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# “An Entire Religion, at the Same Time Spiritual and Tangible”: Common Prayer and Deistic Civil Religion at the End of the Eighteenth Century

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*Civil religion has been imagined as a bloodless rationalism or a baptized patriotism, but rarely as a fully fledged religion. This article argues that a strain of civil religion emerged out of deism in the 1770s and 1780s that aspired to be an authentic religion complete with public prayer. This “practical civil religion” looked to spirituality and social ritual as a means of taming the passions and achieving national regeneration. One of the first to imagine such a religion was the journalist and novelist Louis-Sébastien Mercier. The dissenting minister David Williams went beyond Mercier’s dream, in 1776 opening the world’s first deist chapel at Margaret Street in London. Maximilien Robespierre’s short-lived cult of the Supreme Being in revolutionary France represented the apogee of the tradition of practical civil religion. Robespierre proposed the cult as a means of effecting national regeneration and completing the Revolution.*

In the 1770s and 1780s, religious radicals in France and England began promoting a new kind of deism that looked to public worship as a means of promoting national regeneration. This “practical civil religion” had the explicit aim of fostering the kind of public virtue that Rousseau had insisted was necessary for the survival of the social order.<sup>1</sup> However, it was not merely a code of ethics. It aspired to be a religion in the full, Durkheimian sense by being a system of belief *and* practice that created a recognizable community.<sup>2</sup> The promoters of practical civil religion were convinced, first, that virtue was a product as much of the affections as of the intellect, and second, that the affections that brought forth virtue required social reinforcement. In order to provide this

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<sup>1</sup>Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2010), 2, defines “civil religion” as “the empowerment of religion, not for the sake of religion, but for the sake of enhanced citizenship.”

<sup>2</sup>Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford, 2008), 46, defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.”

reinforcement, they borrowed elements from Christian worship like preaching, public assembly, and, most importantly, common prayer.

Prayer was attractive to these deists in part because it did not depend on special revelation and so held out the promise of universality. It was common for deists to believe that prayer was a basic feature of natural religion. The father of deism, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, thought it self-evident that “every religion believes that the Deity can hear and answer prayers.”<sup>3</sup> John Dryden identified prayer as one of the few essential tenets of deism. In his *Religio Laici* (1682), he summed up deism as belief in a supreme being and the conviction that God should be worshiped through praise and prayer.<sup>4</sup> Prayer was widely acknowledged to be a universal, but the deists discussed here thought that common prayer was especially valuable. Private prayer often produced an inward, individual spirituality that was of little use to the public. Common prayer, on the other hand, had the ability to shape the affections of the people and so the national character. For this reason, it held great potential as a means for promoting civic virtue on a mass scale in a way that rational argument alone could not.

The existence of the practical variety of civil religion is a reminder that many deists sought a participatory religion.<sup>5</sup> It also requires a reconsideration of the way civil religion has generally been understood. Sociologists and political theorists often divide civil religion into two types.<sup>6</sup> Civil religion in the Rousseauvian tradition is a set of essential beliefs about God and the afterlife that buttresses moral and political commitments. They are essential not so much because they are true, but because they are “politically salutary.”<sup>7</sup> Civil religion in this sense is a means of answering the problem of legal authority.<sup>8</sup> A second form of civil religion uses religious language and rituals to sacralize politics and unite a people around the belief that it has a special place in God’s plan for the world. If not uniquely American, this second variant has been a recurring feature in American political discourse at least as far back as the Puritan settlement of New England in the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> Both of these forms of civil religion promote social cohesion. They are also able to coexist with older forms of religion like Christianity because their aims are primarily social and political. They reserve the task of meeting spiritual needs for consolation and forgiveness to churches, while focusing on maintaining public order. As traditionally understood, civil religion is more civil than religious.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*, trans. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol, 1937), 292, 294.

<sup>4</sup>John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden, vol. 2, Poems, 1681–1684* (Berkeley, 1972), 111, ll. 44–50.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Waligore, *The Spirituality of the English and American Deists: How God Became Good* (Lanham, 2023), 23–40.

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics* (Waterloo, 2006), 6–8; Ronald Weed and John von Heyking, “Introduction,” in Ronald Weed and John von Heyking, eds., *Civil Religion in Political Thought* (Washington, 2012), 1–16.

<sup>7</sup>John T. Scott, *Rousseau’s God: Theology, Religion, and the Natural Goodness of Man* (Chicago, 2023), 202.

<sup>8</sup>Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London, 2012), 63–67.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96/1 (1967), 1–21; see also Phillip E. Hammond, “The Sociology of American Civil Religion: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Sociological Analysis* 37/2 (1976), 169–82; and Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, 2017).

The practical civil religion of the eighteenth century differed from these variants in that it was not solely a minimalist creed or a form of political discourse. This article will introduce some of the most important theorists of practical civil religion and explain the ideas that undergirded their religious programs. One of the first to imagine such a public faith was Louis-Sébastien Mercier, a journalist and utopian novelist who imagined a future world in which a practical civil religion had replaced Catholicism as the national religion of France. The dissenting minister David Williams did not just imagine a practical civil religion; he realized it by opening the world's first deist chapel at Margaret Street in London in 1776. Williams justified the project by arguing that it would strengthen the moral fiber of the nation. Maximilien Robespierre's short-lived cult of the Supreme Being in revolutionary France represented the apogee of the tradition of practical civil religion. Robespierre proposed the cult as a means of effecting national regeneration. These three figures are illustrative of an intellectual culture that was searching for means of creating new citizens through non-Christian worship. Crucially, they took concrete steps to make this theoretical civic deism a reality. Prayer was a key component of their proposals because it did not require priestly mediation or speculative theology, and because it naturally exercised the emotions as well as the intellect.

The existence of practical civil religion suggests that we need to rethink common understandings of deism. First, it calls into question S. J. Barnett's claim that deism was never a coherent movement and that those few philosophers who can be called deists made little impact on religious life.<sup>10</sup> Some led religious movements, even if those movements did not last long. Second, practical civil religion requires us to revise the view that deism was a solitary and interior phenomenon that was, as C. J. Betts describes it, "the result of the individual's unaided reflections on God and man."<sup>11</sup> Deism did not only exist in minds and books. As we shall see, some deists sought and found a social religion complete with ritual.

Practical civil religion also complicates narratives of secularization. It is true that, as Charles Taylor has argued, the "conditions of belief" were changing as the world became modern.<sup>12</sup> But religion is about practice as much as about belief. Changes in religious practice did not always follow the same trajectory as changes in belief. Some of the same radicals who were determined to pare down the number of religious doctrines advocated at the same time for more frequent and passionate religious practice.

### Rousseau and the problem of moral regeneration

The tradition of civil religion had an intellectual pedigree that stretched back to antiquity, but it became particularly important for early modern thinkers searching for

<sup>10</sup>S. J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity* (Manchester, 2003), 11–22.

<sup>11</sup>C. J. Betts, *Early Deism in France: From the So-Called "Déistes" of Lyon (1564) to Voltaire's "Lettres Philosophiques" (1734)* (The Hague, 1984), 3; See also Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester, 2009), 8; and Waligore, *The Spirituality of the English and American Deists*, 10–13.

