THE FRENCH ATTEMPT TO REPLACE CHRISTIANITY
WITH A NEW RELIGION

Prayer
Scripture: Psalm 14; II John 7-11
Hymn: 349 "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne" with "The Doxology"
(verse 4 of 333 "All Praise to Thee, My God, this Night")

French Naturalism with its atheism and materialism was a further development of Deism with its themes of reason and nature. At first it was largely a movement among the literary and philosophical elite. As it filtered down to the bourgeoisie of the Third Estate of France it produced the French Revolution. The product of the first phase of the French Revolution was Continental liberalism which was the demand for the end of the old regime of absolute monarchy and the special privileges of the nobility and clergy. It meant the end of feudalism and civil and fiscal equality. Continental liberalism meant "The Declaration of the Rights of Man." It included full religious liberty and liberty of conscience. It meant the end of all feudal dues, of the annates to the pope, the tithes to the clergy. Continental liberalism was the idea of popular sovereignty and government responsible to the people. It led to the confiscation of church lands, the closing of monasteries and nunneries, and the clergy were made dependent on the state by state paid salaries. The bishops were elected by the civil electorate. The dioceses were reduced from 139 to 83 to conform with the political divisions or departments. Instead of the papal system of control there was "The Civil Constitution of the Clergy," with all the clergy required to take the oath to support the Constitution.

This liberalism was made concrete in the report of May, 1790, made by the "comité ecclésiastique" which the Assembly had appointed in August 1789 to arrange church affairs in accordance with the new constitution of the state. The intent was to return to the discipline of the early church. Newly elected bishops would not receive consecration from the pope. They would be installed by the metropolitans of the new government. Only 5 of 135 bishops of France would accept the new arrangement.

The pope denounced such liberalism calling on all Roman Catholicism to support the traditions of absolutism, the inherited rights and privileges, and the traditional social classes. He denounced the so-called "Rights of Man" including the idea that law represented the will of the people, that religious opinions had any rights, that non-Roman Catholics should be tolerated, that non-Roman Catholics should have equal right to municipal, civil, and military offices. The pope denounced the idea of democratic government, the idea of popular sovereignty and the idea of government responsible to the people. The pope denounced the confiscation of church property and "the Civil Constitution of the Clergy," forbidding the clergy to take the oath to the Constitution. The pope denied the right of the French government to reorganize the church. Among the leaders of the French Revolution there was no
doubt that the pope was behind the alliance of foreign powers threatening to restore the old regime in France.

On October 30, 1790 the French cardinal and 29 bishops issued a manifesto that the civil power could not change the constitution of the church. When the Assembly replied by requiring all the clergy to take the oath to support the law and the constitution, in spite of the pope imploring the bishops and their clergy not to take the oath, three fifths of the clergy chose to support the state and took the oath. The pope declared that the appointment of new bishops by the civil government was invalid (1791). This led to a break in diplomatic relations between France and the Vatican. A strong antipapal reaction spread from Paris throughout the towns of France with their new revolutionary governments. The pope was burned in effigy. In August of 1791 the Assembly guaranteed freedom of worship but popular anti-Catholic passion was not to be restrained by law. Churches were closed to all but official worship. Clerics who had refused to take the oath were banished.

THE RISE OF THE NEW RELIGION OF NATIONALISM: THE GODDESS "LA PATRIE"

The product of the second phase of the Revolution began in 1792 was the attempt to replace Christianity with the religion of nationalism with "la patrie" (the native land or fatherland) as the goddess. Throughout the first phase of the Revolution French patriotism that would lead to the religion of nationalism had been growing. The religion of patriotism increasingly penetrated Roman Catholicism as well as Protestantism. The first celebration of the taking of the Bastille had a religious air. In the communes all over France the people assembled around open-air altars and took the oath to "la patrie". It was the covenanting of a religious community. Often the covenanting was preceded by a mass.

There was a growing secularization in which "la patrie" was substituted for the old religion. The Church of St. Genevieve was converted into a civil Pantheon to hold the ashes of Voltaire. In 1792 many houses did not do the usual decorating for the Corpus Christi procession in June, and shops stayed open. The Legislative Assembly did not participate as a body but members were permitted to take part as private individuals.

In the summer of 1793 in the provinces the new faith, the religion of patriotism, was consciously taking the place of the old religion. In August, 1793 libations were poured out to statues of "nature." The Roman Brutus who murdered the tyrant, Caesar, replaced the old saint, St. Blaise, in the Ille de France. In the homes of the Revolutionists statues of revolutionary heroes and martyrs such as Marat and Le Peletier replaced the traditional saints. Civil officers began publicly announcing their apostasy from Christianity and declaring allegiance to "la patrie." Bishop Gobel and eleven priests removed the cross and ring and put on the red cap of the Revolutionaires. Both Catholic priests and Protestant pastors who were members of the Convention discarded the symbols of Christianity and adopted the symbols of the
Revolution. Pastor Marron denounced Christian theology and dedicated four silver communion chalices to the new religion of "eternal and immortal principles of fact and morality." All over France clergymen were resigning from their church offices to join the new religion of patriotism. The Convention printed and circulated a speech by Chenier in which he praised the "one universal religion... the altar of our country, our mother and our deity."

