

THE REIGN OF TERROR

JAN VOERMAN
Geesbrug, The Netherlands

Traditionally, historians have endorsed the idea that the Reign of Terror that occurred as a part of the French Revolution lasted for a period of three and a half years. Ellen White, for instance, noted in regard to the length of the French Revolution that “It was in 1793 that the decrees which abolished the Christian religion and set aside the Bible, passed the French Assembly. Three years and a half later a resolution rescinding these decrees, thus granting toleration to Scripture, was adopted by the same body.”¹ However, do the facts sustain a period of three and a half years of terror by the governing body of France? Or did the declaration against Christianity and the Bible last only a few weeks or months at the most?

Critical students such as Harold Snide call this time period into question, proposing instead that the Reign of Terror “ended after a few months.”² Snide contends that

we can discover no adequately significant event coming even approximately three and a half years after the atheistic supremacy, to mark the close of the period. Three and a half years from November 1793, would bring us to the spring of 1797. *It has been asserted that the Convention then repudiated its atheistic pronouncement. History shows no such action.* In the first place, the Directory was in power, not the Convention, in 1797. Furthermore, the atheistic intolerance had spent its force and had been repudiated by decree and by the new constitution of 1795, so this work did not remain to be done in 1797.³

Snide supports his argument with the following outline of events:

- On November 26, 1793, the Council of the Commune outlawed all religions, including Christianity, except for the worship of Reason.
- Nine days later, the Convention forbade violence relating to religious liberty.
- On May 9, 1794, the Convention, under the influence of Robespierre, decreed the worship of the Supreme Being.
- On September 20, 1794, government support of religion was abolished, bringing considerable religious liberty, although “non-juring

¹Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1990), 287.

²Harold Snide, “Great Controversy Errors Exposed: 3.5 Years of French Revolution and Other Statements Incorrect” (<www.nonsda.org/egw/gc3.html>), emphasis original.

³*Ibid.*

priests still suffered some persecution, but this was far more from political than from religious animosity.” An attempt was also made to restore “the tenth-day festivals [of Reason] in the hope of competing with Christianity and its weekly Lord’s Day; but this effort was a ludicrous and dismal failure.”

- On February 21, 1795, Boissy d’Anglas made a motion for the complete separation of Church and State, which allowed for “any kind of religious worship throughout France, but with some restrictions as to place, advertising, endowments, etc. Persecution still took place. “The refractory clergy were still considered criminal, but this was a political matter, and could hardly be considered the death of God’s Two Witnesses [i.e., the Old and New Testaments]. In the provinces there was much delay and opposition by local officials in permitting the liberty granted by the Convention.”
- On August 17, 1795, a new constitution, written by “comparatively moderate men,” was adopted that among other things mandated the separation of Church and State and guaranteed freedom of worship.⁴

He then concludes: “*Thus we see that in less than six months the atheistic enactment of November 26, 1793, was abrogated; and in less than two years there was actually greater religious freedom guaranteed on a fundamental legal basis, than existed prior to the outbreak of atheism. The ‘Two Witnesses’ just simply did not stay ‘dead’ three and a half years.*”⁵

When approaching the subject of the Reign of Terror we must bear in mind, however, that we are dealing with a time of revolution—a time of terror, while, at the same time, *liberty, equality, and fraternity* were the leading watchwords of the day. The historical facts point to a harsh reality: although these words were at that time France’s propaganda device, there was in reality excessive terror and much bloodshed—a sinister caricature of France’s well-sounding motto. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to examine the historical events that make up the period of time referred to as the Reign of Terror in order to determine whether the period lasted for three and half years as traditionally proposed by older historians, or only a few months as contended by some contemporary scholars.

The event that marked the beginning of the Reign of Terror was seemingly innocuous. A Revolutionary Calendar with a new name for each month was adopted with September 22, 1792 to September 21, 1793 as year one. However, the new calendar annulled saints’ days and Sundays and this gave great impetus to the dechristianizing movement. All Christian worship was abolished and civic festivals were dictated with dances in the cathedrals

⁴Ibid., emphasis original.

⁵Ibid.

every *décadi* or tenth day. And so there was in fact no freedom of Christian worship, as we will soon discover more clearly.