<sup>12</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, 2007), 3.

solutions to the problems of political fragmentation and religious warfare.<sup>13</sup> Rousseau's classic statement of the problem in *The Social Contract* (1762) was deeply indebted to earlier theorists like Machiavelli, Bayle, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu.<sup>14</sup> In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argued that some form of religion was necessary to teach citizens to do their duty—indeed, no state had ever been founded without the support of religion—however, that religion should not be Christianity. Christianity was too antisocial, too concerned with heaven, to foster deep concern with the things of this world.<sup>15</sup> In the place of Christianity, Rousseau proposed that sovereigns establish a minimalist civil religion. The tenets of this religion were to be restricted to those points “without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or faithful subject.”<sup>16</sup> These included the existence of a providential God and the life to come, the future blessedness of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, and the sanctity of laws and the social contract. The only thing prohibited was intolerance. This tolerant deism was to be enforced on pain of banishment or even death. Two years after the publication of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau clarified his thoughts in his *Letters Written from the Mountain*. The national religions of antiquity were useful to the state, but harmful to humanity. Conversely, Christianity was good for making men just, but enervated the body politic. Legislators had to choose, then, between “a purely civil religion” that consisted only of dogmas, and a Christianity of morality and individual conscience, a Christianity “disengaged from all bonds of flesh.”<sup>17</sup>

The problem with civil religion as conceived by Rousseau was that it had no mechanism to form citizens. Religions united people by shared experiences as much as by shared beliefs. Indeed, Rousseau offered little guidance about how his civil religion was to work in practice. It seems that he had no intention of proposing a new religion with rituals like prayer.<sup>18</sup> Rousseau's own religion was deism tinged with the quietism of Fénelon.<sup>19</sup> He approved of some forms of private prayer, as did many other deists.<sup>20</sup> As a young man, he wrote two deist prayers that emphasized praise to God as creator

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance, the essays in Steven Frankel and Martin D. Yaffe, eds., *Civil Religion in Modern Political Philosophy: Machiavelli to Tocqueville* (University Park, 2021).

<sup>14</sup>The best description and analysis of this tradition in the early modern period is Beiner, *Civil Religion*; see also Weed and Heyking, *Civil Religion in Political Thought*. On civil religion in the English scene see Ashley Walsh, *Civil Religion and the Enlightenment in England, 1707–1800* (Woodbridge, 2020).

<sup>15</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris, 1959–95), 3: 466.

<sup>16</sup>Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Gagnebin and Raymond, 3: 468: “sans lesquels il est impossible d'être bon Citoyen ni sujet fidèle.”

<sup>17</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain, and Related Writings*, ed. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (Hanover, 2001), 148–9.

<sup>18</sup>Helena Rosenblatt, “On the Intellectual Sources of *Laïcité*: Rousseau, Constant, and the Debates about a National Religion,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 25/3 (2007), 1–18, at 9.

<sup>19</sup>Pierre-Maurice Masson, *La religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 3 vols. (Geneva, 1970); Albert Chérel, *Fénelon au XVIIIe siècle en France (1715–1820): Son prestige, son influence* (Paris, 1917), 393–6.

<sup>20</sup>On Rousseau's attitude toward prayer see Henri Gouhier, *Les méditations métaphysiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, 1970), 117–24; Raymond Trousson and Frédéric Eigeldinger, eds., *Dictionnaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva, 1996), “Prière,” 749–50; Charles A. Spirn, *Prayer in the Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York, 2008).

and merciful Father, resignation to divine providence, and petitions for virtue.<sup>21</sup> His “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” (1762) included a classic statement of the deist position on prayer. The Vicar communed with God through meditation on the creation, but never went so far as to ask God for anything in prayer. He asked, “What should I ask of him? That he change the course of things for me, that he work miracles in my favor?”<sup>22</sup> To make such a request would be to doubt God’s wisdom and providence. However, the Vicar did not reject prayer completely—he himself made a brief prayer to God—but only those prayers that petitioned God to intervene in the world.

As far as we know, Rousseau never connected this deist view of prayer to his proposed civil religion. In fact, his civil religion seems oddly disconnected from his sentimental, even mystical, deism. *The Social Contract* mentioned a “Religion of man and of Citizen” that was “without Temples, altars, rites, limited to the purely interior worship of the Supreme God and the eternal duties of morality.”<sup>23</sup> Rousseau’s proposed civil religion seems to have been a religion of this sort. This left open an important question: could mere belief actually mold selfish individuals into virtuous citizens? Many of Rousseau’s heirs doubted that it could.<sup>24</sup> During the Revolution, the Girondins were divided between those committed to a philosophical creed and those who wished to Christianize civil religion. The revolutionary bishop Claude Fauchet favored the latter approach in his popular lectures on *The Social Contract*.<sup>25</sup> In *On the National Religion* (1789), he declared that abstract philosophy would never suffice as a national religion: “It is necessary to have a heaven with ravishing rewards; a hell with dreadful punishments; a mediator with a thousand intermediaries between the infinite being and weak creatures; prayers; public worship; an entire religion, at the same time spiritual and tangible, that embraces the diverse faculties of the mind and of the human heart.”<sup>26</sup> Fauchet’s proposed national religion was more extravagant than some, especially in its inclusion of multiple mediators between God and man. However, he was one of many to argue that civil religion ought to engage the whole person—emotional and social, as well as rational—through rituals and prayer.

### Louis-Sébastien Mercier, prophet of the revolution

Another of Rousseau’s followers was the prolific Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814), whose plays, histories, and *tableaux* of everyday life in Paris won him a large readership

<sup>21</sup>Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Gagnebin and Raymond, 4: 1034–39.

<sup>22</sup>Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Gagnebin and Raymond, 4: 605: “que lui demanderois-je? Qu’il changeât pour moi le cours des choses, qu’il fit des miracles en ma faveur?”

<sup>23</sup>Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Gagnebin and Raymond, 3: 464: “la Religion de l’homme et celle du Citoyen ... sans Temples, sans autels, sans rites, bornée au culte purement intérieur du Dieu Suprême et aux devoirs éternels de la morale.”

<sup>24</sup>Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 15–16, raises the same objection.

<sup>25</sup>Gary Kates, *The Cercle Social, the Girondins, and the French Revolution* (Princeton, 2014), 100–4.

<sup>26</sup>Claude Fauchet, *De la religion nationale* (Paris, 1789), 43: “Il faut un Ciel avec des récompenses ravissantes; un Enfer avec des punitions redoutables; un Médiateur avec mille intermédiaires entre l’être infini & les foibles créatures, des prières, un culte, l’ensemble d’une Religion, à la fois spirituelle & sensible, qui embrasse les diverses facultés de l’esprit & du coeur humain.”

across Europe. Mercier was an ardent champion of Rousseau.<sup>27</sup> Between 1788 and 1793, he coedited a thirty-eight-volume edition of Rousseau's works.<sup>28</sup> In the middle of that project, he authored a two-volume work arguing that Rousseau ought to be considered one of the leading authors of the Revolution.<sup>29</sup> In particular, Mercier praised Rousseau's *Émile* for its simplification of religion. He wrote that Rousseau's novel, "by eliminating certain religious opinions that we are not obligated to adopt, is one of those works that is necessary to man, that must be consulted in all ages and under all governments."<sup>30</sup> Mercier did not disagree with Rousseau's pared-down set of essential doctrines, but he went beyond Rousseau in arguing for the social necessity of rituals like common prayer.

Mercier's own fiction borrowed extensively from Rousseau's religious thought, not least in the popular utopian novel, *The Year 2440* (1771). Mercier's novel was published anonymously at first and some thought that it had been written by Rousseau himself.<sup>31</sup> It was like earlier utopian novels in its preoccupation with the political, social, and religious customs of an imagined world.<sup>32</sup> However, it broke with literary tradition by exploring a European future rather than the present of a distant country (it was thus technically a "uchronia" rather than a "utopia"). The narrator of *The Year 2440* fell asleep in eighteenth-century Paris and woke up seven centuries later to discover the Parisians of the future living in a state of social harmony, material simplicity, and mutual tolerance. This vision of a futuristic Paris enchanted the reading public. Mercier's utopia became one of the best-selling clandestine books of the eighteenth century, running through twenty-five French editions. It was rapidly translated into English and German.<sup>33</sup>

*The Year 2440* imagined a future in which Catholicism had withered away and been replaced by the universal religion of nature, "that of the ancient patriarchs who worshipped God in spirit and truth on the mountaintops."<sup>34</sup> Mercier's Parisians continued

<sup>27</sup> On Rousseau's influence on Mercier see Enrico Rufi, *Le rêve laïque de Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Entre littérature et politique* (Oxford, 1995), 69–100.

<sup>28</sup> J. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J. J. Rousseau*, ed. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Gabriel Brizard, and Louis Le Tourneur, 38 vols. (Paris, 1788–93).

<sup>29</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *De J. J. Rousseau, considéré comme l'un des premiers auteurs de la Révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1791). For an argument against the idea that Rousseau was a cause of the Revolution see James Swenson, *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution* (Stanford, 2000), 159–228.

