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Pentecost 1794: Robespierre's Religious Vision and the Fulfillment of Time

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Après les flots de sang, vous savez quoi? Je vous le donne en cent, en mille, en cent mille: l'Être Suprême! Ne riez pas, c'est le nom regonflé de la Chimère, on nous a changé la marionnette d'habits . . . Ah, Lumières, Lumières, n'étiez-vous donc que la préparation des Ténèbres?

—Philippe Sollers¹

Publications on the religious history of the French Revolution were in vogue during the second half of the nineteenth century.² Several important essays published then are still regarded as landmarks for this topic, including those by Edgar Quinet (*Le christianisme et la Révolution française*, 1845), François-Alphonse Aulard (*Le Culte de la Raison et le Culte de l'Être Suprême*, 1892), and Albert Mathiez (*Les origines des cultes révolutionnaires*, 1904). After this initial wave of interest, the religious paradigm of the French Revolution disappeared from scholarly discussions for more than half a century.

1. *Sade contre l'Être Suprême* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 62, 69.

2. In his introduction to *Conscience religieuse en Révolution* (Paris: Éditions Picard, 1969), Bernard Plongeron presents the major developments of this research and notices new trends as of 1955.

Not until the 1970s do we see a revival of interest in the topic, with the production of a significant amount of studies in a short period. In 1990, just after the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, Claude Langlois reviewed ninety French titles dedicated to the relationship between religion and the French Revolution that had been published during the late 1980s.³

This recent scholarship is traditionally divided into two groups: essays written by secular historians and essays written by historians who belong to the Catholic Church. The latter often express an antirevolutionary view, focusing on the violence perpetrated during the French Revolution against the church, its members, and its representatives; they are generally not interested in presenting a constructive critique of the revolutionary religious paradigm. In response, since the 1990s, as Langlois notes, the so-called secular approach has grown in popularity among historians and has slowly superseded the voice of confessional historians, claiming to formulate a more scientific understanding of the French Revolution and its religious tenets.

A discussion of the mere opposition between these two approaches, however, does not seem entirely productive. The present article seeks to reconcile both discourses and suggests points of encounter between historical and theological perspectives that can illuminate the complex relationship between religion and the French Revolution. Due to limited space, I have chosen to focus my analysis on one of the most significant moments of the French Revolution and its religious paradigm: the Festival of the Supreme Being orchestrated by Robespierre in June 1794. The Festival of the Supreme Being plays a decisive yet paradoxical role in the development of the revolutionary religious paradigm; often seen as its apogee, it marks, at the same time, the last manifestation of this new religion.⁴

When read in the larger context of the Revolution and its ideology, scholars agree on the festival's symbolic power for the entire Revolution, delivering a strong message of cohesion and renewal. Aulard links it to Robespierre's deep mysticism; Mathiez reads it as the perfect synthesis

3. Claude Langlois, "Religion et Révolution: bibliographie critique," *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 71, no. 1 (1990): 189–204.

4. Robespierre was executed on July 28, 1794.

between the god of the philosophers and the god of the church. Frank Tallett, in his 1999 study on Robespierre's religion,⁵ sees in it Robespierre's unique opportunity to teach the value of the republican virtues; Christopher Dawson develops similar views in *The Gods of the Revolution*.⁶ Mona Ozouf, in her 1976 study of the revolutionary festivals,⁷ reads it as the perfect ritual of regeneration and renewal. Finally, Marie-Hélène Huet, in her article on the representation of the sublime during the French Revolution, analyzes the Festival of the Supreme Being as the palimpsest of all the other revolutionary festivals, particularly the Festival of Reason celebrated in November 1793, and situates it as the culmination of all revolutionary festivals.⁸

Among all those interpretations, however, no one addresses the fact that the Festival of the Supreme Being was celebrated on the official date of the Christian Feast of Pentecost, June 8, 1794. The surprising overlap between one of the most important revolutionary festivals and the Christian liturgical calendar offers the opportunity to investigate the relationship between the Revolution and its religious claims in new ways. Expanding on Huet's reading of the Festival of the Supreme Being as the palimpsest of the Festival of Reason, I suggest that the Festival of the Supreme Being cannot be fully understood without uncovering another palimpsest: the Christian Feast of Pentecost. This overlap not only renews our understanding of the Festival of the Supreme Being and its ideological function but sheds a new light, as I argue, on the overall religious revolutionary paradigm.

