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Time as Rational: Historical Methodologies and the Republican Calendar in Revolutionary France

In writing the history of religions, we find ourselves today amidst a vigorous discussion (some might say ‘a battlefield’) of just how to understand not only historical events pertaining to religion, but the nature of religion as a concept. Historians have not always been celebrated for their progress in incorporating theoretical considerations otherwise standard in the humanities. Methods around understanding history through religion and vice versa have been given tremendous depth and power by many contemporary (or close to contemporary) scholars, usually working within Religious Studies departments as opposed to strictly the field of history. But have the developments in theory and methodology that these arguments have produced made their way into the writing of thematic/narrative histories? Or is the adoption of these theoretical and methodological advancements still relatively slow-going?

To assess this, I have chosen to investigate a highly contentious area of European history – the French Revolution, and more specifically, the dechristianization campaigns that commenced essentially at the Revolution’s beginning and continued until the Napoleonic era. This area of the Revolution is notorious for its attempts to eradicate Christian influence from all corners of life, ranging from the attempts to create a Cult of Reason to replace the Church, to the renaming of public areas formerly evoking Saints, to outright violence directed at Church representatives, as well as the invention of an entirely new calendar to replace the Gregorian. This case study of the Republican Calendar in particular should yield a fruitful assessment of the degree to which historians have seized upon the developments in theory and method in the history of religions, and how issues of religion, reason, and the secular either cohere or dissolve in the human labour of writing history.

I will begin this article by way of a brief assessment of recent academic debates in the practice of writing religious history, while simultaneously introducing some of the framework by which I intend to assess the Republican Calendar. Following this, the so-called “religious turn” in the historical writing on the French Revolution will be addressed, where I suggest the degree to which the gulf between theory and method in the writing of religious history, and the writing of the religious conflicts in the French Revolution, still exists. With all of this in mind, this article will advance a limited “case study” of how the recent arguments over the nature of religion and the secular can be employed to good effect through a focused study of the Republican Calendar, and the struggle to successfully implement it in Revolutionary France. The sum total of these efforts should successfully demonstrate that the historiography of the French Revolution could benefit from employing these recent theoretical and methodological techniques developed within the field of Religious Studies.

Since the late 1970s, one thinker who has steered the academic study of religion more than others is Jonathan Z. Smith.¹ The argument as to religion’s rationality is among the most tremendous single assertions coming from the academy over the past several decades, which Smith’s book *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* makes abundantly clear: “one of the fundamental building blocks of religion [is] its capacity for rationalization, especially as it concerns that ideological issue of relating that which we do to that which we say or think we do.”² In addition, Smith tends to respond to and engage with many ‘classical theorists’ of religion such as Durkheim, Freud and Frazer, as well as taking the opportunity to respond to contemporaries of his.³ Smith’s provocative assertion that “there is no data for religion” has also become an oft-quoted (though, a not-often followed) dictum that has encouraged a strong sense of self-consciousness over the study of

¹ For a good summary of Smith’s influence, see Russell McCutcheon’s *A Modest Proposal on Method: Essaying the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015), 77–95.

² Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 57.

³ The entire first chapter of Smith’s book *To Take Place* is, for example, an extended critique of Eliade’s *axis mundi*.

religion today.⁴ This statement encourages the scholar of religion to keep at the fore of their mind the fact that “religion” as a category is solely an invention: it is not a “natural” category of human life.⁵ This “relentless self-consciousness”⁶ has become a slow-going project, but nonetheless a staple, of the discussion of just how to conduct the academic study of religion after Smith’s challenges to the field.

Bruce Lincoln, part of the so-called “Chicago School” of religious scholars, is well-known in the field today for proposing a series of “Theses on Method,” meant to guide how one approaches the academic study of religion. Lincoln’s “Theses on Method” make some of the same demands on the historian of religions as Smith, though Lincoln systematizes these demands in an unabashedly succinct manner. For this article’s purposes, attention should be paid to the thirteenth thesis, which reads as follows:

When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between “truths,” “truth claims,” and “regimes of truth,” one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of imported goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship.⁷

While this particular argument will be important for our investigation later on, what is worth noting at this point is the stress Lincoln places, throughout his Theses, on the *scholar* defining the terms of their study explicitly, and essentially framing their own interests in advance of addressing their objects of study. This supports the self-consciousness Smith encourages in the work of this field, a point Lincoln clearly seems to be in agreement with.

Several scholars have offered sustained critiques of the religious/secular divide, as well as the ways secularism frames “religion” as a category. Russell McCutcheon and William Arnal’s book *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion”* has confronted several aspects of the relationship between the supposed

⁴ McCutcheon, *Modest Proposal*, 83–84.