<sup>30</sup> Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Mercier et al., 1: 10: "Son *Émile*, en écartant quelques opinions religieuses, qu'on n'est pas obligé d'adopter, est un de ces ouvrages nécessaires à l'homme, qu'il faudra consulter dans tous les siècles, et dans tous les Gouvernemens."

<sup>31</sup> Rufi, *Le rêve laïque*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Denis Verias's *L'histoire des sévarambes* (1675–79), which envisioned a society with a civic religion that employed public prayers to teach citizens to love their duty. Denis Verias, *The History of the Sevarambians: A Utopian Novel*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Cyrus Masroori (Albany, 2006), 88.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (New York, 1995), 115. The title of the English version was rounded up to make it even. [Louis-Sébastien Mercier], *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, trans. William Hooper (London, 1772).

<sup>34</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Un deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fût jamais* (London, Amsterdam, 1771), 120: "celle des anciens patriarches, qui adoroient Dieu en esprit & en vérité sur le sommet des montagnes."

to believe in a Creator, the doctrine of divine providence, and the immortality of the soul. But their religion stipulated nothing beyond these few points. This imprecision was a stratagem for preventing ruinous division: “A pure morality and no extravagant dogmas—this is how to avoid having impious, fanatical, or superstitious people.”<sup>35</sup> Mercier’s narrator rejoiced that the people of Paris had eliminated theology entirely: “Happy mortals! You no longer have any theologians? I no longer see those huge volumes which seemed like fundamental pillars of our libraries, those heavy masses that only the printer, I think, had read.”<sup>36</sup> The few theological books that remained were kept locked away in library basements, brought out (together with books of jurisprudence) only in times of war so they could be launched as projectiles at the enemy.<sup>37</sup>

Although Mercier feared the divisive potential of speculative theology, he believed that a religion that emphasized worship could promote love of neighbor. After he had whittled away all superstition, a natural core of prayer and worship remained. Mercier’s future Parisians declared, “All our religion can be reduced to worship you, bless you, and cry to your throne that we are weak, miserable, limited, and that we need your helping arm.”<sup>38</sup> They worshipped by contemplating nature, occasionally with the aid of telescopes and microscopes. Most importantly, they met daily in a temple with a glass ceiling, the walls of which were bare save the name of God repeated a thousand times in various languages.<sup>39</sup> There they recited a prayer of about five hundred words that allowed each person to honor God as he or she saw fit. It began by praising God for his goodness in creation:

Unique, uncreated Being, intelligent Creator of this vast universe! Since your goodness has given it as a spectacle to man, since such a feeble creature has received from you the precious gift of reflecting on this great and beautiful work, do not allow man to, like a brute, pass over the surface of this globe without rendering praise to your omnipotence and wisdom. We admire your august works. We bless your sovereign hand. We worship you as master, but we love you as the universal father of beings. Yes, you are as good as you are great, everything tells us, and especially our heart.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Mercier, *Lan deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 121: “Une morale pure, & point de dogmes extravagans, voilà le moyen de n’avoir ni impies, ni fanatiques, ni superstitieux.”

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 76–7: “Heureux mortels! Vous n’avez donc plus de théologiens? Je ne vois plus ces gros volumes qui sembloient les piliers fondamentaux de nos bibliotheques, ces masses pesantes que l’imprimeur seul, je pense, avoit lues.”

<sup>37</sup>Mercier may have borrowed this equation of theology and law from Rousseau. Some years later, he cited the following maxim drawn from Rousseau’s correspondence: “Theology is to religion as legal squabbling is to justice” (“La théologie est à la religion ce que la chicane est à la justice.”) Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *De J. J. Rousseau*, 2: 339.

<sup>38</sup>Mercier, *Lan deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 119: “Tout notre culte se réduit à t’adorer, à te bénir, à crier vers ton trône que nous sommes foibles, misérables, bornés, & que nous avons besoin de ton bras secourable.”

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 130–42, 114.

<sup>40</sup>Mercier, *Lan deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 118–19: “Etre unique, incréé, Créateur intelligent de ce vaste univers ! puisque ta bonté l’a donné en spectacle à l’homme, puisqu’une, aussi foible créature a reçu de toi les dons précieux de réfléchir sur ce grand & bel ouvrage, ne permets pas qu’à l’exemple de la brute elle passe sur la surface de ce globe sans rendre hommage à ta toute-puissance & à ta sagesse. Nous admirons tes œuvres augustes. Nous bénissons ta main souveraine. Nous t’adorons comme maître: mais nous t’aimons

This prayer was the religion's sole sacred text. The worshippers who used it prayed that they might resign themselves to God's will and trust in his mercy. It was in the vernacular and so intelligible.<sup>41</sup> It was more a cry of the heart than a rational dissertation: "Our hearts sigh for your presence."<sup>42</sup>

The emotion of the Parisians' prayer was meant to be shared. Indeed, the public nature of the prayer was crucial. Mercier thought that private prayer was irrational and tiresome. He was particularly hostile to the cloistered prayers of monks. He insisted that a savage meditating on the Creator in the woods came closer to true religion than a monk babbling in his cell to the figments of his own imagination.<sup>43</sup> Better than either of these was a virtuous citizen regularly attending public prayer. The future denizens of Paris attended a single, daily prayer service that was more than sufficient to elevate the heart to God and encourage brotherly love. At their daily service, they prayed together that God might move all inhabitants of the world to love one another.<sup>44</sup> Social prayer was the primary ritual that trained the people to be virtuous.

Mercier appended a second vision of reform to the 1786 printing of *The Year 2440*. His *The Man of Iron* described the unsuccessful attempt of a metallic man to reform Paris. The religious attitude of *The Man of Iron* was identical to that of *The Year 2440*. Mercier recognized that religion was needed to restrain vice. What should that worship look like? It should be internal and public at the same time: "Interior worship is the homage that every creature ought to render to the Supreme Being. This is the ultimate worship, worthy of being offered to him who is spirit and truth; but as man is not isolated, he ought to publish his recognition publicly. It is in the interest of the human race that a God be recognized and adored."<sup>45</sup> Because human beings were linked to one another ("not isolated"), their religious worship was necessarily social. By contrast, the atheist cut himself off from God and his neighbor and so condemned himself to a degraded emotional life. Mercier followed Rousseau in condemning atheists because an atheist "is a man who is isolated, who makes himself the center of the universe, who can no more have elevated desires nor consoling hopes: he is an egoist who has destroyed a supreme being only to make himself the ultimate being. He must live alone, just as he will be one day; for hell is to be alone, alone."<sup>46</sup>

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comme pere universel des êtres. Oui, tu es bon, autant que tu es grand; tout nous le dit, & surtout notre cœur."

<sup>41</sup>In his unpublished account of a 1781 visit to London, Mercier favorably contrasted intelligible English prayers to Latin French ones. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Parallèle de Paris et de Londres: Un inédit de Louis-Sébastien Mercier*, ed. Claude Bruneteau and Bernard Cottret (Paris, 1982), 169–70.

<sup>42</sup>Mercier, *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 120: "Nos cœurs soupirent après ta présence."

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 118–20.

<sup>45</sup>Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'an deux mille quatre cent-quarante: Rêve s'il en fût jamais; suivi de L'homme de fer: Songe*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1786), 252: "Le culte intérieur est l'hommage que toute créature doit rendre à l'Être suprême. C'est le culte par excellence, & digne d'être offert à celui qui est esprit & vérité; mais, comme l'homme n'est pas isolé, il doit publier sa reconnaissance publiquement. L'intérêt du genre humain exige qu'un Dieu soit reconnu & adoré."