On October 15, 1793 (15th Brumaire of the year II), Marie-Joseph Chénier proposed to found a new religion instead of the Christian faith. “Wrench,” he said,

the sons of the Republic from the yoke of theocracy which now weighs upon them. . . . [T]hen, freed from prejudice and worthy to represent the French nation, you will be able, on the ruins of fallen superstitions, to found the one universal religion, which has neither secrets nor mysteries, whose one dogma is equality, whose orators are the laws, whose pontiffs are the magistrates, which asks no incense from the great human family to burn save before the altar of our *country, our mother, and our deity*.⁶

We are informed that this speech was made in the name of the Committee, applauded by the Convention, and officially printed.⁷

Thus solicited and applauded by the Convention, soon a conscious war with Christianity and the Bible raged. Everywhere in the country, priests, bishops, and ministers renounced their beliefs and resigned, often accompanied by public declarations of their religious fraud and folly. Shameless and ridiculous processions took place. Donkeys were dressed in bishops’ robes and miters and led through the streets. In Lyon, an ass “with a bible and a missal tied to its tail, was followed by cartloads of church vessels.”⁸

The movement of dechristianization quickly became general. Religion was renounced. Christian churches were closed and then reopened as Temples of Reason. No other religion was propagated than that of Liberty and Equality, while the resistant clergy were denounced and arrested.

A. Aulard noted that

The Commune of Paris . . . on the 3rd Frimaire of the Year II (24th November, 1793), on the request of Chaumette, . . . decreed “that all the churches and chapels of every religion and sect which exist in Paris shall be closed forthwith,” and also that anyone who asked for their reopening should be arrested as a suspicious person.⁹

Although the situation throughout the country varied from district to district, especially in the rural areas, there was, in general, no real freedom of

⁶A. Aulard, *Christianity and the French Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), 104, emphasis supplied.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 779. Cf. Shailer Mathews, *The French Revolution: A Sketch* (New York: Chautauqua, 1900), 248, n.

⁹Aulard, 109.

worship and, as troubles and disturbances continued, the movement for the destruction of Christianity continued strong.

*Atheistic Enactment Abrogated with
Worship of Supreme Being*

On May 9 (or rather May 7 of the 18th Floréal of Year II), 1794, under the leading influence of Robespierre, the worship of the Supreme Being was decreed. However, what did this mean? Were atheistic measures actually put to an end within six months of the initial decree? Was freedom of religion restored? Did France return to the worship of the true God of heaven, and was Christianity once again established?

Aulard explains that “There was one to which I have only alluded—namely, the establishment of the Worship of the Supreme Being, under which the attacks on Christianity went on and which was in truth only the continuation of the Worship of Reason under another form—the form initiated by Robespierre.”¹⁰

Thus it is clear that the establishment of the worship of the Supreme Being was, in actuality, an attack against Christianity—the attacks went on. The worship of Reason was continued under another form—Deism. It was also in a sense atheistic since the true God of the Bible was worshiped no more than with the worship of Reason.

Aulard, in his Preface, states:

A dechristianization of France started in 1793, and in the Year II, first with the Cult of Reason, then with that of the Supreme Being. . . . The peril thus run by Christianity at the time of the Worship of Reason and the Worship of the Supreme Being is the most outstanding episode in the religious history of the French Revolution. . . . [I]t was the whole of Christianity which was involved, and at a solemn hour, when a New France was being called in existence.¹¹

There was no positive change for Christianity under the worship of the Supreme Being. The dechristianization went on as before, leaving Christianity and the Bible to remain in peril.

The English newspaper, *The Times*, on August 2, 1794, nearly three months after the introduction of the cult of the Supreme Being on May 7, listed a number of stipulations imposed by the French government on its people. Under the heading *French Consistency* these stipulations included:

¹⁰Ibid., 124.

¹¹Ibid., 13-14.

Decreed	That religious worship shall be exercised as usual.
Ordered	That all Priests and Bishops performing Mass, be put to death immediately.
Decreed	That there is no God, nor any power superior to man; and that a throne be erected to Reason.
Ordered	That it be made known to the Public, that the Convention do believe in a Supreme Being, who is above all things.
Decreed	That death is an eternal sleep, and the idea of an hereafter ridiculous.
Decreed	That the French Nation is <i>free</i> , and every individual shall fully enjoy LIBERTY.
Decreed	That all persons shall enjoy full Liberty of Speech.
Ordered	That whoever finds fault with the proceedings of the Convention, be sent to the Revolutionary Tribunal—that is—put to death.
Ordered	That whoever talks of restoring Royalty as a branch of the Constitution, be put to death.
Ordered	That Great Britain be invaded, and the national flag hoisted on the Tower of London; and that the English be invited to follow the example of France, and destroy Royalty.
Decreed	That France is a brave, a generous, and a <i>humane</i> people; and that their wish is to make all mankind happy.