⁵ See also Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. 281 – 282.

⁶ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

⁷ Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

secular and religious realms, including the ways in which religion is created as a kind of “alter-ego” for secularism. What is reinforced by such a framing of religion by secular governments is the tacit assumption that ‘religious logic’ is irrational, while ‘secular logic’ is rational. The two make clear one of the central assertions of the book early on: “that “the religion/not-religion distinction [...] much like the distinction between the domestic and the foreign [...] has long outlived its scholarly utility, making the category ‘religion’ an example of what our 19th century predecessors might have once called a curious survival.”⁸ Arnal and McCutcheon frame part of their book’s theoretical assumptions with the work of another notable scholar of secularism: Talal Asad.⁹

Talal Asad has eschewed defining religion at all, contrary to academics such as Smith, who encourage the academic to explicitly define what is meant by “religion.” His focus on the nature of the secular, as *it* defines religion and seeks to constitute its boundaries, has shown “the secular and the religious [...] to be interdependent and fluctuating notions constituting a crucial domain of modern power and governance.”¹⁰ Indeed, the efforts of Asad have brought to the fore the nature of how secularism’s political manifestations define religion, demarcate its boundaries, and encourage normative forms of religion. Studies that take as their focus the nature of the “sacred” versus the “secular” are considered “one of [the] field’s sharpest cutting edges.”¹¹ Arnal and McCutcheon seem to side wholeheartedly with Talal Asad’s assessment of secularization being closely tied to the advent of liberalism and modernity, and thereby the defining of religion against the so-called secular sphere.¹² Further, Arnal and McCutcheon give a fairly coherent *functional* definition of secularism vis-à-vis the secular state: “the secular state is the institutional apparatus by which the social body *prevents* the incursion by others into

⁸ William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16.

⁹ Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred is the Profane*, 28–29.

¹⁰ Wendy Brown, “Introduction” in *Is Critique Secular?* ed. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 8. Brown is summarizing Asad here.

¹¹ Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane*, 8.

¹² They quote him at length on pages 28–30 to this effect in Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred if the Profane*.

the personal and various other goals of individuals, rather than being the means of achievement for common projects and the collective good. This very definition of the modern democratic state, in fact, creates religion as its alter ego.”¹³ This statement, too, seems to be entirely in line with Asad. Drawing on Charles Taylor, Asad understands secularism as being a function of the modern state’s need to “transcend the different identities built on class, gender, and religion, replacing conflicting perspectives by unifying experience. In an important sense, this transcendent mediation *is* secularism.”¹⁴ An important caveat he places on this definition is that “the secular ... is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred).”¹⁵

The field of anthropology, in which Asad works, has tended to take something of a different approach to assessing the nature of religion. Clifford Geertz offers us a ‘five-point’ definition of religion¹⁶ that inextricably ties religion in with the “webs of meaning” generated by culture more generally, especially in his assertion that religion is, fundamentally, a system of symbols.¹⁷ Geertz stresses here that, in contrast to many definitions of religion that focus on things like “belief in spiritual beings” (E. B. Tylor’s famously succinct definition of religion) that point to the interiority of spiritual belief, referring to religion as primarily a system of symbols necessarily makes religion about external expression.¹⁸ This expression

¹³ Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane*, 29. See also, William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Talal Asad, *Formation of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁵ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

¹⁶ Which Asad critiqued at length in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 90–91. Jonathan Z. Smith says as much in a video interview, seeming also to allude to Geertz’ “web of meanings” quotation: “we have been preoccupied for a long time with finding in this seamless web of human activities the capacity to break one out and say ‘when they’re doing that one, they’re doing religion.’ ... In a way, we’re the only ones who think there’s a big deal about defining religion, and why do we think that? And that’s an honest question on my part because I haven’t the foggiest idea why we decided to do that.” AmScholarsReligion, “Dr. J. Z. Smith 00,” uploaded Nov. 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTVeX4Jp418>

¹⁸ Geertz refers to these as being “extrinsic sources of information.” Geertz, *Interpretation*, 92.

need not be, for purposes of definition, fundamentally public or private, but these symbols and their import are a way of attempting to evade the *sine qua non* of interior belief, which many definitions of religion emphasize.