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 3: 282: "Je condamnai un athée à vivre seul. Qu'est-ce qu'un athée? C'est un homme qui s'est isolé, qui s'est fait le centre de l'univers, qui ne peut plus avoir ni desirs élevés, ni espérances consolantes: c'est un



Mercier could not have known while writing *The Year 2440* that France was soon to undergo a transformation nearly as radical as the one envisioned in his novel. However, that did not stop him in later years from calling his novel a prophecy of the Revolution. In the preface to the 1799 edition, he made much of this stroke of luck: “Never, I dare say, did a prediction come closer to an event, nor did one give a more detailed account of an astonishing series of transformations. I am therefore the true prophet of the French Revolution.”<sup>47</sup> But Mercier was not just a prophet. He would play an important role in the Revolution as a Girondin deputy to the National Convention and a promoter of practical civil religion.

### David Williams and the Margaret Street chapel

The same year that Mercier published *The Year 2440*, a book entitled *The Philosopher* (1771) appeared anonymously in London. *The Philosopher* was a set of three dialogues between an enlightened sage and a series of interlocutors representing different segments of the English intellectual scene. The third of the dialogues criticized British Christianity. It was a recognizably deist text in its rejection of Christian doctrine in favor of reason and morality, but it differed from early deist texts in its preoccupation with the social and political effects of religion.<sup>48</sup> The titular Philosopher declared that he was concerned “not with the truth of religion; but with the use which is made of it, as it is incorporated with our laws, and is made to effect many of the important purposes of civil government.”<sup>49</sup> This extended to public worship. *The Philosopher* judged the Book of Common Prayer to be beautiful in style but deficient in content. It criticized the free prayer of the dissenters for failing to encourage social devotion. It also bemoaned the fact that the worship services of both the established and dissenting churches were dwindling in popularity. This was a tragedy. Human beings were social creatures, created “that every joy is multiplied upon us, when we partake of it in conjunction with others.” By absenting themselves from worship, the people were both missing out on the pleasure that came from public worship and contributing to moral decline. The “philosopher” asserted that a “pious and rational liturgy ... would induce almost all the people to attend the church.” If the English people did resume their churchgoing, virtue would flourish and the nation would grow strong and prosperous.<sup>50</sup>

The author of *The Philosopher* was David Williams (1738–1816), a Welsh educational theorist and cleric who would become notorious after 1776 as the “priest of nature.”<sup>51</sup> Williams had entered the dissenting ministry in obedience to his father’s

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égoïste qui n’a détruit un être suprême que pour se faire l’être par excellence. Il faut qu’il vive seul, ainsi qu’il sera un jour; car l’enfer sera d’être seul, seul.”

<sup>47</sup> Quoted and translated in Darnton, *Forbidden Bestsellers*, 125.

<sup>48</sup> As an example of an earlier deist concerned with individual virtue rather than social order see Anthony Collins’s frequently read *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* (London, 1713).

<sup>49</sup> David Williams, *The Philosopher. Part III.* (London, 1771), 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 86–87, 110–11, 125, 130, 131.

<sup>51</sup> On Williams’s life see J. Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground: An Examination of the Ideas, Projects, and Life of David Williams* (Oxford, 1993); and Whitney R. D. Jones, *David Williams: The Anvil and the Hammer* (Cardiff, 1986). Williams also wrote a brief autobiography, *Incidents in My Own Life Which Have Been Thought of Some Importance*, ed. Peter France (Brighton, 1980).

deathbed charge. However, he had too little fondness for orthodox theology—and too much for female company—for the Christian ministry to remain a viable career for long. Williams was a close, if critical, reader of Rousseau, particularly in his writings on education.<sup>52</sup> He was also deeply interested in liturgical experimentation. At just twenty-two years of age, he became the pastor of the Mint Chapel, an influential Arian congregation in Exeter. There he introduced an innovative liturgy based on that of Liverpool's radical Octagon Chapel. In 1771 or 1772, he began work on a liturgy designed to unite members of all Christian denominations in common worship.<sup>53</sup> That liturgy still referred to Jesus as the Son of God. Sometime around the year 1773, Williams began to think in earnest about producing a non-sectarian liturgy that would be acceptable to members of every faith.

The impetus for this liturgy came from none other than Benjamin Franklin.<sup>54</sup> Franklin was keenly interested in the reformation of liturgy in the 1770s.<sup>55</sup> He and Williams were founding members of a club that met at the Old Slaughter Coffee House (sometimes called the Club of 13, it would later come to be known as the Athenian Club). Franklin's religious beliefs were idiosyncratic, but he was not hostile to religion.<sup>56</sup> At one of the club's meetings, the members began to discuss a religious festival, and Franklin, "with some emotion, declared he never passed a church during the public service without regretting that he could not join in it honestly and cordially. He thought it a reproach to philosophy that it had not a liturgy and that it skulked from the public profession of its principles."<sup>57</sup> Franklin's declaration moved the members of the club to action. As an experienced liturgist, Williams naturally took part in writing the philosophical liturgy. This was a utopian undertaking. Indeed, one of Williams's most important models was the natural religion described in Thomas More's *Utopia*. In a series of sermons published in 1774, Williams wrote that he was "obliged to acknowledge Sir Thomas More as my master" for his clear articulation of toleration.<sup>58</sup> Williams

<sup>52</sup>See Dybikowski's overview of Williams's attitude toward Rousseau in *On Burning Ground*, 129–33.

<sup>53</sup>David Williams, *A Liturgy on the Principles of the Christian Religion* (London, 1774).

<sup>54</sup>On Franklin's deist religion see Thomas S. Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life of a Founding Father* (New Haven, 2017).

<sup>55</sup>Together with Francis Dashwood, Franklin produced an *Abridgement of the Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of the Church of England* (London, 1773).

<sup>56</sup>Franklin composed a personal liturgy and a daily prayer in 1728. The liturgy suggested that there was one supreme God and a host of lesser beings that had created individual solar systems. The prayer read, "O Powerful Goodness! bountiful Father! merciful Guide! Increase in me that Wisdom which discovers my truest Interests; Strengthen my Resolutions to perform what that Wisdom dictates. Accept my kind Offices to thy other Children, as the only Return in my Power for thy continual Favours to me." Benjamin Franklin, "Founders Online: Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion, 20 November 1728," at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-01-02-0032> (accessed 17 Dec. 2024).

<sup>57</sup>Williams, *Incidents*, 16; The same story is told in Thomas Morris, *A General View of the Life and Writings of the Rev. David Williams* (London, 1792), 11–12.

<sup>58</sup>David Williams, *Sermons, Chiefly upon Religious Hypocrisy*, vol. 2 (London, 1774), 17.

was particularly pleased by the way More realized the ideal of toleration through public prayer.<sup>59</sup>

Franklin's departure from London in advance of the American Revolution left the project in Williams's hands. Williams published his new liturgy in 1776 as the *Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality*.<sup>60</sup> That same year, he rented the Margaret Street Chapel with the intention of holding regular services. Williams introduced the endeavor to the public through newspaper advertisements that ran the week before Easter:

With a view to promote Rational Piety and the practice of such Moral Duties as are most essential to the good order and happiness of society, a Gentleman proposes to deliver a COURSE of TWENTY FOUR LECTURES, to be preceded by the use of a Liturgy on the universal principles of Religion and Morality, at a Chapel in Margaret-street, Cavendish-square.<sup>61</sup>

His nascent congregation met on Easter Sunday (April 7) for the first deistic worship service ever held publicly in Europe. At that gathering, Williams preached an apology for the new undertaking. While Franklin had proposed the endeavor in order to soothe his own conscience, Williams argued that the new congregation would serve an important public function. He lamented that so few people attended religious services in England. The situation was particularly bad in London: "Not one in five; perhaps not one in ten in this vast city, goes with any decent regularity to a place of public worship."<sup>62</sup> This lack of church attendance had produced a lamentable moral decline. Williams rejected the priestcraft that had characterized the churches of years past, but he could not help admiring the role that they had played in encouraging public virtue. The Christianity of their ancestors had "impelled them to actions of disinterested patriotism, and gave wisdom to their legislation and policy."<sup>63</sup> But now, even as Europe's enlightened people were accomplishing great things in science and philosophy, they were "advancing to a political decrepitude and destruction, from a strange and wretched irreligion."<sup>64</sup> Civic rebirth would require a new civic religion.