The Times adds the following significant words to the stipulations:

Such are the out-lines of that constitution which France at present is cured with; and which is not only recommended as a proper one for this kingdom, but actually endeavoured to be established here by a set of Jacobins who are a disgrace to their country, and a dishonour to human nature. The violence of their proceedings seem, indeed, to be a token of their despair; and, from the resolute activity of government, there appears every reason to hope, that the sword of the law will speedily bring such rebellious miscreants to justice.¹²

There is no doubt these ordered and decreed sentences do *not* reflect freedom of Christian worship. “That there is no God, nor any power superior to man” is a clear anti-Bible and anti-Christian decree. Further, the Supreme Being is not the true biblical God of heaven, but more a philosophical being, indicating nature and the people.

¹²*The Times*, Saturday, 2 August 1794, 2, column 4.

Robespierre's introduction of his Supreme Being was, in fact, a disgusting mockery to the righteous and only true God of the Bible. Note how Edmond de Pressensé describes this act:

The future high priest of the Supreme Being was ascending thus by bloody steps to the altar of his god. To arrive there he marched over the dead bodies of his friends, of those at whose table he had sat, and whose marriage contracts he had signed. Master in the Jacobin Club, and in the Committees, this most pure, this incorruptible saint of demagogism, was always ready with some furtive plan of conspiracy, in the elastic meshes of which he entangled all his adversaries, or, more truly, all his rivals.¹³

The *Christian History Institute* concurs: "On this day, May 7, 1794, the Committee of Public Safety, which controlled France, decreed worship of a Supreme Being. This was not the God of the *Bible*, who enters into personal relationship with men, but a Deist god."¹⁴ John McManners points out that "In effect, it was all the same; his new religion was but an episode of the de-Christianization—as Mercier's errand boy observed, "There's no longer a God, only Robespierre's *Être Suprême*."¹⁵ Walter Scott also declares that Robespierre's religion involved no worship of the true God, stating that "His acknowledgment of a Divinity . . . involved no worship of the Great Being."¹⁶ Aulard describes the pretended freedom to believe in the principles of the new philosophical anti-Christian religion this way: "You may believe in them or not as you like. If you do not believe you will be banished, not for irreligion, but for lack of social sentiment."¹⁷ Simon Schama calls the Festival of the Supreme Being that was to replace Christian worship a "most ambitious political production" and explains:

Robespierre had announced the creed a month earlier, on May 7 (18 Floréal), in a painfully crafted speech on "the relations between moral and religious ideas with republican principles." "The true priest of the Supreme Being," Robespierre declared to the baffled and the bemused, "is Nature itself; its temple is the universe; its religion virtue; its festivals the joy of a great

¹³M. Edmond de Pressensé, *Religion and the Reign of Terror* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1868), 239.

¹⁴"Glimpses of Christian History, May 7, 1794, French Revolution Decreed Cult of Supreme Being," *Christianity Today International*, Christian History Institute, Box 540, Worcester, PA 19490 (<www.christianhistorytimeline.com/DAILYF/2002/05/daily-05-07-2002.shtml>).

¹⁵John McManners, *Lectures on European History, 1789-1914* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 65.

¹⁶Walter Scott, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Smith, 1859), 1:177.

¹⁷Aulard, 124.

people assembled under its eyes to tie the sweet knot of universal fraternity and to present before it [Nature] the homage of pure and feeling [sensible] hearts.”¹⁸

Thus Robespierre, by introducing the cult of the Supreme Being—a worship reflecting much of Rousseau’s ideas—actually desired to make this “the State religion and to be himself the pontiff of it.”¹⁹

An opera singer named Mademoiselle Maillard “was proclaimed goddess of the feast of freedom and reason.”²⁰ She declared, as the representative figure of Reason: “Let the world consider it! This, O National Convention, wonder of the universe, is our New Divinity; Goddess of Reason, worthy, and alone worthy of revering. Her henceforth we adore.”²¹

On the feast of the Supreme Being, it turned out that Robespierre himself was worshiped and received similar honor, much to the disgrace of his opponents:

In his craven soul, he has worshipped not the Supreme Being, but only himself, Robespierre.²²

Incorruptible Robespierre, not unlike the Ancients, as Legislator of a free people, will now also be Priest and Prophet . . . the “Existence of the Supreme Being.”²³

Look at it one moment, O Reader, not two. The shabbiest page of Human Annals: or is there, that thou wottest of, one shabbier? Mumbo-Jumbo of the African woods to me seems venerable beside the new Deity of Robespierre; for this is a conscious Mumbo-Jumbo, and knows that he is machinery.²⁴

His pompous self-glorification on the festival of the Supreme Being . . . gave fresh irritation to all classes of his opponents, who thenceforth spared no pain to accomplish his ruin.²⁵

¹⁸Schama, 831.

¹⁹Aulard, 125.

²⁰Samuel Macaulay Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1909), 4:387.