With the above considerations in mind, this article will now take on its case study to see if recent scholarly reassessments of religion and the secular have entered into the historiography of a particular area of history. The French Revolution is an important point, illustrative of the tension between Enlightenment secularist ideas and Christianity, culminating in various campaigns that sought to ‘Dechristianize’ France. As highly combative an area, in terms of arguments surrounding religion, reason and the secular as the French Revolution is, understanding it through recent theories of religion would be beneficial to the writing of its history. It should be noted in the first place that a recent ‘religious turn’ in the historiography of the French Revolution has begun, the nature of this so-called ‘religious turn’ being the subject of an article by Thomas Kselman. The article is rooted in a case study centered on French academic Catherine Maire’s response to a book by American historian Dale K. Van Kley, and the public debate between the two that resulted from it. Kselman sees the conflict between Van Kley and Maire as a demonstration of the identity politics at play in resistance to or acceptance of the ‘religious turn.’ I will quote Kselman at length:

I want to suggest that Maire’s critique of Van Kley in a journal edited by [Marcel] Gauchet [author of *The Disenchantment of the World*] represents a French position that acknowledges the power of religion as a historical force, sees the restriction of this power as a necessary and generally positive development, and fears the reintroduction of religion into the public sphere as retrograde and potentially dangerous.... Their debate confirms a “religious turn,” but it also suggests that for at least some French scholars this is a problematic development, in part because it raises questions about the possibility of a “religious turn” in contemporary French society.¹⁹

Arguments about whether or not Kselman is taking this accusation too far aside, this is, nonetheless, a well-known phenomenon in historical writing – demonstrated, in the first place, by Lincoln feeling the need to caution *against* unwittingly taking

¹⁹ Thomas Kselman, “Challenging Dechristianization: The Historiography of Religion in Modern France.” *Church History* 75:1 (Mar. 2006), 135.

on the position of a “cheerleader” by how one uses their data.²⁰ Smith’s caution that one must be “relentlessly self-conscious” with one’s data would perhaps aid in ensuring one is writing history in a manner that avoids being self-serving or politically motivated. Even an engagement with Asad’s writing, which demonstrates the roots of secularism and how secularism functions, might do this historiographical field a tremendous service. The dechristianization period of France, one chapter within the larger process of developing a secular government in Revolutionary France, can be effectively analyzed through the theoretical tools mentioned in this article’s first section.

The Republican Calendar was invented for a multitude of reasons, and its creation was a laborious, confusing process. The final incarnation was overseen by mathematician and virulent anti-Catholic Charles-Gibert Romme, who would also oversee the attempts at reforming the calendar after the problem of irregular leap years was noticed.²¹ What the calendar was attempting to do, among other things, was to inaugurate a new way of life, free from the claimed irrationality of the *ancien régime*. It intended to do away with the old arrangement of French society, one of its main aspects being the rhythm of the week that culminated on Sunday, the day of rest, and create a new common experience of time centered on an ostensibly rational, Enlightened way of structuring time. The main aspect of this structure was based on the metric system, and in particular the number ten.

²⁰ As another note on the historiography, the writers on the Republican Calendar I am primarily engaging with in this article evidence the lack of engagement with recent writing on the study of religion. Ozouf, for her part, is primarily engaged in a Durkheimian analysis of the French Revolution’s festivals, drawing primarily from the theory of Durkheim himself. Ozouf uses Freud’s assessment of the “transgressive” nature necessary for festivals/rituals to be successful as well, to frame her study. Perovic cites Durkheim, Eliade, and Marx in his study, and Shusterman does not seem to engage with religious studies methodology at all, though he does cite Robert Scribner in a single footnote. While Marx, Durkheim, and Freud still have much to offer the academic study of religion, and are still engaged with regularly by the “contemporary” academics of religion I mentioned at the beginning of my article, the relative absence of engagement with the elaborations, revisions, and challenges made by more recent scholars reflects the continued refusal of French Revolution historiography to engage with recent theoretical and methodological advances in Religious Studies.

²¹ Noah Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time: Holidays in France From Louis XIV Through Napoleon* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 128-129, 139-140. Romme would die by suicide before these reforms could be accomplished.

The *décade* system created a ten-day week, which had the (supposed) advantage of each month being three *décade* weeks long, giving the year a greater degree of uniformity and a single day of rest for the week – the *décadi*, or tenth day. Such a structure was said to be “more natural and rational than the seven-day week.”²² Aside from merely being seen as natural and rational, the Republicans knew that time was “objective, yet materially embodied.”²³ Transforming the structure of time and how people understood the banalities of their day-to-day activity could make for a transformation, also, in popular consciousness, making the Revolution a part of the very way this new life was acted out. Thus, restructuring time and the behavior of the new country would have led to the readjustment of people’s routines, with even the most basic elements of human life being Republican – based on the principles of Reason, and the rejection of the *ancien régime*. This dictation of the human body on the part of the State sought to ensure a greater degree of uniformity and acceptance of the post-1789 paradigm, uniting the people in the installation of a new era of human history.