Williams's religion included "all creatures, in all worlds, throughout that undefinable space, which we call the universe."<sup>65</sup> His religion could attain this level of universality because it emphasized morality and spiritual practice rather than doctrine. The moral life was not merely a question of correct ideas. It required the cultivation of right affections and habits. Williams believed that prayers should be emotional rather than

<sup>59</sup>In his sermon, Williams quoted the Utopia's entire section on religion, ending with the italicized words, "nor are there any prayers among them but such as every one of them may use without prejudice to his own opinion." *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>60</sup>David Williams, *A Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality* (London, 1776).

<sup>61</sup>Quoted in Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 9–10.

<sup>62</sup>David Williams, *A Sermon Preached at the Opening of a Chapel in Margaret-Street, Cavendish-Square* (London, 1776), 20.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>65</sup>David Williams, *Lectures on the Universal Principles and Duties of Religion and Morality*, vol. 1 (London, 1779), 93.

doctrinal, for, “In proportion as devotions become didactic or explanatory, or as they abound in principles rather than sentiment, they lose their effect upon the heart.”<sup>66</sup> True piety was impossible without actions of the heart like “delight, gratitude, and virtuous resolutions.”<sup>67</sup> Public worship was essential because it enlisted “those social affections which are the most powerful principles of our nature” to the cause of virtue.<sup>68</sup> Those attending services needed both to worship and to see others worshipping. In his introduction to the published liturgy, Williams compared the minds of the people to machines that could be “regulated on the Sunday for the duties of the following week.”<sup>69</sup> Common prayer would do a far better job of promoting social harmony than the doctrines that had proved so divisive in the past.<sup>70</sup>

Williams’s liturgy would have been familiar to an audience accustomed to the Book of Common Prayer. It was composed of an “Order for Morning Prayer” and an “Order for Evening Prayer,” both of which contained lessons, hymns, prayers, and a litany. All these elements were saturated with Scriptural language. The prayers thanked and praised God extravagantly as the benevolent creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe. However, Williams’s liturgy omitted features of the Prayer Book like the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and ceremonies for the sacraments. It never mentioned Jesus Christ. More subtly, its prayers carefully avoided petitions for alterations of the material world. The liturgy’s prayers did ask for God’s help in making moral and intellectual progress, but always with the understanding that advancement would come through human effort. So, for instance, rather than praying for knowledge, good health, or material advantage, Williams led the congregation to pray, “May we never impair our understandings, ruin our health, or disqualify ourselves for any important duties and employments ... May we aspire to that state of manly liberty, and that habit of self-government, which will effectually [*sic*] promote the attainment of wisdom and virtue, and the tranquility and true enjoyment of life.”<sup>71</sup> Williams taught his congregation to pray only those prayers they could answer themselves.

Williams made explicit the theory behind these prayers in his Margaret Street lecture on the “Nature and Effect of Prayer.” He argued that it was absurd—even barbarous—to pray to receive benefits in this world or the world to come. God ruled the world through natural laws that could not be interrupted: “All prayers are thus reprehensible, which aim at the operations of nature.”<sup>72</sup> Prayer as petition was nonsensical. Williams included prayers in his liturgy, because he thought they were the principle means by which men raised their minds to God and so improved their characters. This was “the proper ground of all rational and useful worship. On this principle, when men asked, they found, and were never disappointed.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Williams, *Sermons, Chiefly upon Religious Hypocrisy*, 50.

<sup>67</sup>Williams, *A Sermon Preached*, 8–9.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>69</sup>Williams, *A Liturgy on Universal Principles*, viii.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>72</sup>Williams, *Lectures on Universal Principles*, 1: 131–2.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 1: 133.

In the four years of its existence, Williams's congregation never attracted more than a hundred auditors and many of those were motivated more by curiosity than by commitment to his religious vision. The congregation eventually collapsed due to financial mismanagement and infighting between Shaftesbury-style deists and more radical materialists. However, the project attracted significant notice from the European philosophical community. Williams's liturgy received the imprimatur of leading deists like Voltaire and Frederick II of Prussia.<sup>74</sup> It also pleased Rousseau, who was introduced to it in 1776 by a member of the Club of 13 named Thomas Bentley. While on a business trip to Paris, Bentley called on Rousseau and, finding him away, left him some letters and a copy of Williams's *A Liturgy upon the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality*. Returning two days later, Bentley and Rousseau discussed the work. In Bentley's remembrance, Rousseau remarked that the liturgy was "a truly noble and respectable undertaking. I approve it entirely and greatly respect the man."<sup>75</sup> Rousseau was even more pleased to learn that the liturgy was actually being used, although he thought it unlikely that many women would attend. In Williams's retelling of the encounter, Rousseau was even more enthusiastic. Williams had Rousseau declare, "Tell Williams it is a consolation to my heart that he has realised one of my highest wishes, and that I am one of his most devoted disciples."<sup>76</sup>

Rousseau was not really one of Williams's disciples. We do not know whether Rousseau was simply being polite to Bentley or genuinely welcomed Williams's liturgy as an extension of his own project.<sup>77</sup> However, it is clear that Bentley and Williams understood the liturgy to be a continuation of Rousseau's work. Moreover, Williams's many admirers in France also believed this to be true. He was particularly close to members of the Girondin party (including Mercier) who recognized him as an ally in the cause of religious reform.<sup>78</sup> Sometime around 1792, a group of leading Girondins that included Mercier, the Marquis de Condorcet, and Jacques Pierre Brissot commissioned a biography of Williams.<sup>79</sup> Brissot shared many of Williams's religious ideas and reported praying enthusiastically to the Supreme Being.<sup>80</sup> Brissot arranged in 1792 to have Williams appointed as an adviser to the Constitutional Convention. Williams was

<sup>74</sup>The letters from Frederick and Voltaire are reproduced in Williams's *Lectures on Education*, vol. 3 (London, 1789), 299–306.

<sup>75</sup>Thomas Bentley, *Journal of a Visit to Paris, 1776*, ed. Peter France (Brighton, 1977), 60.

<sup>76</sup>Williams, *Incidents*, 21.

<sup>77</sup>Rousseau's extolling of the benefits of public festivals and ceremonies in his then unpublished *Considerations on the Government of Poland* suggest that he may have had a real affinity for the liturgy. Megan Gallagher, "Moving Hearts: Cultivating Patriotic Affect in Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland*," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 15/2 (2019), 497–515.

<sup>78</sup>There is no proof that Williams had read Mercier, but it is highly likely that he at least knew of *The Year 2440* as it was a genuine best seller. The English translation published in 1772—albeit without the author's name—was reviewed in all major English journals. Everett C. Wilkie, "Mercier's 'L'An 2440': Its Publishing History during the Author's Lifetime, Part I," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 32/1 (1984), 5–35.

<sup>79</sup>This according to the extended title of Morris, *A General View of the Life and Writings of the Rev. David Williams*, which says that it was written "at the request of Messrs. Condorcet, Claviere, Mercier, Auger, Brissot, & c."

<sup>80</sup>E.-A. Aulard, *Les orateurs de la législative et de la convention*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1906), 230–31.

not impressed by the faction-plagued efforts of the Convention. In a series of observations on the Constitution published in *La chronique du mois* in the beginning of 1793, Williams wrote against the Constitution's intention to eliminate religious establishment.<sup>81</sup> He argued that a complete disestablishment would only create a class of resentful ex-priests. It would be better to put priests to work educating the people in republican principles. He proposed that the entire infrastructure of the Catholic Church be repurposed in this fashion. The people were used to attending church, so it would be sensible to transform the churches into centers for "the elections of the people, their military exercises, the arbitrages of the parish, and times of political instruction."<sup>82</sup> These civic activities could all be performed on one day, leaving the rest of the week available for work. In short, Williams proposed transforming the Catholic Church into an organ of republican civil religion.

