La Morte de la Culture Populaire Française

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*Rois ivres de sang et d’orgueil;
Le peuple souverain s’avance,
Tyrans descendez au cercueil.*

--Thomas Rousseau, *L’âme du peuple du soldat*

On the 14th of July, 1790, a sopping company of national guardsmen and citizens stood in a rain-flooded field with their eyes transfixed upon that which had been “transformed into huge elliptic arena in the center of which rose a huge altar to the patrie [to the state, the nation itself],” known as the Champ de Mars.¹ It was here that a great festival would soon begin. And it was this newly built altar, perhaps, that characterized the very nature of the festival. Inscribed upon it was a message defining the nation. It read:

The Nation, the Law, and the King.
The Nation is you, the Law is also you.
The King is the guardian of the Law.²

This, of course, was what the celebration was all about; the people were to celebrate the fact that they were the very law that governed the nation of France. All eyes would be diverted from the altar’s inscription, however, as the Sacrament of Holy Mass began. Yet this Mass would bear quite an unusual mark—it would be “said on the altar of the patrie, not on the altar of Christ,” in which case “it seemed that the sovereignty of man and

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² Ibid., 331.
nation rather than that of God was being celebrated.”

This unique reading of the Mass was quite unlike anything that had ever happened at any other French festival or celebration. In fact, it was almost as if it were not French at all. The pouring rain, it seems, was symbolically washing away the sovereignty that God and his divinely-appointed king had once had in France. The people would now define new sovereigns—the nation and its people.

The celebration outlined above is that of the Festival of Federation. While there is evidence to support the idea that this was still a Christian celebration, the reading of the Mass on altar of the patrie and not that of Christ, as well as the fact that the king’s chair was on the same level as that of the president of the National Assembly (the king’s chair was customarily elevated above all others), suggests otherwise. The Festival of Federation, then, serves as a precursor to the coming dechristianization movement that would hit its stride in 1793 and in which the people would transfer sovereignty from God, his Son, and King Louis XVI to themselves. Therefore, the Revolution that would begin in 1789 would also be a religious reformation. And it would be a reformation of the most extreme sort since it sought a complete doctrinal change; it sought a complete removal of the Christian God from France. This extreme reformation is evident in the way in which a predominately Christian themed popular culture would come to promote a shift in sovereignty from God and king, to the nation and its people. In a country where Catholicism fundamentally defined all that the French were, and subsequently what popular culture was, all would be undone. As Timothy Tackett states, seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century France was a nation in which “the parish clergyman was first and foremost director of souls,

3 Ibid.
the essential link with rural world between man and the supernatural, man and his salvation.” Therefore, the patrie and Christianity were intrinsically linked. But with Christianity’s removal amidst the Revolution and its concurrent reformation, could the nation still be considered France? I suggest that it could not. In this Nation of Revolution, then, the newly-sovereign people would have to alter their forms of popular culture to promote the nation and themselves as divine authority—they would create a culture that was decidedly non-French. This article will analyze the role the Catholic Church played in France before dechristianization, before looking at the way non-Christian forms of popular culture—particularly songs, art, and festivals—would transfer divinity from God and king to the nation and its people. Ultimately, we will see that popular culture during the Revolution could not be considered French at all.

To fully understand the impact that this transfer of sovereignty had on destroying what was French popular culture, one must first understand the role that the Catholic Church played in the nation before the Revolution. We will first look at the rural parish. According to Georges Lefebvre, “the church...was above all the center of collective life.” This was especially the case in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The people in the countryside were often illiterate and work oriented, and they depended upon the rural parish to meet a great many of their needs. But perhaps most importantly, the Church would give such harsh lifestyles deeper meaning. The teachings of the Catholic Church would suggest that there was something more, something better than the lives they plodded so determinedly through on earth. Ultimately, the

