

Islam:

In his approach to the religious phenomenon, Tocqueville was interested essentially in three religions: Christianity, mainly in the form of Catholicism; Hinduism, at the time he envisaged writing a work on the colonization of India by the English; and Islam, because it is the religion of the Algerians and it is important to know its characteristics at the moment when France is undertaking the colonization of the country. In June and September 1837, he published two letters on Algeria in *La Presse de Seine-et-Oise*; as early as March 1838, he read and annotated the Quran in order to attempt to understand the spirit and letter of Islam, conscious of the necessity, for one undertaking to colonize a Muslim country, to know the foundations of this religion, notably the ties uniting it to the societal and the political. There existed at that moment a current of sympathy toward Islam in circles close to him, but he insisted on forming his own opinion and began by trying to identify the characteristic elements of the Muslim religion. He thus wrote for himself *Notes on Islam* in 1839-1840, in which he highlighted the interactions between the political and the religious.

Due to its historical, geographical, and social origins, Islam, a religion of pastoralists, could only have a worship and practices as simple as possible, comprising very few rituals and no true priestly body. But the greatest weakness of this religion, closely linked to a bellicose practice both of tribes toward one another and vis-à-vis infidels, lies in the confusion of different "orders," which has the consequence of freezing Muslim society, forbidding it access to modernity, and dragging it toward ineluctable decadence:

"Mohammed preached his religion to people who were little advanced, nomadic, and warlike; this religion itself had war as its goal; hence the small number of practices and the simplicity of worship. (...) Since worship was almost nil, the priest was little needed. But there is a more powerful reason to explain the almost complete absence of a regular priesthood among Muslims (...) Mohammedanism is the religion that has most completely confused and intermingled the two powers; so that the high priest is necessarily the prince, and the prince the high priest, and all acts of civil and political life are regulated more or less by religious law. (...) This concentration and this confusion established by Mohammed between the two powers (...) was the primary cause of the despotism and above all of the social immobility that has, almost always, characterized Muslim nations and which finally makes them all succumb before nations that have embraced the contrary system."

On March 21, 1838, he wrote to Kergorlay: "I am reading the life of Mohammed and the Quran. This latter reading is one of the most patience-trying and instructive things imaginable because the eye easily discovers there, by looking very closely, all the threads by which the prophet held and still holds his followers. (...) I do not conceive how Lamoricière could have said that that book was an improvement on the Gospel."

And after having considered that this religion was better, all things considered, than polytheism, he ends by affirming that: "Mohammed exercised an immense power over the human species which I believe, all things considered, to have been more harmful than salutary."

He passes an identical judgment when addressing Gobineau, who confesses to him: "I was formerly in love [with Islamism] and a very good Muslim," even while he severely criticizes, at that time (1843), Christianity, which he considers a mediocre syncretism of ancient moralities.

One year later, he is even more explicit in a letter to his friend Richard Milnes, an English politician and man of letters whom he met in Paris in 1840: "You seem to me only, like Lamartine, to have returned from the Orient a little more Muslim than is fitting. I do not know why, these days, several distinguished minds show this tendency. For my part, I have felt effects quite to the contrary from my contact with Islamism (you know that through Algeria we touch upon the institutions of Mohammed every day). As I have known this religion better, I have better understood that it is above all from it that the decadence stems which is increasingly affecting the Muslim world before our eyes. Even if Mohammed had committed only the fault of intimately joining a body of civil and political institutions to a religious belief, in such a way as to impose immobility on the former, which is in the nature of the Saudis [sic], that would have been enough to doom his followers, in a given time, first to inferiority and then to inevitable ruin. The greatness and holiness of Christianity is, on the contrary, to have undertaken to reign only in the natural sphere of religions, leaving all the rest to the free movements of the human spirit."

On the other hand, Tocqueville affirms that, to have a chance of succeeding in colonization, one must absolutely respect the practice of Islam by not imposing on the Algerians obligations that violate their habits and beliefs: "Twice the doctor's visit was imposed on the Muslims... and twice withdrawn upon their complaint (the Arabs said that freedom of conscience had been assured to them and that this freedom was violated by the visits in question). [...] Finally, says the report with very imbecilic joy, 'the walled houses of the Moors are opening before the doctor.' There is a fine triumph!"

France must help the Muslims to maintain and develop their schools, ensure that they can apply their law and that they can practice their religion—even if he judges Islam severely—this is, Tocqueville judges, the only way to avoid explosions of fanaticism: "What we owe them at all times is a good government. We mean, by these words, a power that directs them, not only in the direction of our interest, but in the direction of theirs (...) Doubtless, it would be as dangerous as it would be useless to wish to suggest to them our mores, our ideas, our customs. It is not onto the path of our European civilization that we must push them for the present. [...] Individual property, industry, sedentary dwelling have nothing contrary to the religion of Mohammed. Arabs have known or know these things elsewhere; they are appreciated and enjoyed by some of them in Algeria itself. Why should we despair of making them familiar to the greatest number? [...] Let us not force the natives to come to our schools, but let us help them to rebuild theirs, to multiply those who teach, to train men of faith and men of religion, which Muslim civilization can no more do without than ours."

By acting thus, by giving back to the Muslims the money from their pious foundations instead of seizing it under the pretext of managing it, by helping them to rebuild their schools, by renouncing the seizure of mosques, by organizing a double ownership of the territory, it would be possible, he thinks, to bring the two peoples living together closer, and to create little by little a community of destiny. Finally, he underscores the ambivalent nature of Islam, which draws a magic circle around the individual, encloses him in his beliefs and religious obligations, at the same time as it frees him for all the rest:

"The religious passions that the Quran inspires are, it is said, hostile to us, and it is good to let them die out in superstition and ignorance, for lack of legal scholars and priests. It would be committing a great imprudence to attempt this. When religious passions exist in a people, they always find men who undertake to take advantage of them and lead them. Let the natural and regular interpreters of religion disappear, you will not suppress religious passions, you will only

hand over their discipline to madmen or impostors. We know today that it is fanatical beggars, belonging to secret associations, a species of irregular and ignorant clergy, who inflamed the spirit of the populations in the last insurrection, and brought about the war."