Scholars who study the religious history of the revolutionary period generally recognize two distinct phases of dechristianization in France

5. Frank Tallett, "Robespierre and Religion," in *Robespierre*, ed. Colin Haydon and William Doyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 92–108.

6. Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of the Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1972).

7. Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire, 1789–1799* (Paris: Gallimard/NRF, 1976).

8. Marie-Hélène Huet, "Le Sacre du Printemps: Essai sur le sublime et la Terreur," *MLN* 103, no. 4 (September 1988): 783. A few years after the publication of the original French version, Huet published an English version of her essay: "The Revolutionary Sublime," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 51–64. Ruth Scurr, in her biography of Robespierre, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), reads the entire history of the French Revolution as "an extraordinary palimpsest" (273).

during the eighteenth century. Nigel Aston provides a helpful definition of these two phases:

At risk of over-simplification, it may be said that there are basically two ways in which the term "dechristianisation" can be deployed. The first is its use to describe the deliberate attempt by the First Republic from 1792 to 1794 to use the resources of the state to extirpate Christianity and replace it as the dominant cultural mode of French society with a new frame of references springing directly from the Revolution itself. The second meaning of the word characterises the longer-term trends that suggest the gradual detachment during the eighteenth century of a growing number of the French population from (Catholic) Christianity. Scholars who have taken up this second, more diffuse definition tend to argue that the official dismantling of Christian culture in 1792–4 was facilitated at grass-roots level by men and women who already stood at a remove to the historic faith.⁹

Even if this twofold understanding of dechristianization¹⁰ does not entirely account for the complexity of the religious history of eighteenth-century France, it helps us situate the Festival of the Supreme Being in a continuum that slowly and profoundly transforms the religious references in France during that period from a Christian cultural paradigm to a new revolutionary understanding of time, culture, and history. As a palimpsest of the Christian Feast of Pentecost, the Festival of the Supreme Being is to be read as the marker of a radical change of times: it inaugurates a new era in which the old Christian understanding of history and salvation is fulfilled and consecrated by the Revolution.

My argument is divided into three parts: first a brief presentation of the festival itself that enumerates its main elements; second, a

9. Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780–1804* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 259. Similar views can be found in Michel Vovelle, *La Révolution contre l'Église: de la raison à l'Être Suprême* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2001), 14–17; and Noah Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 116–22.

10. As Bernard Plongeron reminds us, the neologism "dechristianization" initially provoked many negative reactions; see Plongeron, *Conscience religieuse*, 1200.

theological and biblical analysis of the festival explaining the Christian references that shaped it; and, third, a presentation of Gérard Genette's definition of "palimpsest" that helps articulate more specifically the use of Christian references in the revolutionary religious paradigm.

Description of the Festival of the Supreme Being

We possess descriptions of the Festival of the Supreme Being from a few archival documents (available in French) that contain the details of the festival. On May 7, 1794, in front of the Comité de Salut publique, Robespierre promulgated the dates of the various revolutionary festivals. The Festival of the Supreme Being was scheduled for June 8, 1794, and two hundred thousand pamphlets were immediately printed and sent throughout France to announce the date.

The painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), official stage director of the revolutionary festivals, was given one month to plan the Festival of the Supreme Being. He worked closely with three other artists: Théodore Desorgues (1763–1808) wrote the lyrics of the hymns, and François-Joseph Gossec (1734–1829) and Étienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763–1817) composed the music. The day before the actual celebration, David presented a detailed program of the festivities to the National Assembly. This historical document indicates that a general call will be heard in Paris at dawn and a procession will form to go to the National Garden (known today as the Jardin des Tuileries) for the first half of the celebration. The following description then is provided:

Lorsque toutes les sections seront arrivées au Jardin National, une députation ira annoncer à la Convention que tout est préparé pour célébrer la fête de la Divinité.

La Convention Nationale descendra par le balcon du pavillon de l'Unité, sur l'amphithéâtre adossé audit pavillon.

Le Président, placé à la tribune, fera sentir au peuple les motifs qui ont déterminé cette fête solennelle [sic] et l'invitera à honorer l'auteur de la nature.

Après ce discours, on exécutera une symphonie ; pendant ce temps, le Président s'approchera d'un monument élevé sur le bassin circulaire et représentant le monstre de l'Athéisme.

Du milieu de ce monument, incendié par le Président, apparaîtra la Sagesse.

Après cette cérémonie, le Président remontera à la tribune et parlera de nouveau au peuple, qui lui répondra par des chants et des cris d'allégresse.

(When each group has arrived at the National Garden, a delegation will tell the members of the Convention that everything is ready for the celebration of the Divine Being.

The members of the Convention will then come to the balcony of the Pavilion of Unity. . . .

The President, at the tribune, will impress upon the people the meaning of this solemn festival [*sic*] and will invite the audience to honor the maker of nature.

After this speech, the orchestra will play a symphony while the President reaches a monument sets on the central fountain representing the monster of Atheism.

From the middle of this monument, set on fire by the President, will appear Wisdom.

After this ceremony, the President will go back to the tribune and speak again while the people will cheer him with songs and joyful cries.)

The Festival of the Supreme Being was organized into two distinct parts. The first took place in the National Garden, whereas the second, which was longer and more elaborate, was held on the Field of the Reunion (known today as Champ de Mars), where an artificial mountain had been built:

La Représentation Nationale occupera la partie la plus élevée de la montagne et les musiciens se placeront sur le milieu. . . .

Aussitôt que tout sera rangé . . . , le corps de musique exécutera un hymne à la Divinité.

Après cet hymne, on exécutera une grande symphonie.

Cette symphonie finie, les vieillards et les enfants, qui seront sur la montagne, chanteront une première strophe sur l'air des Marseillais, et jureront ensemble de ne poser les armes qu'après avoir anéanti les ennemis de la République.

Tous les hommes répandus dans le Champ de la Réunion répèteront en chœur le refrain.

Les mères de famille et les jeunes filles placées sur la montagne chanteront une seconde strophe ; celles-ci prometttront de n'épouser que les

Citoyens qui auront servi la patrie et les mères remercieront l'Être Suprême de leur fécondité.

Toutes les femmes répandues dans le Champ de la Réunion répèteront ensemble le refrain.

La troisième et dernière strophe sera chantée par tout ce qui sera sur la montagne. . . .

Le Peuple entier répètera en chœur le dernier refrain. . . .

Après la dernière strophe, une décharge générale d'artillerie, interprète de la vengeance nationale, se fera entendre ; et tous les Français, confondant leurs sentiments dans un embrasement fraternel, termineront la fête en faisant retentir les airs du cri général : "Vive la République!"¹¹

(The National Representatives will stand on the highest point of the mountain and the musicians will stay in the middle of the slope. . . .

As soon as everything is in place . . . , the orchestra will play a hymn to the Divine Being.

After this hymn, a grandiose symphony will be played.

When the symphony is performed, old and young, who will be standing on the mountain as well, will sing the first stanza of the Marseillaise, and swear together not to give up arms before defeating the enemies of the Republic.

Every man standing down in the Field of the Reunion will repeat the refrain.

