton administration chief of staff John Podesta include remarks disparaging the use of “Thomistic thought” and “subsidiarity” to “sound sophisticated because no one knows what the hell they’re talking about.” They also characterize as a “bastardization of the faith” the views held by Catholics and converts who “must be attracted to the systematic thought and the severely backwards gender relations and must be totally unaware of Christian democracy.”

Reaction has been swift. Among the more forceful is a statement from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), reminding us that “the truth of Christ is never outdated or inaccessible.”

Not quite as recent, but nonetheless relevant, is Alexis de Tocqueville’s description in *Democracy in America* of the complementary relationship between religion and freedom. If religion is diminished, Tocqueville explains, the successful perpetuation of American democracy would be imperiled. He acknowledges that religion and freedom have often been at war, but that in America they were successfully incorporated into one another and combined marvelously. He devotes many chapters throughout his work to exploring their relationship, but begins by sketching how the two elements complement one another.

Religion and freedom are in fact part of two different worlds: the moral world and the political world. The political world is described by Tocqueville as agitated, contested, and uncertain; the moral world is classified, coordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance.

The political world is where innovation is permitted and where one can satisfy the desire for material wealth, well-being, and freedom; the moral world permits moral satisfaction and turns the attention of the believer toward Heaven. The political world permits independence, contempt for experience, and jealousy of every authority; the moral world requires passive though voluntary obedience. In spite of these contrasting characteristics, Tocqueville observes, “Far from harming each other, these two tendencies, apparently so opposed, advance in accord and seem to lend each other a mutual support.”

The key to the whole work that Tocqueville announces in the second chapter of *Democracy in America*, expressed in the simplest terms, is the active role that religion and freedom play in the lives of Americans.

Denigrating those who have deeply held religious beliefs and championing a “Catholic Spring” to overcome “a middle ages dictatorship,” as Voices for Progress founder Sandy Newman wrote to Podesta, go well beyond offending the sensibilities of Catholics and others. It suggests a cynicism as well as a contempt for the intelligence of Americans and their ability to participate in politics. It also seeks to sever a tie that Tocqueville saw as necessary to the freedom of the American people, but those who make up the Progressive Left have never been concerned with freedom.

On the contrary, those on the left undermine the moral foundation and cultural underpinnings of the people. Tocqueville warns in the second volume of *Democracy in America* that in such a case the members of society suffer and freedom is at risk:

When religion is destroyed in a people, doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him & himself; one defends one’s opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like to a coward, to not thinking about them at all. Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude. Not only does it then happen that they allow their freedom to be taken away, but often they give it over.

We are not only witnessing, but experiencing this very event of freedom being taken away as the Progressive Left increases the size and scope of government.

The UCSSB statement invokes the founding principle of our nation, the freedom of religion, but there is far more at stake regarding the future of the nation. Tocqueville saw that freedom and religion provided a basis for living and governing one’s private and public life. Successfully combined, they also meet the challenges presented by the worst features of equality and democracy. If freedom is lost, then the existence of religion is called into question; if religion is lost, then the perpetuation of freedom is called into question.

Tocqueville offers a candid assessment of the chances of one surviving without the other. “As for me,” he wrote, “I doubt that man can ever support a complete religious independence and an entire political freedom at once; and I am brought to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.” The subversion by the Left not only imperils freedom of religion, but the exercise of all freedoms that we hold dear.