### Robespierre and prayers to the Supreme Being

The Girondin circle that included Mercier and Williams was not alone in its interest in civil deism. Both the concern about the decline in civic virtue and the belief that public worship and common prayer might be the solution were widespread. Many of the Girondins' political rivals were similarly convinced that the republic needed a religious foundation. The most notable of these was Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94). In 1794, Robespierre fused radical republicanism and practical civil religion to create the cult of the Supreme Being. The cult has occupied a curious place in historical memory ever since. For his part, Mercier remembered it as an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Years later, he declared without irony that he would never forgive Robespierre for having "the mania to want to create a novel religion and to exercise its ridiculous priesthood."<sup>83</sup> He was convinced that the hypocrite Robespierre had impiously substituted himself for God, an accusation that dated from the Festival itself.<sup>84</sup> According to Mercier, Robespierre was at the same time the false priest and the false God of a counterfeit religion.<sup>85</sup>

Despite their mutual enmity, Mercier and Robespierre shared a common set of religious beliefs. Both held deist convictions about the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Both read history through the lens of providence. In particular, they were convinced that God had shown special care in protecting the French Revolution from its enemies. Mercier believed that God had "visibly protected a political revolution of which the necessary effect is to increase liberty, human dignity, and to make

<sup>81</sup> David Williams, "Observations sur la dernière constitution de la France," trans. M[audr]u, *La Chronique du mois: Ou, les cahiers patriotiques*, 7 Jan. 1793, 39–65, esp. 59.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 61: "les élections du peuple, ses exercices militaires, les arbitrages de la paroisse et les instructions politiques."

<sup>83</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Paris pendant la Révolution (1789–1798) ou le Nouveau Paris*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1862), 98: "On n'oubliera point qu'il eut la manie de vouloir créer une religion nouvelle et d'en exercer le ridicule sacerdoce."

<sup>84</sup> Mercier, *Paris pendant la Révolution*, 176; Jonathan A. Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being: The Search for a Republican Morality* (Manchester, 2017), 71.

<sup>85</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Néologie ou vocabulaire des mots nouveaux* (Paris, 1801), 134.

cease the countless calamities that accompanied arbitrary power.”<sup>86</sup> In a similar vein, Robespierre insisted that God “watches over the French Revolution in a completely uncommon manner.” He declared to the Jacobin Club that this conviction was “a sentiment of my heart, a sentiment that to me is necessary.”<sup>87</sup> Mercier and Robespierre recognized the need for a national regeneration that would create new men in addition to new political institutions. They thought religious worship was the means of creating this new kind of citizen.<sup>88</sup> If the cult of the Supreme Being had been introduced by someone other than Robespierre, Mercier might have applauded it. After the Revolution, Mercier would praise Theophilanthropy, the patriotic deist religion that shared much with the cult of the Supreme Being. He rejoiced that, although this simple religion had been suppressed in the past, “Thanks to the revolution which has occurred in France, a revolution of the spirit as well as of the government, we now teach the people, in a high voice, the Theophilanthropy.”<sup>89</sup>

The origin of the cult of the Supreme Being remains an unsettled question in the history of the Revolution.<sup>90</sup> Was it a calculated political maneuver or an authentic expression of religious belief? It is now traditional to approach this question by beginning with the early twentieth-century debate between Alphonse Aulard and his one-time student, Albert Mathiez. Aulard concluded that both the cult of the Supreme Being and the cult of Reason that preceded it were savvy responses to the crisis posed by the opposition of the *ancien régime* to the new spirit of the age.<sup>91</sup> The cult took its logic from philosophers like Rousseau, but it was pragmatic rather than ideological. The revolutionaries “overturned the altar, not by philosophy, but by patriotism, not to realize an a priori principle, but to assure the national defense.”<sup>92</sup> In short, it was a political expedient. By contrast, Mathiez thought that the cult of the Supreme Being had roots in an authentic patriotic sentiment. Robespierre’s proclamation was certainly political, but it was also an attempt to provide an institutional framework for

<sup>86</sup>Mercier, *De J. J. Rousseau*, 2: 287: “Dieu a visiblement protégé une révolution politique dont l’effet nécessaire est d’augmenter la liberté, la dignité de l’homme, et de faire cesser les calamités sans nombre que accompagnoient le pouvoir arbitraire.”

<sup>87</sup>Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes de Robespierre*, ed. Marc Bouloiseau and Albert Soboul, vol. 8 (Paris, 1954), 234: “Oui, invoquer le nom de la providence et émettre une idée de l’être éternel qui influe essentiellement sur les destins des nations, qui me paraît à moi veiller d’une manière toute particulière sur la révolution française, n’est point une idée trop hasardée, mais un sentiment de mon coeur, un sentiment qui m’est nécessaire.”

<sup>88</sup>On the revolutionary goal of moral regeneration see Mona Ozouf, *L’homme régénéré: Essais sur la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), 116–57.

<sup>89</sup>Mercier, *Néologie ou vocabulaire des mots nouveaux*, 285: “Grâce à la révolution qui s’est faite en France, dans les esprits comme dans le gouvernement, on enseigne maintenant au peuple, à haute voix, la Théophilanthropie.” See also Jonathan Douglas Deverse, “Theophilanthropy: Civil Religion and Secularization in the French Revolution” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Florida State University, 2015).

<sup>90</sup>For an overview of the classic interpretations of the cult see Jean-Philippe Domecq, “La Fête de l’Être Suprême et son interprétation,” *Esprit* 154/9 (1989), 91–125.

<sup>91</sup>F.-A. Aulard, *Le culte de la raison et le culte de l’Être suprême, 1793–1794* (Paris, 1892), viii.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 15: “Ils culbutèrent l’autel, non par philosophie, mais par patriotisme, non pour réaliser un principe à priori, mais pour assurer la défense nationale.”

the fervor of the citizenry.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, Robespierre's proposal showed "not the slightest tinge of invention, or even of personal initiative."<sup>94</sup> It was simply an expression of the familiar republican cult. For neither Aulard nor Mathiez was the cult of the Supreme Being primarily a religious phenomenon. In more recent years, historians have been more open to the possibility that the Revolution was more religious than has been commonly believed.<sup>95</sup> But some modern historians of the cult of the Supreme Being still argue that it was not a "real religion."<sup>96</sup>

The task of interpreting the cult of the Supreme Being is vexing in part because of the difficulty in accessing the inner life of its aloof founder. The little we know about Robespierre's religious beliefs suggests that he walked a path toward deism typical of men of his education.<sup>97</sup> He received a conventional Catholic upbringing in Arras. As a student at the Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris, his life was regulated by prayer and strict discipline, but testimony from his time there suggests that he was already showing dissatisfaction with his youthful Catholicism.<sup>98</sup> By the time of the Revolution, he had become a deist who emphasized natural religion's moral and political applications. His religion owed a debt to a previous generation of deists like Voltaire and Rousseau. Indeed, some still see Robespierre's religion as simply the realization of Rousseau's ideas.<sup>99</sup> However, his application of deism to civil society went beyond anything either *philosophe* had imagined.

Robespierre inaugurated the cult of the Supreme Being in his famous speech to the Convention of 7 May 1794 (18 Floréal Year II). In words that paralleled those of Williams, he described a world that had made dramatic progress, but was still only partially enlightened: "Compare the imperfect language of hieroglyphics with the miracles of printing; set the voyage of the Argonauts next to that of Lapérouse; measure the distance between the astronomical observations of the magi of Asia and the discoveries of Newton ..." At the same time, human beings were much the same as they had always been. Robespierre declared, "Everything has changed in the physical order; everything ought to change in the moral and political order. Half of the revolution of the world is already accomplished; the other half must be accomplished."<sup>100</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Albert Mathiez, *La théophilanthropie et le culte décadaire, 1796–1801; essai sur l'histoire religieuse de la Révolution* (Paris, 1903), 18; Mathiez, *Les origines des cultes révolutionnaires (1789–1792)* (Paris, 1904), 143.

<sup>94</sup> Albert Mathiez, *The Fall of Robespierre: And Other Essays* (London, 1927), 90.

<sup>95</sup> For instance, David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, 2001), 8, has shown that revolutionaries borrowed techniques from Catholic missionaries in order to inculcate republican ideals in the citizenry.

<sup>96</sup> Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> For Robespierre's religion see Frank Tallett, "Robespierre and Religion," in William Doyle and Colin Haydon, eds., *Robespierre* (Cambridge, 1999), 92–108; for Robespierre's life and intellectual development more generally see Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, 2012).