11. The entire document is reproduced by Marie-Louise Biver, *Fêtes révolutionnaires* (Paris: PUF, 1979), 192–98.

Mother and young daughters, standing on the mountain will sing a second stanza; the latter will promise to marry only the Citizens who have served their country while the former will give thanks to the Supreme Being for their fertility.

Every woman in the Field of the Reunion will repeat the refrain.

The third and last stanza will be sung by the entire group standing on the mountain. . . .

The People, all united, will repeat the last refrain. . . .

After the last stanza, a general firing will be heard, sound of the national revenge; and every French person, sharing his/her feelings of fraternity, will end the festival cheering and screaming, "Long live the Republic!")

These two phases indicate an important ideological choice: the first act was devoted to the destruction of the representation of Atheism in order to unveil in its place the figure of Wisdom; the second act celebrated the Supreme Being and the glory of the French Republic protected and chosen by divinity.

In 1831, nearly forty years after the festival, Charles Nodier (1780–1844) wrote what has become one of the most famous descriptions of it:

Jamais un jour d'été ne s'était levé plus pur sur notre horizon. Je n'ai trouvé que longtemps après, au midi et au levant de l'Europe, cette transparence de firmament à travers laquelle le regard semblait pénétrer d'autres cieux. Le peuple y voyait du miracle, et s'imaginait qu'il y avait, dans cette magnificence inaccoutumée du ciel et du soleil, un gage certain de la réconciliation de Dieu avec la France.¹²

(Never did we see a purer summer day on our horizon. I saw only years later, in the South and East of Europe, similar transparency in the sky inviting my gaze to penetrate other dimensions. The people believed then in a miracle, and thought that there was, in this unusual beauty of the sky and the sun, the ultimate proof that God was reconciled with France.)

12. See Huet, "Le Sacre du Printemps", 783.

The historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874) spoke of the hope the festival represented for the people, as the guillotine had been dismantled for the occasion:

Nulle fête n'excita jamais une si douce attente, nulle ne fut jamais célébrée avec tant de joie. La guillotine disparut, le 19 prairial au soir. On crut que c'était pour toujours.¹³

(No other festival had been so exciting, no other celebrated with so much joy. The guillotine had been removed in the evening of the 19th of Prairial. Everybody believed it was forever.)

This hope was betrayed, as history tells us, and the Festival of the Supreme Being was but a brief reprieve in the terror instilled by Robespierre. The festival, however, was quickly regarded as a unique episode in the Revolution and the most remarkable of its public ceremonies. Grasping the specificity of this episode requires a close reading of its context and Christian undertone as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Robespierre's Pentecost

As stated earlier, June 8, 1794, coincided with the Christian Feast of Pentecost. If historians occasionally mention it,¹⁴ they fail to incorporate this detail into a broader analysis of the festival and often dismiss it as mere coincidence.¹⁵ To my knowledge, only Aulard comments on the date and the Feast of Pentecost, stating:

On ne sait si Robespierre avait prémédité cette coïncidence, mais elle fut très remarquée. Si certains catholiques en furent

13. Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, Tome 9 (Paris: Alphonse Demerre, 1888), 204.

14. For instance, see Marie-Louise Biver, *Fêtes révolutionnaires*, 93; or Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe c.1750–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214.

15. For instance, see Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 326; and Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France*, 271.

contristés comme d'un sacrilège, d'autres y virent un hommage rendu à l'ancienne religion.¹⁶

(We don't know whether or not Robespierre had premeditated this coincidence, but it was certainly widely noticed. If some Catholics were offended by this sacrilege, others took it as a way of honoring the old religion.)

If this coincidence might have been widely noticed at the time, it is today ignored by most scholars and authors writing on the Festival of the Supreme Being. It seems, however, quite unlikely that the overlap between the Gregorian and Republican calendars had been missed by Robespierre, considering his attention to detail in the preparation of the festival. Moreover, theologically and biblically this choice illuminates the liturgical power of the festival. In order to fully appreciate the importance of this overlap, it is essential to reread the biblical narrative of Pentecost in Acts 2:1–41.