²¹Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, n.d.), 2:323.

²²Lydia Hoyt Farmer, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1889), 533.

²³Carlyle, 355.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 356.

²⁵W. Henley Jervis, *The Gallican Church and the Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882), 257.

For one moment this most prudent of men forgot his caution; his face, usually grave, was brightened by a smile of triumph. For a moment the Vicar of God fancied he was himself God!²⁶

The man stood forth in his glory, he appeared as a leader of the Government and as a religious leader, at once a pontiff and a dictator . . . and we have seen that the work of destroying Christianity went on apace.²⁷

Aulard further states that letters have been found among Robespierre's papers "in which he was regarded, not as a mere pontiff, but as a divinity."²⁸ In a leading newspaper of 1794, Robespierre is addressed as being a Deity and to express his horrible pontificate, he, with his party, was characterized as "wholesale dealers in human flesh."²⁹ Thus it is clear that with this new form of worship the only true God of heaven was not glorified. There was *no relief* for Christianity whatsoever. The destructive work against Christianity *went on apace*. The worship of the Supreme Being was revolutionary and anti-Christian, as Shailer Mathews also clearly confirms: "As Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety gained influence, the cult of Reason was repressed, and France recalled to the better but no less revolutionary and anti-Christian worship of the Supreme Being."³⁰ Aulard explains that everyone was commanded to think and act as Robespierre, and those who did not were branded as "enemies of the Republic" and as "men who are corrupt."³¹ What is more, he concludes: "So under this pontificate there would be no more religious liberty."³²

Great crowds, dressed in their Sunday best, attended the Festival of the Supreme Being, but did this day have any favorable effect? Did it bring some relief and freedom to the oppressed people? François Furet informs us that

Accounts agree on this point, which is hard to comprehend, since the Terror was going full swing and the dread machine had been still for only a day . . . the illusion did not last very long—the bloody law of Prairial [May 1794] followed in a couple of days. Nor did the festival have a favourable effect on the Conventionnels, who had seen in it only its political, and even personal aspect. The Supreme Being did not have the same hold over them as the Committee of Public Safety. War and

²⁶Louis Madelin, *The French Revolution* (London: William Heinemann, 1922), 407.

²⁷Aulard, 130.

²⁸Ibid., 129.

²⁹*The Sun*, Saturday, 23 August 1794, 2, column 1.

³⁰Mathews, 248.

³¹Aulard, 126.

³²Ibid.

fear remained the political and psychological mainsprings of the revolutionary dictatorship.³³

Consider how the grim situation deteriorated two days after the procession of the Supreme Being when the law of Prairial was presented by Couthon. John Dalberg-Acton describes the act as follows:

It is the most tyrannical of all the acts of the Revolution, and is not surpassed by anything in the records of absolute monarchy. For the decree of Prairial suppressed the formalities of law in political trials . . . no time was to be lost with witnesses, written depositions, or arguments. . . . Robespierre had only to send a deputy's name to the public accuser, and he would be in his grave next day. . . . The victims increased rapidly in number . . . the guillotine was removed to a distant part of the city, where a deep trench was dug to carry away such quantities of blood.³⁴

Schama, commenting on the decree of 22 Prairial, says:

Henceforth anyone, denounced for "slandering patriotism," "seeking to inspire discouragement," "spreading false news" or even "depraving morals, corrupting the public conscience and impairing the purity and energy of the revolutionary government" could be brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal . . . no witnesses would be allowed to be called nor could the accused have a defense counsel. Were not the jurymen, after all, good citizens, capable of coming to a fair and unbiased verdict on their own judgment?³⁵

The execution rate went up extremely high. It reveals that the worship of the Supreme Being had not exerted any softening influence upon the Reign of Terror. The alarming effect on the public is not surprising: "Public opinion was shaken, and the practices of the repression abetted the fear."³⁶

When Robespierre and his accomplices were themselves sent to the guillotine, did this end the Revolution and bring any immediate relief to Christianity? George H. Allen justly remarks:

Robespierre's downfall has sometimes been regarded as the conclusion of the Revolution. Difficult as it is to assign any definite limit to this great movement of the Revolution, the 9th Thermidor of the Year II (July 27, 1794) is manifestly premature. For revolutionary activity continued with scarcely

³³François Furet, *The French Revolution, 1770-1814* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 148-149.

³⁴John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 287-288.

³⁵Schama, 837.