<sup>98</sup> J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (Oxford, 1988), 11–13, blames the moral surveillance at Louis-le-Grand for turning Robespierre into a prig.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, Michaël Culoma, *La religion civile de Rousseau à Robespierre* (Paris, 2010), 211–59.

<sup>100</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes de Robespierre*, ed. Marc Bouloiseau and Albert Soboul, vol. 10 (Paris, 1967), 444: "Tout a changé dans l'ordre physique; tout doit changer dans l'ordre moral et politique. La moitié de la révolution du monde est déjà faite; l'autre moitié doit s'accomplir."



Finishing this Revolution would be harder than beginning it. For one thing, the kings of the world did not fear geometers or poets, but they would be implacable in their opposition to the defenders of humanity. More profoundly, the moral half of the Revolution ran contrary to human nature. Robespierre said, “to seek to become skilled in the arts, you must only follow your passions, whereas to defend your rights and respect those of others, you must vanquish them.”<sup>101</sup> The passions were the source of both vice and virtue; they could elevate man to heaven or cast him down into the abyss. Robespierre declared, “The great work of society would be to create in man a quick instinct in moral things that, without the tardy help of reasoning, would lead him to do good and avoid evil.”<sup>102</sup> He proposed to create this instinct through a social deism. The cult of the Supreme Being was to be conducted primarily through public festivals that could harness the joy of the people to promote *fraternité* and true worship.<sup>103</sup>

Where did Robespierre get his ideas? In his speech, Robespierre praised Rousseau as the philosopher who by the purity of his life and doctrine had been a “precursor” of the Revolution.<sup>104</sup> Rousseau had certainly anticipated Robespierre in his concern about the disjuncture between the advancements of science and virtue. Robespierre certainly learned from Rousseau, but Mona Ozouf is not quite correct that there was nothing in Robespierre’s religious vision that was not typical of deists like Rousseau and Voltaire.<sup>105</sup> Robespierre differed from Rousseau in several ways. He stopped short of Rousseau by declining to banish atheists from the Republic. In a speech to the Jacobins given a week after his address to the Convention, Robespierre argued diplomatically, “There are some truths that we must present with tact, such is the truth professed by Rousseau, that we must banish from the Republic all those who do not believe in the divinity.”<sup>106</sup> More importantly, Robespierre’s public religion went far beyond anything Rousseau had proposed in *The Social Contract* with respect to practice. Rousseau’s civil religion had imagined a bare set of essential convictions serving as an intellectual foundation for civic virtue. Robespierre proposed a living religion coupled with a theory of moral regeneration through public worship.

There were, of course, intellectual resources available to Robespierre other than Rousseau. One likely source for Robespierre’s ideas was the republican philosopher Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–85). Mably was extraordinarily well connected. His older brother employed Rousseau as a tutor for his children. His younger brother was the philosopher Condillac.<sup>107</sup> Robespierre owned a copy of Mably’s *Of the Rights and*

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.: “pour chercher à se rendre habile dans les arts, il ne faut que suivre ses passions, tandis que, pour défendre ses droits et respecter ceux d’autrui, il faut les vaincre.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 10: 452: “Le chef-d’œuvre de la société seroit de créer en lui, pour les choses morales, un instinct rapide qui, sans le secours tardif du raisonnement, le portât à faire le bien et à éviter le mal.” See Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1986), 245.

<sup>103</sup> Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 10: 457.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>105</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, 1991), 108.

<sup>106</sup> Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 10: 467: “Il est des vérités qu’il faut présenter avec ménagement, telle est cette vérité professée par Rousseau, qu’il faut bannir de la République tous ceux qui ne croient pas à la divinité.”

<sup>107</sup> For Mably’s biography see Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, 1997), 23–4.

*Duties of Citizens*, a work that urged citizens to participate in public worship provided there was nothing unworthy of God or contrary to good morals in it.<sup>108</sup> As a lawyer, Robespierre was probably also familiar with Mably's *Of Legislation; or Principles of Law* (1776), which made a sustained argument for the necessity of a public cult. In that work, Mably observed that there would always be people who would follow their passion and flout the laws and so religion was needed to remind miscreants that they would eventually face judgment.<sup>109</sup> Mably did not think this religion could be entirely metaphysical. Human beings had bodies as well as souls and they needed a religion that engaged both, a religion that, "while raising us to spiritual ideas, still maintains a cult and corporal ceremonies that unite the citizens to one another by sensible actions and disposes them to have the same spirit and to fulfil their mutual duties."<sup>110</sup>

The decree of 18 Floréal was resisted in some regions. In one town near Lavoûte sur Loire, women turned and exposed their buttocks as an oration to the Supreme Being was read.<sup>111</sup> On the whole, however, it was welcomed as a return to stability. Revolutionary societies in the provinces responded with congratulatory letters that included numerous prayers, hymns, and poems.<sup>112</sup> The new cult was also promoted with official propaganda. Broadsheets and engravings were quickly produced in the days following Robespierre's speech. One broadsheet printed in Reims contained the "profession of faith of free men on the true religion and the immortality of the soul."<sup>113</sup> This "profession" was in fact a lengthy prayer, large portions of which were lifted verbatim from the central prayer of Mercier's *The Year 2440*.<sup>114</sup> Christophe Opoix's *To the Supreme Being, the Prayer of the Republican* was set to music at the behest of the Committee of Public Safety.<sup>115</sup> The prayer asked that the Supreme Being open the eyes of all men to the light of virtue and give victory over superstition and tyranny.

The cult of the Supreme Being also had an educational component. The day after the decree of 18 Floréal, the Committee on Public Instruction recorded the receipt of the *Historico-political Republican Catechism* written by one Citizen Gerlet.<sup>116</sup> It is possible that Gerlet cooperated with Robespierre to produce the catechism in the weeks leading

<sup>108</sup> Germain Bapst, "Inventaire des bibliothèques de quatre condamnés," *La Révolution française: Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 21 (1891), 534. *Des droits et des devoirs du Citoyen* was written in 1758, but not published until 1789. Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Collection complète des oeuvres de l'abbé de Mably*, ed. Guillaume Arnoux, vol. 11 (Paris, 1794), 361.

<sup>109</sup> Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Collection complète des oeuvres de l'abbé de Mably*, ed. Guillaume Arnoux, vol. 9. (Paris, 1794), 387–8.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 426: "en nous élevant à des idées spirituelles, tienne cependant à un culte et à des cérémonies corporelles qui unissent les citoyens entr'eux par des actions sensibles, et les disposent à n'avoir qu'un même esprit, et à remplir leurs devoirs mutuels."

<sup>111</sup> Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1999), 118.

<sup>112</sup> Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival*, 6, 45.

<sup>113</sup> *Hommage à l'Éternel, profession de foi des hommes libres sur la vraie religion et l'immortalité de l'âme, reconnue par le peuple français, dans la séance du 19 floréal*. (Reims, 1794).

<sup>114</sup> *Prière républicaine adressée à l'Être suprême, propre à réciter dans toute l'étendue de la République Française, les jours que la convention nationale fixera pour célébrer les Fêtes* (Paris, n.d.).

<sup>115</sup> Christophe Opoix, *A l'Être suprême, prière du républicain* (Paris, 1793), 1.