Church provided these persons with hope for salvation. But while such

5 Kennedy, 28.
a fundamental human need should not be discounted, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century parish would provide people with more than this. The Church would be the arbiter of the most important parts of rural human experience—baptism, marriage, and burial. And the Church would also play a role in the everyday lives of such parishioners, for even the church bells “marked off with great emotional force the hours of work and worship, the processions, the feast days of the liturgical year, [and] the passing events of life and death.”6 The priest would also serve as a source of news for the rural community since “the pulpit provided the only means of publicizing government policies to a largely illiterate mass audience.”7 Because their days were spent working, Sundays provided a means for men and women to learn the latest news, not to mention a means for social interaction. It would seem, then, that for the rural dwelling family the Church was of the utmost importance, making Tackett’s claim regarding the centrality of the Church and Christianity in French rural life a valid one.

In urban areas, the Church also maintained its centrality to human life, but it did so in different ways. Paris, for example, afforded men and women with much more than days spent farming, marked by the ringing of church bells. Instead, the capital “had the greatest concentration of intellectuals, artists, and such cultural institutions as salons, theaters, academies, [and] booksellers.”8 It would seem that with so many different institutions present, the spiritual would take a backseat to the secular. However, Paris had the most convents and monasteries of any city in France.9 By some estimates, the clergy in France “amounted to...100,000,”
but those employed in some capacity by the Church—as well as by
convents and monasteries—must have exceeded even these numbers,
making the number of people directly involved with urban churches
perhaps even greater than those in rural areas.\textsuperscript{10} There were many specific
jobs that required the attention of both clergy and the laity. In some parts
of the nation there could be as many as thirty ecclesiastics at one time who
were employed at a single church. Such urban centrality is reflected in
the way in which at “Notre-Dame one [man] was a \textit{chevicier} who had to
sleep in the church as a night duty priest, another a sacristan of masses,
and a third the sacristan of the chapelle de la Vierge.”\textsuperscript{11} There would also
be those who were responsible for caring for relics, altar ornaments, the
keeping of minutes, and even attendance registers. Each person who held
such a position was an employee of the church. As for lay employees,
churches were “in oversight of lawyers, registrars, bailiffs, collectors, and
the like.”\textsuperscript{12} But church appointment did not end there, for every profession
from that of mason and goldsmith, to that of cleaner and dog-catcher (yes,
dog catcher), had their place in the parish system.

Thus, it would seem as though an eighteenth-century France that
was so dependent upon the Church would be the last place that one would
expect to find cries for religious reform. But then came the Revolution
and with it the deposition of the sovereign king and dechristianization. It
is important to note, however, that the stage had been set for a religious
reformation long before the Revolution. As early as 1685, the revocation
of the Edict of Nantes had “guaranteed for all time the predominance
of the Roman Catholic religion, in perpetual alliance with His Most

\textsuperscript{10} Hampson, 28.
\textsuperscript{11} John McManners, \textit{Church and Society in Eighteenth Century France, Volume 1: The Clerical
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 435.
Christian Majesty.” In all actuality, it looked as though the revocation of this edict was anything but reformational since it created religious uniformity. But it was under this umbrella of guaranteed Catholicism at the beginning of the Revolution that the clergy would set about improving (i.e.—reforming) their religion. Such improvements would focus on the “cultivation of religious music; research into ecclesiastical history—and on the pursuit of power and office.” And the clergy certainly did gain power and office insomuch as the Church “intervened in the political, social, and economic life of the community at all levels while itself escaping from secular control.” The Church would receive its income based on tithes, while remaining exempt from taxes, thus allowing their wealth to accumulate. The Church would also have substantial influence over the crown, would maintain the rights to censor all published materials, and would dominate education within France. With such evidence in tow, we can see that French life had begun to stray further and further away from a real spiritual connection to the Church—eighteenth-century France came to be a nation that was “against a life of religious contemplation.”