Luke, the author of Acts, begins his account of the life of the early church by telling the story of the Holy Spirit descending on the apostles. Following Jesus's command, the apostles are gathered in Jerusalem after Easter. Before departing, Jesus promises them the coming of the Holy Spirit and asks them to wait for it in Jerusalem. Luke describes this event with imagery of thunder and fire: a loud noise is heard, and tongues of fire descend from the sky and touch each apostle. Filled with the Spirit, the apostles preach in other languages; each person in the crowd can hear the apostles' words in his or her own language. When the crowd expresses wonder and skepticism, Peter responds with a long discourse, the first in the Book of Acts. The biblical narrative makes two important theological points that I wish to briefly explore: (1) the Christian Pentecost is built on the meaning of the Jewish Pentecost and (2) the experience of the apostles that day structures a fundamental shift in history.¹⁷

16. François-Alphonse Aulard, *Le culte de la Raison et le culte de l'Être Suprême* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1892), 340.

17. For detailed commentaries on the book of Acts, see Robert C. Tannhill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); and Ulrich Wilckens, "Interpreting Luke-Acts in a Period of Existentialist Theology," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. by Leander E. Keck (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980), 60–83.

In the Jewish tradition, the Feast of Pentecost commemorates the gift of the Law on Mount Sinai and the establishment of the covenant between God and his/her people. As such, Pentecost is at the heart of the election of Israel as the chosen people. Luke immediately announces the reference to the Jewish Feast of Pentecost in Acts 2:1 ("when the day of Pentecost had come . . .")¹⁸ and thus aligns his narrative in the history of the covenant. In the actual description of the Holy Spirit's descent, Luke uses a terminology inspired by both the appearance of God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16–19) and Jesus's baptism (Luke 3:21–22), blending the two episodes. The theology of this narrative is then very deliberate: a new covenant is about to be established between God and his/her people, while the apostles, who are about to announce it to the world, are invested of an authority similar to the authority granted to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Representatives of every known nation are present in Jerusalem that day to witness the events; their presence opens the proclamation of the new covenant to the entire world (Acts 1:8). By extension, the text suggests that the new covenant is not restricted to Israel only but includes all nations on earth. The new covenant is resolutely universal.

After the coming of the Spirit, Peter speaks to the crowd and explains the meaning and importance of this moment. His discourse is loaded with a vocabulary that evokes the biblical theme of fulfillment. Peter borrows from the prophet Joel, emphasizing the eschatological tone of his words: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17–21). This very moment, Peter reminds his audience, is the beginning of a new era in which salvation is offered to all. After reminding the people of God's miraculous power (against those who wanted to kill him) manifested in Jesus's resurrection, Peter calls everyone to repent and receive the Spirit: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Peter's speech not only signals the beginning of the new era but invites those who are present to enter it and take part in the new covenant.

18. All biblical quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Keeping in mind that the Festival of the Supreme Being was celebrated on the very day of the Christian Feast of Pentecost in 1794, the themes identified in the biblical narrative of Pentecost resonate deeply with some elements of the festival, particularly Robespierre's rhetoric. In the first phase of the festival, Robespierre speaks to the crowd twice, before and after the destruction of the monument representing Atheism. The tone of his sermon is deeply inspired by eschatological imagery. Robespierre opens his harangue by acknowledging this unique occasion in which the French people at last celebrate the Supreme Being ("Il est enfin arrivé, le jour à jamais fortuné que le peuple français consacre à l'Être Suprême"). The rest of his discourse is centered on the notion of fulfillment: God's divine plan has led the world from the beginnings of time to this very moment when the republican virtues are to be manifested eternally for all nations ("pour tous les siècles et pour tous les peuples"). France becomes, in this divine plan, the chosen people, elected by the Supreme Being, and she is now invested with the responsibility to combat false leaders and tyrants who oppose the Revolution. Those who sought to block this divine plan and annihilate the Supreme Being (such as those who tried to kill Jesus, according to Acts 2) have failed. Wisdom, in Robespierre's vision, receives a role identical to the one of the Spirit: she is the protector of the people and the Republic, granting them prosperity and success.