³⁶Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from 1793-1799* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 125.

abated intensity. . . . [T]he Terror was still maintained as an instrument of government although in waning measure; and the revolutionary leaders were still intent on plans for the remodeling and reforming of the framework of society.³⁷

De Pressensé writes: “The situation of France immediately after the fall of Robespierre was very peculiar. The party which had triumphed held in the main the principles of him who had fallen.”³⁸

Since the triumphant party was mainly led by similar principles, no real change was to be expected. No wonder then that we read: “Too often, however, the reaction which set in on the fall of Robespierre was but a continuation of the Reign of Terror.”³⁹ It is clear, then, that the situation remained much the same and that the objectionable laws were not repealed.

As to matters of religion, the fall of Robespierre in Thermidor induced no very rapid change. Persecution was no longer so atrocious, but still all the laws of proscription remained unrepealed, even liberty of worship had been theoretically re-established—a liberty which was suspended on the slightest suspicion. Public opinion had not yet returned to Christianity. The reaction of Thermidor was imbued *fully* with the *infidel* philosophy of the day.⁴⁰

W. Henley Jervis informs us that

The change was not immediate, for the men who succeeded Robespierre in power—such as Tallien, Barras, Fouché, Thibaudeau, Barère—were *not less* fiercely hostile to Christianity and the Church than any of their fallen colleagues and by no means disposed to repeal the bloodthirsty legislation of the Terror.⁴¹

Thus it is made clear that after the fall of Robespierre there was just as much hostility to Christianity and the Bible as before. Thus it is no wonder that although a decree of freedom of worship existed it was grossly violated. It only meant freedom of worship of the state religion on the tenth day and meanwhile secularization went on.

The decree of the 16th Frimaire of the year II, which had proclaimed liberty of worship, had not been repealed, though it was violated almost in every direction. . . . But the work of secularization went on. Thus on the 3rd Frimaire of the Year III

³⁷George H. Allen, *The French Revolution* (Philadelphia: George Barrie’s Sons, 1925), 4:240-241.

³⁸De Pressensé, 249.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 251.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, emphasis supplied.

⁴¹W. Henley Jervis, 259, emphasis supplied.

at Albi, Mallarmé and Brouillerot, representatives “en mission”, prohibited all exercise of public worship within the district, and all meetings except to celebrate the “décadi” [the tenth day].⁴²

The Reign of Terror was a period of great chaos, agony, doubt, insecurity, and uncertainty. The ruling powers were divided, inconsistent, and contradictory. “The Convention was characterized by inconsistencies that loom large in the history of legislatures. It followed policies so contradictory that at first glance it seems impossible to find a common feature among them.”⁴³

Freedom of Worship with the Speech of Boissy d’Anglas

On February 21, 1795 (the decree of the third Ventôse of the Year III), Boissy d’Anglas made a speech about the separation of Church and State. It is true that in several districts this decree led to the reopening of churches, but many were soon closed again, while the priests “were obliged to conceal themselves through fear of the penal legislation of the Terror, which was not yet repealed.”⁴⁴ Thus since these iniquitous laws were still in force the churches were, in fact, still in peril. “In many districts the magistrates exerted themselves by unfair and arbitrary proceedings of all kinds to obstruct the execution of the law of the 3rd Ventôse.”⁴⁵ In other places, where priests exhorted people to come and hear mass on Sundays and Festivals, they were “forthwith denounced for having insulted the Republican Calendar, which was still legally in force. Sometimes meetings for worship on Sundays were expressly prohibited . . . and Dumont insisted that the Terrorist legislation should be enforced to its full extent.”⁴⁶

When we look carefully at the facts, it will soon be clear that there is only a difference of strategy with exactly the same intention as before Robespierre’s execution. “Boissy d’Anglas was by education a Protestant, but had abandoned all belief in Christianity, and was a philosophical freethinker of the most advanced type.”⁴⁷

Aulard records Boissy’s report to the citizens of France:

“Citizens,” he said, “public worship has been banished from the Government and it will not return.” Then he declared the Catholic religion to be intolerant, domineering, sanguinary, childish, absurd and harmful. The ideal would be that instead of

⁴²Aulard, 135-136.

⁴³Lefebvre, 160.

⁴⁴Jervis, 271.

⁴⁵Ibid., 267.

⁴⁶Ibid., 267-268.