And when Louis XVI was forcibly made to return to Paris from his shameful attempt to flee to Varennes, extreme religious reform in the form of dechristianization would begin. The king’s flight would prompt the removal of his power and authority. This deposition of the sovereign king would also serve as a deposition of God. After all, if the king was no longer worthy of his claim to the throne—and he had received this claim by appointment from God—then perhaps there was no longer any need for a Christian God in France. And if there was no need for God, there

13 Hampson, 27.
14 Ibid., 28.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 30.
would, of course, be no need for Catholicism, the clergy, or the Church. To further symbolize the removal of sovereignty from God and king, a new constitution was put into effect to govern the new non-Christian Nation of Revolution. In essence, these events would serve as visual evidence as to the transfer of sovereignty to the nation—one that was not France, for France had always had a sovereign king linked with a sovereign God. However, this transfer created a problem. French culture, as it had been defined until this point, could no longer exist since the Catholic Church would no longer play a central role in French life. We now turn our attention to the way in which popular culture—specifically songs, art, and festivals—would cease to be French as the result of dechristianization and would seek to promote the idea of a sovereign Nation of Revolution.

Prior to the Revolution, French music was almost exclusively religious. Certainly, one could hear non-religious songs in cafés, at the theater, or in bars; but these songs had little, if anything, to do with the national state of affairs. Songs of meaning, then, were religious. This, of course, was because most important parts of French life had links to Christianity. A look at the liturgical calendar yields a number of holy days and feast days which called for meaningful songs. On one particular Easter in Angers, for example, “two ecclesiastics in dalmatics wearing gloves and red hats represented the mourning women and approached the long white curtains symbolic of the ‘sepulchre’; the gospel words were read, and from the ‘tomb’ emerged the ‘angels,’ two chaplains in copes wearing silver-mounted ostrich eggs and singing ‘Alleluia, Ressurrexit Dominus.’” Such a spectacle had reached its pinnacle with a religious song as necessary means of expressing the joy of Christ’s resurrection; it could not be expressed in mere words. Obviously, the singing of

17 McManners, 423.
the “Alleluia, Ressurrexit Dominus” served as a means of emotional expression. But the singing at the celebration would not end there, for the choir would respond to this song with a singing of “Deo gratais, Alleluia,” before the service would end with what was arguably the most important song in France until the time of the Revolution, the Te Deum. This traditional song of praise was sung at any celebration of importance. If France emerged victorious in war, the Te Deum was sung. In response to births, marriages, and baptisms, the Te Deum was sung. And, of course, at the king’s coronation this hymn of praise was sung. Thus, it seems that this Christian song of praise “had been drawn out of its devotional and liturgical context to be made the propaganda manifestation of the monarchy.”18 Essentially, the song was praising God, Christ, and the divinely appointed king. We can also see the importance of this song in Toulouse, where it was apparently sung seventy-two times between 1730 and 1780.19 Here, it was sung for everything from the canonization of saints, to the recovery of the king’s health. Christian singing would not be exclusive to celebratory events, though, for in “times of national danger the psalm Deus judicium would be sung,” while a more solemn Tenebrae would be performed during the season of Lent.20 The aforementioned songs for the celebrations of births would have their remorseful counterparts as well, for songs would also mark the end of life. While most of these pieces outlined above were performed and provided by the maître de musique, or the music teacher, there is evidence to suggest that when lay persons wrote songs, these also subscribed to religious themes. Again, such was the case at Toulouse where locally composed carols

18 Ibid., 16.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 446.
characteristic offerings to the manger,” were written by young men each year during Christmastide and in hopes of having their songs chosen by the church choir.\textsuperscript{21} And finally, the most important aspect of religious life—the high Mass—would contain a great number of musical pieces, such as “the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Benedictus.”\textsuperscript{22} The songs sung during Mass were not confined to those selections, however, for “motets might be added after the Epistle and during the Offertory and the Consecration.”\textsuperscript{23} Ultimately, religious songs were a part of everyday life in every area of France. And this was only natural since clerics of old France were well aware of “the ways in which art [could] serve religious ends” and would knowingly use songs to keep Christianity and the Church at the center of French culture.\textsuperscript{24}