In short, Robespierre introduces in his sermon themes and imagery that closely echo Luke's narrative, especially Peter's discourse: the renewal of the covenant (here, between the Supreme Being and the French people), the end of those who opposed the coming of a new era, the protection of the Spirit/Wisdom, and the universality of salvation:¹⁹

Français républicains, c'est à vous de purifier la terre qu'ils ont souillée, et d'y rappeler la justice qu'ils en ont bannie. La liberté et la vertu sont sorties ensemble du sein de la divinité, l'une ne peut séjourner sans l'autre parmi les hommes. Peuple généreux, veux-tu triompher de tous tes ennemis? Pratique la justice et

19. Both of those speeches are reprinted at the end of the article by Jean Deprun titled "Les 'noms divins' dans deux discours de Robespierre," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 44, no. 208 (April-June 1972), 161-80.

rends à la divinité le seul culte digne d'elle. Peuple, livrons-nous aujourd'hui, sous ses auspices, aux transports d'une pure allégresse.

Homme qui que tu sois, tu peux concevoir encore de hautes pensées de toi-même; tu peux lier ta vie passagère à Dieu même et à l'immortalité. Que la nature reprenne donc tout son éclat, et la Sagesse tout son empire; l'Être suprême n'est point anéanti.

(French Republicans, you are the ones to purify the earth soiled by them and to call back justice. Freedom and virtue are born of the Divinity, one cannot dwell among human beings without the other. Generous people, do you want to triumph over your enemies? Practice justice and respectfully worship the Divinity. Today, people, let's put ourselves under its protection and celebrate the Divinity with joy.

Man, whoever you are, you can conceive high regards for yourself; you can attach your passing life to God and immortality. May nature finds its brilliance and Wisdom its reign; the Supreme Being is not destroyed.)

Frank Tallett, in his essay on Robespierre's religious views, analyzes documents written by Robespierre between 1789 and 1794; his reading allows him to identify Robespierre's creed²⁰ around three elements: the divine election of the French people, an apocalyptic vision of history, and the essential role of the Revolution in renewing divine moral values. Robespierre's tone during the Festival of the Supreme Being is therefore entirely consistent with his longstanding beliefs. However, the implicit reference to the Christian Feast of Pentecost situates Robespierre's vision in a broader frame in which France adopts the role of the first Christian church and, by extension, Robespierre adopts Peter's role. In so doing, Robespierre defines the revolutionary religious paradigm as the renewal of the old Christian paradigm in several ways.²¹

20. Tallett, "Robespierre and Religion," 93.

21. It might be possible to add a third element, but the constraint of space does not allow me to expand on this possibility. Between November 1789 and October 1791, strong antirevolutionary rhetoric was published in the journal *Les Actes des Apôtres*

By indirectly taking Peter's role, Robespierre draws a parallel between his authority and Peter's authority (Peter is traditionally regarded as the church's cornerstone and the first bishop of Rome). In that sense, Robespierre inserts himself in the apostolic succession, with the Festival of the Supreme Being celebrating his enthronement. In her discussion of the festival, Ozouf wonders if Robespierre at that moment was deliberately strategic or genuinely religious.²² Reading the festival through the lens of the Feast of Pentecost suggests that Ozouf's question ultimately offers a false dichotomy—both perspectives are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, planning the Festival of the Supreme Being on the very date of the Feast of Pentecost reveals Robespierre's mastery of religious representations and a clear strategy to articulate his new religious paradigm on the old one, thus rooting it in common cultural references. At the same time, Robespierre takes on a pontifical role, presenting himself as the head of the revolutionary church; such a function reinforces for the believer the continuity between the old and the new paradigms. In short, Robespierre indicates a clear interest in building his new religious paradigm on the old one, forcing his audience to interpret it in light of Christian cultural references. In this context, the second stage of dechristianization, often read as purely destructive, can be seen as a reinterpretation of the old paradigm rather than a pure destruction of it.²³