⁴⁷Ibid., 263.

religion men should be led by the light of reason and bound to each other by ties of mere common interest, by the principles of social organization, and by that imperious feeling which draws men to gather together and love one another. It was by “the wisdom of the laws” that the Convention would prepare for the “sole reign of philosophy, for the sway of morality alone. . . . Absurd dogmas will be no sooner recognized than despised. Very soon the religion of Socrates and of Marcus Aurelius and of Cicero will be the religion of the world.” But to attain this end we must go slowly, like nature. Let there be no Hébertism, no persecution.⁴⁸

Aulard concludes: “Thus the plan of substituting natural religion for Christianity *was reaffirmed*. Christianity could not be overthrown by violence. They hoped to do it by liberty—and strict legal restraints.”⁴⁹ Thus although this decree proclaimed liberty, it, in actuality,

prohibited all external ceremonies, signs or inscriptions and all public proclamations or calling of assemblies. No one might appear in public in canonicals or wear ornaments used in religious ceremonies. All religious gatherings were placed under *police supervision*. The communes were not to acquire nor let [i.e., rent] any place for religious purposes. No endowment, either permanent or temporary, might be created, nor might any tax be imposed for the maintenance of religion.⁵⁰

We can only conclude that in reality there was not that kind of freedom as some would think. Furthermore, it was not at all the religion of the Bible that was favored. The philosophies of Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and Cicero were advocated as the religion of the world and, therefore, we can confidently say that this was not in any way a Christian revival; on the contrary, as was prophesied, God’s two Witnesses (the Old and New Testaments) *remained dead*. Says de Pressensé:

At the close of the Reign of Terror the moral condition of France was truly deplorable. The nation had begun by making of liberty a religion. Disgusted finally with the crimes committed in its name, and possessing no longer that faith which gives consolation in disappointment, and saves the soul from universal and morbid doubt, the people seem to have lost the faculty of believing in God. Thus the greatest bond of moral restraint was broken. . . . Never did debauchery parade itself with more audacity in open day. . . . A journal of the time gave the true explanation of this deplorable situation. “We are the only people in the world,” said the *Éclair*, “who ever attempted to do without religion. But what

⁴⁸Aulard, 139.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 139, emphasis supplied.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, emphasis supplied.

is already our sad experience? Every tenth day [this Sabbath of the infidels] we are astounded by the recital of more crimes and assassinations than were committed formerly in a whole year. At the risk of speaking an obsolete language, and of receiving insult for response, we declare that we must cease striving to destroy the remnants of religion if we desire to prevent the entire dissolution of society.”⁵¹

Thus there was no Christian revival yet. De Pressensé notes that

Entire religious liberty did not exist a single day during the whole course of the Revolution. Even under the “régime” of the separation of Church and State it was seriously trammled by the general government. And in many cases the legal impediments were rendered tenfold more severe by the passions and injustice of the provincial magistrates. These acted almost everywhere in the interest of the anti-religious tendency.⁵²

No Repudiation of Atheistic Laws in the Spring of 1797

It is hard to believe that the Two Witnesses had come to life in France much before the end of the prophesied three and a half years. No sign of the influence of the Bible was perceptible in the disorderly situation that reigned supreme. Further, we are informed that the situation grew worse under a divided government. With

violent factions in the directory; it sank under its own weight and disorder reigned supreme. . . . The country, like its government, went blindly on at random. . . . The people threw themselves headlong into all forms of pleasure-seeking. . . . [T]he dissolution of morals was unbridled, gambling was carried likewise to unheard-of excesses; the police did nothing, bands of brigands multiplied. The south was laid waste by the “compagnons de Jésus” and the “enfants du Soleil”; the “chauffeurs” terrified the west. It seemed as if the whole state was on the verge of dissolution.⁵³

However, during the first part of the year 1797, a clear change came about. “The election of 1797 had fortified in the government the party of moderation. Several of the new delegates, such as Camille Jordan and Royer Collard, were strangers to the violent measures of the Revolution. They were especially strangers to antireligious passions, and represented constituents who were attached to Christianity, and more and more weary of the intolerance of the Directory. The legislative session began with a revision

⁵¹De Pressensé, 293-294.

⁵²Ibid., 292.

⁵³Victor Duruy, *A Short History of France* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1918), 363.

of the revolutionary laws.⁵⁴ Although some advance was already made in behalf of Christianity in 1796, it was not until the first part of 1797 that the lot of the religious became more favorable:

But the lot of the religious was making advance toward betterment during the year 1796 and the first part of 1797. On June 17 Camille Jordan, deputy from Lyons, delivered an address in favor of the priests and calling for a revision of the laws respecting religion. On June 24 the directorium reported to the Five Hundred that, in consequence of the more favorable outlook in religious affairs, a large number of priests had returned and many religious organizations were asking for freedom of worship.⁵⁵

Camille Jordan, “a young man of good sentiments and a lively imagination,”⁵⁶ was “elected at Bordeaux to carry out a programme involving the *restoration of religion* on the basis of a liberal Separation.⁵⁷ The role of Jordan is recorded thus:

On the 4th Prairial Dumolard had applied for the nomination of a Commission to revise the laws affecting the government of religious worship. This was duly appointed: Camille Jordan was elected chairman, and the Council, while waiting for his report, sent a message to the Directors demanding the *immediate release* of all incarcerated priests.⁵⁸