The dechristianization movement that would accompany the Revolution necessitated a shift in the nature of the songs which would be sung in the Nation of Revolution, however. No longer could the Te Deum be sung in praise of the king, for there was no king to praise after his execution in 1793. And as we have already acknowledged, this was symbolic of the death of God in France, as well. Free of God and the king, the people would transfer sovereignty to the nation and themselves. Therefore, songs that had played such a central role in French cultural life, would have God stripped from their stanzas and would promote the nation and the people as deities creating a genre of music that could no longer be considered French.

This shift in the character of French songs would be gradual, for initially songs would seek to combine a Revolutionary mentality with

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 445.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 436.
Christian themes and scriptures. For example, this excerpt from Marc-Antoine Desaugiers’ *hiérodrame*, suggests this combination of Christianity and Revolution:

**CITIZEN**
Regain your courage and fight: You are called to liberty!
Our enemies have drawn the sword to destroy the weak and indignant;
Let their sword enter into their own hearts.
(Kings 4.9; Fal. 5.13; Ps. 36. 14, 15)

**CITIZEN AND CHOIR**
May our enemies blush and be dispersed; that they flee and that they may perish.
(Ps. 6.14; Ps. 67.1)

**CHORUS OF WOMEN DURING THE PRECEDING**
O God help us!
(Ps. 78.9)

**THE CITIZEN AND THE CHORUS**
Yes God will come to our help.

**THE CITIZEN**
The Lord rejects the councils (or counsels) of the princes.
Let us run and destroy their odious fortress.
God will combat for us. Let it be.
(Ps. 32.10; Isa. 51.22)\(^{25}\)

This collection of songs was written to commemorate the storming of the Bastille, but it “used a church genre (the sung psalm) to celebrate particularly the Fourteenth of July.”\(^{26}\) As the reformation-amidst-revolution continued to mount, however—culminating with the removal of the Church and king—God would no longer be the help of the nation. Instead, songs would come to represent the nation as bringing about its own liberty. Thus, the nation no longer needed to glorify God through song. This sentiment is evident in “satirical songs directed against the court [that of the divinely-appointed king] and the formerly privileged

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25 Kennedy, 240.
26 Ibid.
orders were cross parodies of sacred hymns.”27 One example is the “O Filii,” (translated as “O Daughter”), which was a sacred Easter hymn. The words to this hymn would be altered to claim that the archbishop of Paris was a thief of the most sordid kind, while further claiming that the pope was a turkey.28 But songwriters would soon make the transition from simply parodying existing hymns, to that of creating their very own which would deify the nation or national characteristics which were represented by the people. Such new hymns included: “Hymn to Equality,” Hymn to Humanity,” “Hymn on Peace,” and even one entitled “Hymn to the Eternal,” all of which offered “constant sanctification of the patrie.”29 Even the most professional of songwriters from the Institut national de Musique would create hymns that dethroned God and Louis XVI and which would be distributed to the military. Rosseau’s L’aïme du peuple et du soldat, a government subsidy that saw “100,000 copies…distributed to the army,” would include this kind of professionally written military hymn.30 Included in this particular subsidy were the song lyrics which were placed at the beginning of this article. Translated, they read:

Tremblez, ennemis de la France,
Rois ivres de sang et d’orgueil;
Le peuple souverain s’avance;
Tyrans descendez au cercueil.