The Festival as Palimpsest

In her essay, Huet mentions that on July 1, 1794, less than a month after the Festival of the Supreme Being, a decree was promulgated prohibiting any theatrical representation of the festival.²⁴ This decree is unique in the history of the revolutionary festivals and, according to

(*Acts of the Apostles*), directed by Jean-Gabriel Peltier (1760–1825); Robespierre strongly condemned the journal and its political views. Robespierre's takeover of Pentecost and his allusion to the biblical narrative may fit in this controversy as well.

22. Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire*, 126.

23. Jean Deprun and Frank Tallett independently recognize the essential role Christian terminology plays in Robespierre's speeches.

24. Huet, "Le Sacre du Printemps," 784.

Huet, signals the particularity of the festival as a religious event. Huet lists two characteristics that set it aside: first, unlike theater performances, the festival does not tolerate viewers but requires participants; second, unlike the other revolutionary festivals, this festival does not tolerate any visual representation of the Supreme Being (only Atheism and Wisdom are represented). Based on these two characteristics, Huet reads the Festival of the Supreme Being as the achievement of the revolutionary religious paradigm. This religious paradigm is built, Huet insists, in stages and overlays, with one new concept added to an old one. However, in this analysis of the various layers of the Festival of the Supreme Being, Huet does not discuss the possibility and interest of identifying Judeo-Christian elements in this process. As suggested by the previous paragraphs, the rewriting process does not start with the first revolutionary festival, as Huet tends to suggest, but takes root in a strong Christian cultural environment that marks French history. The Festival of the Supreme Being may be the palimpsest of the Festival of Reason, as Huet describes it, but more profoundly it needs to be read as the palimpsest of the Christian Feast of Pentecost (itself a palimpsest of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost). If such is the case, the revolutionary religion cannot be fully understood outside of its Christian references. This conclusion sheds a new light on the concept of dechristianization.

In his famous study *Palimpsestes*,²⁵ Gérard Genette presents and analyzes diverse forms of hypertextuality. This category, created by Genette, defines the relationship between a text A (hypotext) and a text B (hypertext) that is grafted on A. In the relationship from B to A, Genette distinguishes two relational modes, transformation and imitation, and three registers, playful, satirical, and serious. The result is a series of six different possibilities of rewriting or recomposing text A through text B (see figure 1). The following is a reproduction of Genette's table adapted from the French original:²⁶

25. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1992).

26. Ibid., 43.

Register Relation	Playful	Satirical	Serious
Transformation	Parody	Travesty	Transposition
Imitation	Pastiche	Caricature	Plagiarism

Figure 1. Genette's table

The category of hypertextuality broadens the concept of palimpsest and, in our case, allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Festival of the Supreme Being and the Christian Feast of Pentecost. At first glance, one may be tempted to classify the Festival of the Supreme Being under "satirical," but the intrinsic link between the festival and Pentecost forces us to place it under "serious" instead. Furthermore, the festival does not actually imitate Pentecost and so must be read as a transposition, the second possibility, according to Genette's classification, in this column. For Genette, transposition is the most important "pratiques hypertextuelles";²⁷ it possesses the largest array of devices and manifests itself under multiple forms (not just literary or textual forms). In a transposition, Genette adds, the hypertext establishes a unique relationship with its hypotext, using it as a real source of artistic inspiration, thus often making it essential to uncover the hypotext in order to interpret the hypertext.