<sup>116</sup> M. J. Guillaume, ed., *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale*, vol. 4 (Paris, 1901), 374.

up to the speech of 18 Floréal. The catechism began with two impassioned prayers to the Supreme Being.<sup>117</sup> The first—the “Prayer of the Republican”—praised the Supreme Being as the creator and regenerator of the world.<sup>118</sup> His second prayer was especially designed for students. The “Prayer before Studying” asked that the Supreme Being help the student profit from their labors “for the good of society [and] for our temporal and spiritual felicity.”<sup>119</sup> Gerlet’s catechism was designed to instruct young people in a republican civil religion that was closer to Robespierre’s model than to Rousseau’s. Not only did the catechism include prayers for individual and corporate use; it also followed Robespierre in rejecting the exile of atheists.<sup>120</sup>

Two days after the Convention’s decree on the Supreme Being, a citizen of the Paris section of Fontaine-de-Grenelle praised it as “perhaps the finest work to ever come from the hands of men.”<sup>121</sup> The orator told the other members of the section that their fathers had been duped and fanaticized by priestly imposters. Their prayers had only been *paters* and *aves*. Even the *philosophes* had been too timid to do more than mock superstition privately. The regenerated French had surpassed them all. Now, “let us say to Rousseau, or rather to God alone, hear the prayer of the republicans.”<sup>122</sup> He concluded his address with a prayer that recognized the Supreme Being as the source of all good things. The prayer’s author shared with Robespierre a keen sensitivity to the role that passion played in virtue and the need for public worship. He prayed, “it is in the heart of the upright man that you have rooted this strong desire which makes him love liberty, morality, and all the virtues which we want to celebrate in the festivals during our days of repose.”<sup>123</sup> Speeches extolling the new cult were given outside Paris as well. A week after the decree, a representative of the Convention named Guillaume Chaudron-Rousseau delivered in Haute-Garonne his own “Prayer of the Free Man to the Eternal.” It rejoiced that “the worship of thought and heart, that of reason ... finally replaces bizarre and repulsive forms.”<sup>124</sup>

The Festival of the Supreme Being was observed on 8 June 1794 (20 Prairial Year II) following a plan prepared by Jacques-Louis David. In form, it did not differ much from other revolutionary festivals. It was staged out of doors at the Jardin national (Tuileries) and the Champ de la réunion (formerly the Champ de Mars). At the Jardin national, Robespierre gave two short speeches. The first touched on familiar themes of virtue and God’s providential care. Robespierre suggested that the Festival represented the beginning of a national rebirth. For too long the Supreme Being had looked on as

<sup>117</sup> Citizen Gerlet, *Catéchisme républicain historico-politique* (Paris, 1794), 5–6. On the function of Revolutionary catechism, see Adrian Velicu, *Civic Catechisms and Reason in the French Revolution* (Farnham, 2010), 90, 99.

<sup>118</sup> Gerlet, *Catéchisme*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: “pour le bien de la société, pour notre félicité temporelle et spirituelle.”

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

<sup>121</sup> *Réflexions d’un citoyen* (Paris, 1794), 3: “peut-être le plus bel ouvrage qui soit sorti de la main des hommes.”

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5: “nous dirons à Rousseau, ou plutôt à Dieu seul, écoutes la prière des républicains.”

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12: “c’est dans le coeur de l’homme probe que tu as enraciné ce désir fort qui le fait tendre à la liberté, à la morale et à toutes les vertus dont nous voulons célébrer les fêtes dans nos jours de repos.”

<sup>124</sup> Guillaume Chaudron-Rousseau, *Prière de l’homme libre à l’éternel* (Toulouse, 1794), 2: “le culte de la pensée & du coeur, celui de la raison ... succède enfin à des formes bizarres & repoussantes.”

tyranny reigned over the earth, but now he would witness a nation pause in its work to lift its thoughts to heaven.<sup>125</sup> At the conclusion of this oration, Robespierre set fire to a hideous statue of Atheism that burned to reveal the image of Wisdom hidden within.

At the same time, a group of singers from the Opéra sang a hymn written by the poet Théodore Desorgues for the occasion.<sup>126</sup> The “Hymn to the Supreme Being” was in fact a prayer, addressed to the “Father of the Universe, supreme intelligence.”<sup>127</sup> It was not, however, wholly original. It borrowed liberally from earlier deist prayers like Alexander Pope’s “Universal Prayer.”<sup>128</sup> After this stirring anthem, Robespierre rose to speak again. He blamed the kings of the world for murdering humanity with “the dagger of fanaticism and the poison of atheism.”<sup>129</sup> Robespierre urged the people to practice all the virtues in the service of the revolutionary cause. “Let us erase the impious league of kings by the grandeur of our character, more even than by the force of our weapons.”<sup>130</sup> He ended with a prayer that mixed hatred of tyranny with a profound trust in the Supreme Being’s providential care: “Being of beings, author of nature, the stupid slave, the vile henchman of despotism, the perfidious and cruel aristocrat, outrages you by invoking you; but the defenders of liberty can surrender themselves with confidence to your paternal bosom ... You know the creatures of your hands; their needs no more escape your attention than their most secret thoughts.”<sup>131</sup> The assembled people then processed to the Champ de la réunion, where an artificial mountain topped with a tree of liberty had been constructed.

One observer, François-Antoine de Boissy d’Anglas, described the festival as a new birth. In the great gathering, man had presented himself as an offering to the Supreme Being “as pure as the first time he had emerged from [the Supreme Being’s] beneficent hands.”<sup>132</sup> However, the success of the festival was short-lived. In the weeks following, the pace of the Terror increased and Robespierre’s enemies mobilized. When Robespierre fell, the cult of the Supreme Being fell with him.

## Conclusion

In his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796), Edmund Burke attacked the doings of the Jacobins as contrary to human nature. He wrote, “The whole drift of their institution is contrary to that of the wise legislators of all countries, who aimed at improving

<sup>125</sup> Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 10: 481.

<sup>126</sup> The text of the hymn can be found in Michel Vovelle, *Théodore Desorgues, ou, la désorganisation: Aix–Paris, 1763–1808* (Paris, 1985), 225.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. “Père de l’Univers, suprême intelligence.”

<sup>128</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Universal Prayer* (London, 1738).

<sup>129</sup> Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, 10: 482: “Armés tour-à-tour des poignards du fanatisme et des poisons de l’athéisme, les rois conspirent toujours pour assassiner l’humanité.”

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 10: 483: “écrasons la ligue impie des rois par la grandeur de notre caractère, plu encore que par la force de nos armes.”

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 10: 483: “Être des Êtres, auteur de la nature, lesclave abruti, le vil suppôt du despotism, l’artiste-crate perfide et cruel t’outragent en t’invoyant ... Tu connais les creatures sorties de tes mains; leurs besoins n’échappent pas plus à tes regards que leurs plus secretes pensées.”

<sup>132</sup> François-Antoine de Boissy d’Anglas, *Essai sur les fêtes nationales* (Paris, 1793), 68: “aussi pur que lorsqu’il sortit pour la première fois de ses bienfaisantes mains.”

instincts into morals, and at grafting the virtues on the stock of the natural affections.”<sup>133</sup> This was unfair to Robespierre, at least, who had introduced the Cult of the Supreme Being with the express purpose of creating natural bonds between virtue and the affections. Practical civil religion was an attempt to solve social problems by creating a new kind of citizen for whom virtue was spontaneous and heartfelt. The reformers discussed in this article recognized this as a problem that was too divisive and full of irrational superstition to promote national virtue. However, they went beyond deists like Rousseau by insisting that a deism of the intellect could not realistically channel the passions. Accordingly, they created a deist religion that jettisoned Christian theology while repurposing core practices of Christian worship like social prayer.

In retrospect, it is fair to question whether practical civil religion could have ever worked as intended. It called for regeneration without the Holy Spirit, salvation without forgiveness of sins, and prayer without miracles. However, these deficiencies were not obvious to its eighteenth-century publicists. Mercier, Williams, Robespierre, and others spoke about their project in the most optimistic and exalted language. Practical civil religion was not merely a means of providing intellectual grounds for virtue. The practitioners of practical civil religion hoped by their prayers to create a living religion that would unite the citizenry in virtue.

In light of the long tradition that reads eighteenth-century deism as secularizing, the keen interest in worship and prayer is somewhat startling. The existence and wide appeal of deist common prayer requires a reevaluation of both deism and the cult of the Supreme Being. Deists were not all individualists and some were willing to consider re-creating the churches their polemics had sought to empty (albeit with less theology). Perhaps more significantly, the tradition of practical civil religion requires us to reevaluate the nature of secularization in the eighteenth century. It was entirely common for Christian practices to outlive Christian teaching. For example, the Revolution generated immense numbers of catechisms, prayers, saints, and cults. Common prayer in particular struck men like Mercier, Williams, and Robespierre as indispensable.

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<sup>133</sup>Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ed. Ian Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge, 2014), 311.

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