Quake, enemies of France,
Kings drunken with blood and arrogance;
The sovereign people advance;
Tyrants descend to the tomb. 31

Here, Rousseau begins by defining the enemies of France, the king and his God, before he asserts that the “sovereign people” will justifiably keep these enemies at bay. Notice that there is no build up to the transfer of

27 Ibid., 257.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 241.
31 Ibid., 122.
sovereignty from God and king to the people. Rousseau seems to suggest that national sovereignty is an understood trait and that the nation had always held it; their rights as deities had been kept from them by those who desired these rights for their own purposes (i.e.—God, the pope, clerics, and the king), but this would be the case no longer. Whatever Rousseau’s intent, however, it is clear that the transfer of sovereignty is official. After all, the king has been deposed and with him, God, the Church, and Christianity. One final hymn that promotes a deified Nation of Revolution is François de Neufchâteau’s “Hymn to Liberty.”

O Liberty, holy Liberty!
Goddess of an enlightened people!
Reign today in this sanctuary,
By you this temple is purified!
Liberty! Before you reason chases away imposture:
Error flees, fanaticism is vanquished.
Our gospel is nature.
And our cult is virtue.

Love one’s country and one’s brothers,
Serve the sovereign people,
These are the sacred characteristics,
And the faith of a Republican.
Of a shattered hell
He does not fear the empty flame;
Of an illusory heaven
He does not wait for false treasures;
Heaven is in peace of soul,
And hell in remorse.32

Every line of this hymn is carefully constructed in such a way as to desanctify Christianity and then transfer this sanctity to the Nation of Revolution. In the very first line, the national concept of “Liberty” is referred to as being holy, a characteristic which had previously been reserved for the Christ as well as the French king. By the time we make it to the fourth line, Christianity has been discredited further, as the

32 Kennedy, 281.
song proclaims that “the temple is purified.” Thus, Christ has been removed from the sanctuary, for the church is an acceptable place only for holy Liberty to reside. As the song moves into the second stanza, it reaffirms this new idea that people of the nation are the true sovereigns. Perhaps the most important line of this stanza—of the entire song—is the seventeenth. Here, the song declares that heaven is simply an illusion. In doing so, it further implies that a sovereign God must also be an illusion. After all, how can God exist within a realm that itself does not exist? Thus, the “Hymn of Liberty,” “sung at the height of the dechristianization movement,” undoubtedly promoted the assertion that the nation was its own new deity. It was, then, a new music for a new nation, a non-French song culture for the Nation of Revolution.

While many famous songs and hymns were a large part of daily French life, the same cannot be said of the great works of art which were religious in nature before the Revolution began. Paintings and sculptures were not part of everyday life for the average French citizen. However, there was in fact one particular form of art which was widespread and readily available—the architecture of the church. Recall that the Church employed an incredibly large number of people due to its many specific needs. Obviously, such employees would be continually reminded of the sovereignty of God and king while working within any given church. But even those who were not official employees would receive the same divine reinforcement each time they were present for the holy Mass. An example of architecture as a re-enforcer of the divinity of God and king can be seen in the vision Soufflot had in September of 1764 for a new church in Sainte-Geneviève. His vision was that of “a cross-shaped building with four

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 281.
equal arms, lighted by forty-two large windows, a central dome under which the reliquary of the saint would repose, and an altar with a colossal glorie of angels set in one of the arms, and, outside, a vast colonnade.”

Certainly, the entirety of the proposed design was meant to reinforce the mighty power of God. It must indeed seem doubtful that anyone could be present at such a church, looking at the glorie of angels, without being reminded of their Creator as well as their link to Him—the divinely appointed king. Likewise, between 1699 and 1725 at the Notre-Dame in Paris, there were “fifty-two high stalls and twenty-six low ones, their back decorated with bas-relief and the pillars between the seats carved in foliated scrolls and the instruments of the Passion,” commissioned as a reminder of God’s majesty. There were even “statues of the Virgin and of Louis XII and Louis XVI commissioned,” which further supported the nature of any king’s divine appointment. It can be assumed, then, that each time a man or woman entered a church that he or she would be presented with an artistic representation of the sovereignty of God and king through architecture.

