

## The Quran:

As early as the first *Democracy* in 1835, Tocqueville took a keen interest in the Muslim religion, which he subsequently mentions both in his texts on Algeria and in his correspondence with Gobineau. He wrote to the latter on October 22, 1843: "I have studied the Quran a great deal, especially because of our position vis-à-vis the Muslim populations in Algeria and throughout the Orient." There exists in the chateau's library a work: *The Quran, translated from the Arabic, accompanied by notes and preceded by an Abridgment of the life of Mohammed drawn from the most esteemed Oriental writers*. On May 24, 1841, visiting a college in Algiers, he inquired of a young Arabist professor whether a good translation of the Quran existed; the answer was negative, and the young man added: "The Quran is, to tell the truth, a collection of orders of the day and proclamations of which one understands nothing if the small facts that motivated them are not explained. The Quran is the source of the laws, ideas, and mores of this entire Muslim population with which we are dealing."

As for Tocqueville's own judgment, it is severe; he shared it with his cousin Louis de Kergorlay on March 21, 1838:

"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. That reading is a complete course in prophetic art and I strongly urge you to undertake it. I do not conceive how Lamoricière could have said that that book was an improvement on the Gospel. There is no comparison whatsoever to be made in my opinion, and I find that reading it alone indicates marvelously the different destinies of Muslims and Christians. The Quran seems to me to be but a rather skillful compromise between materialism and spiritualism. Mohammed made concessions, as they say, to the grossest human passions in order to be able to instill with them a certain number of very refined notions so that, the former maintaining the latter, humanity might walk tolerably, suspended between heaven and earth. That is the philosophical and disinterested view of the Quran; as for the selfish part, it is even more visible. The doctrine that faith saves, that the first of all religious duties is to obey the prophet blindly; that holy war is the first of all good works..., all these doctrines whose practical result is evident are found on every page and almost in every word of the Quran. The violent and sensual tendencies of the Quran strike the eye so much that I do not conceive how they escape a man of good sense. The Quran is an improvement on polytheism in that it contains clearer and truer notions of divinity and that it embraces with a more extended and clearer view certain general duties of humanity. But it inflames passions and in this respect I do not know if it has not done more harm to men than polytheism, which, being unified neither by its doctrine nor by its priesthood, never held souls very closely and left them to take flight quite freely. Whereas Mohammed exercised an immense power over the human species which I believe, all things considered, to have been more harmful than salutary."

But he made the effort to read the work pen in hand and to take notes, and doubtless without true *a priori* bias at the start, insofar as there were in his entourage a certain number of people whom he esteemed and who considered the Quran and Islam with benevolence.