A powerful impetus was given to the determination to wipe out Christianity by the revolts against the Convention and its Revolution in La Vendée that climaxed in the revolt in the spring of 1793. While the Convention was facing foreign invasion on the borders from the alliance of England, Germany, Austria, Holland, and Spain—an alliance encouraged by Pope Pius VI—also an alliance that included members of the French royal family and the exiled priests, in La Vendée nonjuring priests stirred the peasants to revolt against the Convention. The revolt was brutally crushed and was followed by a bitter reprisals and savage penalties. Nonjurors were rounded up and shipped to Guiana. Death was decreed for any priest who should be involved in any uprising. The proclaimed religious liberty was replaced by a strong determination to wipe out Christianity that resulted in a great persecution of the church in the late summer and fall of 1793. In the place of Christianity the Revolutionaires preached "the worship of Reason" which meant to them the worship of "la patrie"—it was a kind of revival of pagan tribalism.

In October, 1793 a special committee appointed by the Convention submitted a report on calendar revision that called for a Republican, anti-Christian calendar. All saints' days and Sundays were to be abolished as symbols of Christianity. Sunday work was to be required. The revisionists declared that a new era and a new year began on September 22, 1792, the day following the abolition of the monarchy, which was also the day of the autumnal equinox. The year was divided into twelve months of thirty days each; each month was divided into three ten-day periods called "décades." To make the new revolutionary year correspond with the solar year five additional days (six in leap years) were added and called "sans-culottides." The "sans-culottides" were dedicated to special revolutionary festivals dedicated to Virtue, Genius, Labor, Opinion, and Rewards. An entirely new nomenclature was given to the months to substitute "the truth of nature and the realities of reason for sacerdotal prestige and visions of ignorance." The autumn months were Vendémiaire, Brumaire, Primaire; the winter months Nivôse, Pluviôse, Ventôse; the spring months Germinal, Floréal, Prairial; the summer months Messidor, Thermidor, Fructidor. In an elaborate scheme the days of the year were named for "the true treasures of rural life." This new calendar was in official use in France until January 1, 1806.

One of the bulwarks of the anti-Christian movement was a new Committee on Public Instruction. To take the place of the parochial schools a new national system of education was organized that would propagate the new patriotic faith. No clergy nor nuns were to be appointed teachers.
The Paris Commune took the lead in converting churches into "temples of Reason." The "temples of Reason" were really "temples of nationalism." In the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris the statue of the Virgin was replaced by an actress dressed in blue. Chenier addressed a hymn to her:

Come holy liberty, inhabit this temple
Become the goddess of the French people.

The Paris Commune petitioned the Convention to have Notre Dame permanently converted to a "Temple of Reason." The whole ceremony was repeated with the President and Secretary of the Convention embracing the "Godess of liberty." Some two thousand towns of France followed the lead of Paris and converted their parish churches into "temples of reason." Many country communities followed their example. It is suspected that in Paris there was some cynical, blasphemous, sacrilegious playfulness in the ceremonies that was actually atheistic ridicule of all religion. Among the bourgeoisie in the provinces it was a fanatically sincere deism and patriotism. The provinces were taking the lead in the Revolution away from Paris. The Convention was swept along by the popular zeal.

As late as the winter of 1794 Catholic worship had continued in some private chapels. In the spring of 1794 the private chapels were closed. Priests were forced to unfrock themselves. Anti-Catholic demonstrations were common throughout France.

Robespierre and his followers in the Convention became alarmed at the excesses, fearing that they would turn many citizens against the Revolution. The Convention attempted to halt the dechristianization and to restore freedom of religious worship but the religion of patriotism continued to flourish and the churches remained closed.

When Robespierre and his Jacobins triumphed over all the opposing factions, Robespierre took the lead in trying to establish an official religion of virtue based on his understanding of Rosseau. He held it was the duty of the state to assume control of the souls of its citizens. On the 18th of Floréal, Year II of the Revolution (May 7, 1794) he gave his report on the relationship of moral ideas and revolutionary principles, outlining a national religion of virtue. It had a strong puritanical strain. It was to be free from degrading superstition and the corrupt influence of a priesthood. It had two positive articles of faith: belief in a Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul. Regular ceremonies were to be held on each décadi (tenth day of the decade with three in each month) in honor of various generous abstractions which were the virtues of the new religion: "Liberty and equality," "Filial piety," "the benefactors of humanity," "paternal devotion," and "modesty." These were intended to mold the character of the citizens. Each year would have special celebrations of the four great events of the Revolution: the capture of the Bastille, July 14, 1789; the deposition of the monarchy, August 10, 1792; the execution of the king, January 21, 1793; the Parisian insurrection that lead to the overthrow of the Girondins, May 31, 1793.