Camille Jordan became the organ of the complaints which were everywhere made against the infractions of the liberty of worship. He pronounced a *memorable discourse* in favor of indiscriminate liberty of conscience for all citizens, and feared not to borrow arguments from the excellency of Christianity. . . . “If you desire to erect a dike against the fearful progress of crime and disorder, you must guarantee complete religious liberty.” Jordan then proceeded in the most reasonable manner to explain in detail how this liberty should be respected. . . . This discourse was a *marked* event. . . . The Assembly, by a strong majority, *repealed* the most of the intolerant laws which yet disgraced the code of France. Liberty of conscience obtained a signal triumph.⁵⁹

Among the most important subjects to which the new members purposed to direct their attention were religion and the laws concerning the priests. The commission charged with this

⁵⁴De Pressensé, 280-281.

⁵⁵*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, 4:388.

⁵⁶Louis Adolphe Thiers, *The History of the French Revolution* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1971), 5:91.

⁵⁷Madelin, 523, emphasis supplied.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 525, emphasis supplied.

⁵⁹De Pressensé, 280-283, emphasis supplied.

momentous subject appointed for its reporter young Camille Jordan. . . . Camille Jordan proposed the abolition of the oaths, the *repeal of the oppressive laws* which had been the consequence, permission to use bells, and to have cemeteries, in which each religion could place such religious signs as it pleased upon the graves. The principles of this report, though expressed with dangerous emphasis, were just.⁶⁰

The events linked with those developments culminating with Jordan's report clearly indicate that his work and address were not at all insignificant, but played a definite role in procuring a real change that made *large numbers* of priests return and *many religious organizations* ask for freedom of worship.

Jordan's address was *officially published* in the French *Gazette Nationale ou Le Moniteur Universel*. To all, he sacredly promised full religious freedom.⁶¹ Jervis explains: "A Committee was appointed to revise the laws of the Revolution, more particularly those affecting public worship and the clergy; and on the 17th of June, Camille Jordan, a young barrister from Lyons, presented its report, which is a document of *singular ability and interest*."⁶² He continues:

Jordan pointed out with stern emphasis the true sources which had produced the existing state of confusion and distress. "Within the last few years we have enacted thousands of laws; we have reformed all branches of our jurisprudence; and yet never has this noble empire been more shamefully ravaged by crime. Why is this? Because you have displaced from the hearts of Frenchmen that *great law* which was implanted there *by nature*, that law which alone distinguishes right from wrong, which alone gives authority to every other legislative statute. Recall that mighty law *to life and energy*; grant to all forms of religious worship the faculty of re-establishing it in every heart; then we shall have no further need of all this apparatus of ordinances and penalties. Religion, of whatever shape, ought not only to be tolerated, but protected; because all religion promotes morality, and is therefore beneficial to mankind. To proscribe religion of any kind in France, after the sanguinary lessons that we have received, would be an impious thought; it will never find admission among the representatives of the people; it is execrated within these walls. I swear it by the representatives of the people; it is execrated within these walls. I swear it by the shades of five hundred thousand Frenchmen

⁶⁰Thiers, 101-102, emphasis supplied.

⁶¹*Gazette Nationale ou Le Moniteur Universel*, no. 275, vendredi, 23 juin, 1797, 1097, Corps Législatif, Suite du rapport de Camille Jordan. "Que tous nos concitoyens soient donc aujourd'hui pleinement rassurés; que tous catholiques, protestants, assermentés, insermentés, sachent que c'est la volonté du législateur, comme le vœu de la loi, qu'ils suivent en liberté la religion que leur coeur a choisie. Je leur en renouvelle, en votre nom, la promesse sacrée: tous les cultes sont libres en France."

⁶²Jervis, 286, emphasis supplied.

slaughtered on the plains of La Vendée,—that awful monument of the madness of persecution and the extravagances of fanaticism! Let our fellow-citizens be henceforth fully reassured; I renew to them in your name the sacred promise—Religious worship is free in France!⁶³

If there was already free religious worship in France, why then this pleading address? Wouldn't that be like knocking on a door that has been already opened? We are compelled to admit that everything points toward the fact that there was *no real* religious freedom yet. And so Jordan, in his courageous and impressive speech, demanded a *complete restoration* of Christianity with all its signs, symbols, ceremonies, and practices.⁶⁴ It is, however, not surprising that not everyone agreed with all the details of Jordan's report, and it seems that particularly his pleading for the use of church bells was not appreciated by everyone and caused some hilarity that gave him the nickname Bell-Jordan.