As was the case with songs, the dechristianization of the Church as a building was gradual. After 1793, it would seem that “changes were episodic and destructive, getting rid of excesses of an unfashionable past.” As church architectural art was secularized, stained glass windows and statues of the saints, and even of Christ, would be removed entirely after Louis’ execution, as churches closed altogether and dechristianization moved the Nation of Revolution more determinedly forward.

35 McManners, 437.
36 Ibid., 444.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
With the secularization of both rural and urban churches, however, these buildings would no longer be a part of national life, in which another kind of decidedly non-French popular art would take center stage in asserting that the people were truly sovereign in the Nation of Revolution—newspaper and journal prints. Such prints satirized the Church and the kingship, stripping them of their divinity and transferring it to the nation and its people. Before the Revolution, “printing and publishing had been tightly controlled by the government and by the printers’ guild,” in which “the number of printing shops was limited to thirty-six in the capital and 266 in the French provinces.”

However, under the umbrella of the Revolution, the number of printers would grow, and by “1798 there were 221 printing shops in the capital.”

With the number of printers increased and the number of newspapers and journals that were being printed escalating, there were more people exposed to dechristianizing prints. According to Joan B. Landes, “From the Revolution’s outset, allegorical imagery served as a vocabulary for depicting…the new nation.”

One such print that would promote the new sovereign nation would be *Liberty Triumphant, Destroying Abusive Powers from the newspaper Révolutions de France et de Brabant*. Much as Neufchâteau’s “Hymn to Liberty” did in an audible way, this print deified “Liberty” visually. Here, Liberty is positioned over symbols of the *ancient régime*, and “with her left hand she throws a lightning bolt at the symbols of despotism, monarchy, clerical rule, and aristocracy.”

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40 Ibid., 63.
42 Ibid., 43.
nation, is rendering God and His divinely appointed king obsolete through the use of a lightning bolt. Furthermore, the transfer of divinity to the nation is evident in the way in which beams of light surround her head, much like that of the halo in Christian iconography. As for the clergy and the king, they are further discredited by a 1790 print entitled *Le Pied de nez ou L’Aristocratie écrasée* or *A Nose Thumbed, or the Aristocracy Crushed*. On a fundamental level, this print “calls for the crushing of the holders of all privileges.” Here, clergymen and nuns are ridiculed as they are depicted with overtly large noses. And for Joan Landes, the “nose is linked to the phallus” in which case the clergy and aristocracy are “lowered from the eternal sphere of their pretended nobility and spirituality to the base order of the body and its most elemental needs.”

To associate the clergy with something as profane as that of sexual desire, was to quite forcibly discredit the Church, as well. The message, then, became more than one of a God who was simply no longer needed, but of a God who is to be avoided for He is perverse. As for the divinely appointed king, a “crowned masculine figure is splayed out, gripping a serpent (another symbol of distrust and sexuality) that originates in his mouth as the hooked end of his nose and comes out of his anus.”

Again, the king is depicted at his lowest point, and his fallen state reveals a defeated monarch and a defeated God. The viewer’s eye is inevitably drawn upwards at this point to see “standing triumphantly above these ruined, helpless creatures... an allegory of the nation.” Thus, the nation is the true deity in this print, hovering over the unholy king and clergy.

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 50.
45 Ibid., 52.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
viewers with a representation of the shift in sovereignty to the nation, successfully completed. Once again, Liberty is presented as a divine goddess, but Prud’hon’s representation features something which had previously gone unseen in dechristianized art. Here, beneath the deified Liberty’s right foot “lie various human heads, one of which is crowned.”

While the other prints mentioned in this article did in fact depict a monarchy which had been overthrown and stripped of its sovereignty, the divinely appointed king is here dead. He has been killed by Liberty and the divine nation. With the monarch dead, the sovereignty of the king can seemingly never again exist, and by association, neither can the sovereignty of God since he had provided the king with the divine rights that the nation came to control. Furthermore, the goddess “carries [in her left hand] a broken yoke symbolizing the overthrow of oppression, and in her right [hand] and ax, [the] instrument of liberation.” As such, it seems that this print suggests the finality of the shift in sovereignty, what with the images of a dead king and the deified Liberty herself standing over him as the central focus of the print. Such prints replaced the religious architectural art of the Church that had previously been a central part of French culture, courtesy of a booming print industry. But, again, such art cannot be considered French and instead must join the revised songs of national deification as part of a new popular culture for the Nation of Revolution.