Robespierre formally inaugurated the new religion a month
later on the 20th of Prairial (June 8, 1794) in a great celebration in honor of the Supreme Being. It was held in the Tuileries gardens. He employed the greatest artists of his time to make the ceremonies as impressive as possible. Thousands of Parisians, the deputies of the Convention, and all public officials attended the ceremonies. Robespierre welcomed the assemblage and delivered a lengthy oration. To allegorically show the triumphant Wisdom destroying Atheism, Vice, and Folly he set fire to the statues representing these undesirable abstractions. From the ruins there emerged a lofty wooden statue of Wisdom. A mechanical defect in the arrangements resulted in the statues not burning cleanly and Wisdom was blackened by smoke. Robespierre was terribly disappointed and annoyed and the gay Parisians laughed heartily and irreverently.

Following the Fete of the Supreme Being the Reign of Terror reached its climax. Couthon proposed and the Contention passed a resolution that speeded up the working of the revolutionary tribunal. The accused were deprived of all legal defense. The charge "enemies of the people" was so vaguely defined that the death penalty was virtually mandatory for anyone accused. Any critic of the regime of Virtue was liable to punishment by death. Batches of prisoners were sent to Paris and "heads fell like slates from the roofs." Over 1,300 were guillotined in the six weeks between June 10 and July 27—two hundred more than in the fourteen preceding months. Robespierre fiercely defended the law as necessary for the good of the country. Robespierre was highly honored by his admirers as "the Incorruptible." He devoutly believed his cause was destined to triumph. He and his followers ardently preached the new gospel of the Supreme Being, Providence, immortality, rewards and punishments, and the sanctity of the social contract and the laws of the Republic. All subsidies for the old clergy and churches had been discontinued. The new Deism seemed triumphant.

THE THERMIDORIAN REACTION: THE FALL OF ROBESPIERRE AND THE REVIVAL OF CATHOLICISM

The victory of the French army at Fleurus on June 24, 1794 opened the way for the conquest of the Austrian Netherlands, removing the threat on the French frontier. The Revolution had failed to significantly improve the economic lot of the proletariat and the peasants. The bourgeoisie was tiring of the social and economic experiments of the revolutionary government. Bad crop failure had brought widespread hunger all over France. Robespierre and his colleagues had made bitter enemies who plotted to bring him down. Only Couthon and Saint-Just remained loyal among his leading colleagues. Deputies who had been removed from the Convention for excesses and dilapidations feared Robespierre and began to plot against him. Robespierre, realizing his movement was in jeopardy ceased to attend the Convention for a month, trying to develop a plan to save his work. This gave his enemies a chance to plan his overthrow. On the 8th of Thermidor (July 26, 1794) he delivered a speech that sealed his doom. He sincerely defended his work and defied the Convention. He and his leading followers
were arrested and imprisoned. The Paris Commune freed them. The
Convention declared him an outlaw. He took refuge in the Hotel
de Ville and called for the troops to defend him. Before help could
arrive the Convention moved to take the Hotel de Ville. Robespierre
tried to shoot himself, shattering his lower jaw. That evening,
the 10th of Thermidor (July 23) Robespierre and 19 of his followers
were guillotined.

The Reign of Terror ended. The Thermidorians banned the
Jacobins. The Girondins returned. On September 18, 1794 the
Convention voted to end the separation of church and state opening
the way for the revival of Catholicism. At first the Convention
continued to hold to the religion of the Supreme Being and the
revolutionary calendar continued. The renaissance of Catholicism
was rapid. On May 30, 1795 the Convention permitted the use of
unsold confiscated church buildings upon a petition of the
citizens. The exiled clergy flocked back to France and Catholics
all over France flocked to worship. Protestant pastors returned
and held services. Down deep something of the old religion seemed
to have lingered in the hearts of the people. Royalists returned.
France was terribly divided in heart: Deists, atheists, royalists,
republicans, Untramontane Catholics, Gallican Catholics, Protestants.

In August of 1795 a conservative republican Constitution of
Year III of the Revolution replaced the Constitution of 1793.
Insurrections broke out. On the 13th of Vendemiaire (October 5)
some 25,000 royalist insurgents marched against Tuileries where
the Convention was assembled. The Convention had barely 4,000
soldiers. The Convention soldiers had artillery. The young Corsican,
Napoleon Bonaparte, who was second in command under Barras, posted
his men at strategic points around the assembly hall. When the
royalists attacked he opened fire with the famous "whiff of grape-
shot" that opened the way for his rise to fame and power.

France's experiment with a new religion to replace Christianity
had failed and was short lived. The influence of the experiment
would be lasting and would extend into many countries--especially
into Germany, Holland, and America.