After Jordan's presentation a report about the laws with regard to the clergy was presented: "A second report followed, presented by Dubruel, which had for its object the total abrogation of the penal laws against the clergy, and their reinstatement in all rights and privileges of French citizens."⁶⁵ A prolonged and sometimes heated discussion followed, but when at last the Council was ready to vote, a very remarkable result was gained: "When the vote was at length taken on the 18th of July [1797], there appeared an *immense majority* in favour of the first proposition of Camille Jordan and Dubruel; and the *iniquitous legislation of the Revolution against ecclesiastics was in consequence annulled.*"⁶⁶

This remarkable event that marked the end of the prophesied period of three years and a half, paved the upward way for the Bible and for Christianity. There was no foreign power imposed—it was the same body—France's own ruling Government that adopted after a period of terror of three years and a half "a resolution rescinding these decrees, thus granting toleration to the Scriptures."⁶⁷

George Croly summarizes the events as follows: "By the decree of the French Government, declaring that the nation acknowledged no God, the Old and New Testaments were *slain* throughout the limits of Republican France."⁶⁸ He continues: "In three years and a half from the abolition of

⁶³Ibid., 287, emphasis supplied.

⁶⁴Ibid., 288.

⁶⁵Ibid., 289.

⁶⁶Ibid., 290, emphasis supplied.

⁶⁷White, 287.

⁶⁸George Croly, *The Apocalypse of St. John or Prophecy of the Rise, Progress, and Fall of the Church of Rome; The Inquisition; The Revolution of France; The Universal War; and the Final Triumph of Christianity* (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827), 174.

religion in France, it shall be restored, and even placed in a more secure and prominent rank than before.⁶⁹

Thus it was that on the 17th of June 1797 the “Council of Five Hundred” made a “Revision of the laws relative to religious worship,” which consisted of a number of propositions, “abolishing alike the Republican restrictions on Popish worship, and the Popist restrictions on Protestants.”⁷⁰ Croly mentions a number of issues that were brought forward in Jordan’s report:

- That *all* citizens might buy or hire edifices for the *free* exercise of religious worship.
- That *all* congregations might assemble by the sound of bells.
- That *no test* or *promise* of any sort unrequired from other citizens should be required of the ministers of those congregations.
- That any individual attempting to impede, or in any way interrupt the public worship should be fined, up to 500 livres, and not less than 50; and that if the interruption proceeded from the constituted authorities, such authorities should be fined double the sum.
- That entrance to assemblies for the purpose of religious worship should be free for all citizens.
- That all other laws concerning religious worship should be repealed.

Croly concludes:

Those regulations, in comprehending the whole state of worship in France, were, in fact, a peculiar boon to Protestantism. . . . The Church and the Bible had been slain in France from November 1793, till June 1797. The *three years* and a *half* were expended, and the *Bible*, so long and sternly repressed before, *was placed in honour*, and was openly the book of free Protestantism!⁷¹

Conclusion

Thus after the termination of the prophesied period of three years and a half in June 1797, a free and upward way was paved for the Bible and Protestantism. De Pressensé noted that

as soon as religion became free from the civil administration, and was left to itself, it recovered itself with astonishing rapidity from the discredit into which it had fallen. France witnessed at

⁶⁹Ibid., 177.

⁷⁰Ibid., 179-180.

⁷¹Ibid., 180-181, emphasis supplied.

the close of the eighteenth century the unexpected spectacle of a powerful revival of Christian faith.⁷²

Shortly after the Revolutionary laws against the church were annulled, a *coup d'état* took place with a temporary outburst of persecution of the priests, finally resulting in the captivity of the pope by Napoleon's General Berthier in 1798 and thus the power of the Church of Rome was checked. It is noted that "Finally a decree was passed to restore to the priests their civil rights though in September of 1797, during a temporary period of control by the republican radicals, persecution of the priests was renewed, and of the returned priests stern requirements were made."⁷³ Jervis writes:

The rapid successes of Napoleon Bonaparte in the north of Italy had paved the way for the execution of one of the favourite projects of the ruling powers of Paris, namely, the overthrow of the Pope's temporal authority.⁷⁴

The Constitutional clergy, again, while professing theoretically the deepest reverence for the Holy See as the centre of Catholic unity, were in reality thoroughly opposed to any programme of pacification which should assert in practice the spiritual supremacy of Rome.⁷⁵

The Reign of Terror had ended, following three and a half years of violence. Its ending brought with it true freedom of religion for all the people of France, in which each citizen could worship God in the manner each preferred, and thereby restoring the Bible to its rightful place.

⁷²De Pressensé, 292.

⁷³*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, 4:388.

⁷⁴Jervis, 318.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 325.