Certainly, dechristianized songs and art had quite an impact on the everyday lives of the people of the Nation of Revolution, but perhaps no form of popular culture was more important than the festival. Prior to the Revolution, the religious festival and ceremonial ritual was the

48 Kennedy, 281.
49 Ibid.
seminal form of French culture. This was especially true in rural areas where “local tradition: a sub-Christian, or perhaps pre-Christian culture... was constantly influencing the forms of Catholic worship.” Here, folk-Christian festivals that went along with holy days and feast days, including Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, etc. were quite important, but there were other religious festivals to be celebrated, as well. For example, the Lenten cycle was “inseparably linked to the popular festivities of Carnival and Mardi-Gras,” and feast days for a parish’s patron saint were “accompanied by profane celebrations known in the diocese as vogues.” There were also folk-Christian ceremonial rituals that were practiced for more specific reasons. The people of L’Epine would make a pilgrimage to a spring in Notre-Dame where it was said that the ceremonial and “ritual washing of the basin by a nude virgin” would provide their community with relief from drought. Similar processions were made to chapels in Ribiers or La Fare, in the event that an infant died, where the people would perform a ceremonial ritual to revive the child so he or she could be baptized.

As for religious festivals and ceremonies in urban areas, the most obvious one to mention would be the Sacre, the king’s coronation. On June 11, 1775, in Reims, this religious festival commenced at seven o’clock in the morning as “the procession set off down the newly constructed way to the archbishop’s palace.” It was here that Louis XVI would kneel at the sacred altar of Christ as holy water was sprinkled over his head, and the following prayer was uttered:

50 Tackett, 209.
51 Ibid., 211.
52 Ibid., 210.
53 Ibid.
54 McManners, 7-8.
God almighty and eternal, who hast elevated to the kingdom thy servant Louis, grant that he may ensure the good of his subjects in all the course of his reign, and never depart from the paths of justice and truth.  

Such a prayer that publicly declared Louis’s “elevated” state would leave no doubt in the minds of those present that their sovereign God had appointed Louis to be their sovereign king. To further promote Louis XVI as a divinely-appointed king who was linked to God, he would also receive seven unctions, like those that bishops received. This meant that the “Church received him [Louis] into the circle of its chosen ministry by giving him communion in both kinds, a prerogative of the clergy.” All of these elements were clearly arranged so as to promote the idea that the king was God’s anointed. Yet, as was the case with songs and printed art, this part of cultural life would have to change in order to promote the transfer of sanctity to the nation after the deposition of God and king. There would, then, no longer be French cultural religious festivals, but instead festivals for the Nation of Revolution.

To counter the number of religious festivals which had been a central part of French life prior to the Revolution, the National Assembly would promote many new festivals that would suggest that the nation and its people were divine, while God and his king were not. Such festivals were those for Continental Peace, the 18 of Fructidor, Enlightenment, Labor, Liberty, Reason, Regeneration, the Federation, the Republic, and the sovereignty of the people. We have, of course, already looked at the importance of the Festival of Federation as it was outlined at the beginning of this essay. It is here that we turn to the Festival of the Supreme Being.

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55 Ibid., 8.
56 Ibid., 11.
While this festival was celebrated nationwide, we will limit our focus to the celebration as it took place in Paris on June 8\(^{th}\). 1794. We will further analyze that which its creator, Maximillian Robespierre, said about this important celebration. Mona Ozouf, the foremost scholar of festivals during the French Revolution, claims that “what the festival was trying to demonstrate is not clear. Neither religious fanaticism, nor atheism: the Festival of the Supreme Being…stretched between denunciation of monarch and rejection of anarchy.”\(^{58}\) It is within this stretched-between state that I see a festival which supports the deification of nation and humankind.