Applied to the Festival of the Supreme Being, this interpretative key suggests that the biblical narrative of Pentecost plays a crucial role in the construction of the festival. Robespierre's final religious festival cannot be isolated from its broader religious cultural context, nor can it be univocally associated with the destructive second phase of dechristianization. In this light, Robespierre seems much more concerned by a full and intelligent appropriation of the Christian paradigm and the affirmation of the revolutionary model as the actual fulfillment of Christian promises.

A recent study by Noah Shusterman, *Religion and Politics of Time*, interprets the major events of the French Revolution through the lens of time and the imposition of the revolutionary calendar. Shusterman

27. Ibid., 291.

demonstrates how the implementation of a revolutionary calendar contributes to the effective transfer of power from the Catholic Church to the revolutionary government. Based on his observations, the overlap between the Festival of the Supreme Being and the Christian Feast of Pentecost, one of the most striking examples of the revolutionary calendar replacing the Gregorian calendar, fully participates in this shift and ultimately realizes it. The festival inaugurates a new era in which the French Revolution becomes the depository of divine salvation in perfect continuity with biblical times. The overlap of dates and calendars marks the convergence between the old and the new eras, symbolically indicating the actual turning point of time: June 8, 1794, is irrevocably transformed into 20 Prairial An II.

Religious Historiography

As of the 1970s, when interest in the revolutionary religious paradigm reappeared in the work of historians, historical research on religious mentalities in eighteenth-century France focused on archival documents and pamphlet literature in order to reveal an image of the religious landscape of the time that was less polarized (see in particular the work of Michel Vovelle). Among others, Susan Desan has greatly contributed to this shift in the history of religion during the French Revolution. In an article on the relationship between Catholics and the revolutionaries, Desan challenges "the prevalent assumption [established at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries] that Catholics, almost inevitably adopted counterrevolutionary attitudes."²⁸ Analyzing petitions for the reinstitution of the Catholic mass written by French Catholic villagers after the fall of Robespierre, Desan notes that the rhetoric of those petitions is deeply informed by revolutionary ideology:

Paradoxically, the Revolution opened up surprising and unexpected possibilities for the laity in prerevolutionary regions of

28. Susan Desan, "Redefining Revolutionary Liberty: The Rhetoric of Religious Revival during the French Revolution," *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 1 (March 1988): 2.

France to find within the Revolution itself political techniques and ideology to aid their reestablishment of Catholicism.²⁹

Whereas revolutionaries sought to separate religious and political realms, postrevolutionary attitudes toward Catholicism show a more complex picture in which, as Desan's findings suggest, "religion and revolution might mix in unusual ways."³⁰ The overlap between the Festival of the Supreme Being and the Feast of Pentecost furthers Desan's conclusion and illustrates that the unusual mix between religion and revolution might have been inherent to the revolutionary ideology itself and Robespierre's vision in particular.

Desan's study challenges the assumption that Catholics unilaterally manifested antirevolutionary sentiment, yet it does not challenge the traditional understanding of revolutionary ideology as being strongly and unanimously anti-Christian. As Desan reminds us, "the revolutionary leadership had created a whole cultural system of revolutionary rituals, symbols, and language that aimed at replacing Christianity . . . the frame and underpinning of the monarchy," but it did not necessarily develop "a rhetoric of opposition"³¹ as she wants us to think. If, on one hand, Desan's study demonstrates that the postrevolutionary Catholic revival was to some extent inspired and motivated by revolutionary rhetoric, on the other hand, a reading of the Festival of the Supreme Being through the lens of Pentecost shows Robespierre's attempt at equating the revolutionary religious rhetoric and ideology with the fulfillment of Christian promises.

The historical focus on popular religious mentalities has tremendously modified our understanding of the religious landscape of pre- and postrevolutionary France; in return there might still be new elements to uncover in the revolutionary religious paradigm itself that would challenge our presuppositions regarding the interpretation of the dechristianization movement.

29. *Ibid.*, 26.

30. *Ibid.*, 27.

31. *Ibid.*, 4.