Certainly, those human beings in the Nation of Revolution could see their sovereignty reflected in the way in which the festival was fastidiously organized. For example, every woman’s hair was to be styled in the same way; only certain pieces of music were to be performed; and the types of flowers that girls could carry was standardized to reflect unity. Such a display of organization had not been present in old France, with its monarch and its faith in God. Only a defied people could create such order effectively. But perhaps the belief in this piece of popular culture as one that deified the nation is nowhere more evident than in the words of Maximillian Robespierre. He claimed that it was a celebration “worshipping a deist ‘supreme being’ while resisting the more extreme tendency of some to eliminate spirituality outright through an atheistic ‘cult of reason.’”\(^{59}\) If not God or king, then who else could this ‘supreme being’ be than that of the people of the Nation of Revolution themselves.

The sovereignty of the people and their nation was not restricted

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 112.

to their unifying prowess, however. It is further evident in the way in which the festival seemed to glorify the nation above all else. The festival would begin at 5 o’clock in the morning as citizens would decorate their houses in the spirit of the Revolution, before a salvo from the artillery would signal each of them to make a procession to the National Garden. Here, again, we see the people as divine governors of a divine nation. After all, the ‘spirit’ of Revolution was the one that had maintained them through all of the tumultuous events in recent memory and not the Holy Spirit from God. Furthermore, their signal to process to the National Garden, to move forward as a nation, had not been a command from God but one from other people. No longer was God or king their governor, for they had maintained order themselves. Upon reaching the National Garden, Robespierre would provide the procession with an explanation for the festivities, claiming that “Never before has the world he [the ‘supreme being’] created offered him a sight so worthy of his eyes.”

This statement suggests much more about the nation than it does of the supposed creator to whom Robespierre refers. In essence, the statement glorifies the nation and its people for having brought about some kind of ideal and glorious age. Robespierre says nothing celebratory in regard to the creator; he simply acknowledges that a creator of some kind does exist. Furthermore, there is no mention of the creator as being a divine or powerful councilor. But perhaps the most revealing statement Robespierre makes about the new nation’s purpose is that of a call-to-arms. To those present, he declared: “Frenchmen, Republicans, it is up to you to cleanse the earth they [the enemies of the sovereign nation] have sullied and to restore the justice they have banished from it.”

60 Ibid., 2.
61 Ibid.
would have the authority and ability to regenerate the earth. Therefore, the dechristianized festival would be the ultimate form of national popular culture—combining music, visuals, and ceremony—to promote a shift in sovereignty and subsequently create a non-French culture for the Nation of Revolution.

But such dechristianizing artifacts would all but disappear. The revised songs, printed art, and national festivals would fade away in eleven years. As Emmet Kennedy states, “Humanity was being taught to reach less to some being above and beyond than inward to the self and outward to all people to find human greatness.”62 But the glorification of human greatness had never been a truly French ideal. As such, if the nation wanted to return to being one which could be called France, with its history, legacy, and faith in God intact, the Nation of Revolution would have to be abolished, and with it the popular culture which so forcibly promoted its divine nature. Perhaps Napoleon recognized this, for it was under his reign that the Concordat of 1801 would return Christianity to its former prominence in France. Napoleon himself, however, only saw religion as a political tool, as was evident when he stated, “‘In religion…I do not see the mystery of the Incarnation but the mystery of the social order.’”63 But there was one thing that Napoleon believed in; he believed in the power that Christianity had in regard to the collective to life of the nation. And when the Concordat of 1801 came into effect mending the alliances with the Roman Catholic Church and allowing Christianity to flood the nation once again, perhaps it was then that French popular culture was able to become identifiably French again.

62 Kennedy, 338.
63 Ibid., 377.