The dechristianizing aspect of the Calendar was its most important motivation aside from its intention to ensure the widespread use of the metric system.²⁴ Abolishing the celebration of Sunday and creating a new day of rest, a Republican day of rest, based – again – on the principles of a rational arrangement of time, and collapsing people’s habits into adherence to a division of time based on the number 10, displays the depth at which the *ancien régime* was to be uprooted. This new identity, this new way of understanding the world, and binding people together in a secular space regulated by the government, was displayed in a whole variety of ways, including baptizing citizens – in the first Festival of National Unity – as “citizens of the new Republic.”²⁵ The imagery of starting a new life and doing

²² Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 130.

²³ Sanja Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 157.

²⁴ Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 129.

²⁵ Andrew L. McClellan, “The Musée du Louvre as Revolutionary Metaphor During the Terror,” *The Art Bulletin* 70:2 (June 1988): 305. Ozouf describes one particularly dramatic version of the Fountains of Regeneration, which was placed at the Place de la Bastille. It is described as a “colossal Egyptian-style statue of Nature” from whose breasts these healing waters spewed forth. Simultaneously, apparently, various funeral pyres immolated symbols associated with the *ancien régime*. Mona Ozouf,

away with the old was employed ceremonially; at the Festival of August 10, for example, a crowd watched as a statue of Liberty replaced a statue of Louis XV, in front of which eighty-six Departmental representatives, “each with torch in hand, [lit] a symbolic pyre”.²⁶ These sorts of public dramas were vital to encouraging, along with this new Republican life, the acceptance of a new calendar and the festivals that regulated this new division of time.

The reification of the *ancien régime* and its repeated symbolic employment in public spectacle as an abstract thing to be destroyed is notable for how many aspects of life it encompassed. The monarchy and the Church were essentially conceived of as linked parts of a whole that was intent on crushing and oppressing ‘the People.’ That being said, while there is no easy generalization one can make about the Republicans, as some were vehemently atheistic, ‘religion’ was not *exactly* what was being attacked by the Republicans generally, or the Calendar project specifically. Aside from more overt attempts to replace the religion of the Catholic Church – the Cult of Reason and the Cult of the Supreme Being – it seems that a discourse swirled about the Revolutionaries, drawing from Rousseau, of the possibility of a natural religion emerging which would permeate all parts of a life that was free from oppression and characterized by mutual equality.²⁷ There does not seem to have been any firm understanding on a general level as to what exactly this “natural religion” entailed, but at any rate, the disagreements about the Cult of Reason versus the Cult of the Supreme Being demonstrate a divide as to what exactly would follow Christian theology. The Calendar, however, gives a further hint about what this natural religion might have meant to the Republican government.

The ideology behind the festivals included a more general view that, until then, festivals and the rhythmic divisions of the year were primitive, characterized by disorder, unclear motivation, and structured by chance.²⁸ Even after Robespierre created a different set of festivals based on worship of the Supreme Being and the

Festivals and the French Revolution trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 84.

²⁶ McClellan, “The Musée du Louvre as Revolutionary Metaphor During the Terror.”

²⁷ Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 158.

²⁸ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 162.

immortality of the soul (at least some of these festivals coincided with the traditional celebration of Christian events), the ideology behind the calendar was still thoroughly debated. What is interesting to note, however, is that Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being occurred on Pentecost – June 20, 1794. Other festivals were intended to be – and indeed, many were – conducted on traditional Gregorian dates.²⁹ It seems that the popular imagination of the symbolic value of these dates still maintained its cultural currency – and was at least understood at the government level.

The Goddesses of Reason were symbols that began to be employed both in art and in festive occasions. Unlike the statues, art, and relics associated with the Christian Church, these goddesses stood for “the sensual presence of the material body over the transcendental soul . . . , the living goddesses stood for a society unified purely out of a different kind of material presence, that of living bodies to one another.”³⁰ However, it became obvious quite quickly that these goddesses could not serve, for the new calendar, the same function as religious imagery/figures could for the Gregorian.³¹ The figure of the Goddess was debated by everyone from villagers to the likes of Robespierre, and in the end, was infused with an “excess of meaning” that prevented its taking root in the popular consciousness in any meaningful way.³² Even the mere fact that Reason, and not Liberty, was portrayed in popular festivities by a woman was cause for controversy. The centrality of women to such festivities is possibly a reason for their perceived strangeness to the French public.³³ The larger debates surrounding the Goddesses of Reason are multifarious, and cannot be rehearsed in their entirety here.³⁴ Suffice it to say that the invention of these Goddesses, and their association (both through mythic quality

²⁹ Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 169–170.

³⁰ Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 152.

³¹ Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 156.

³² Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 164–165.

³³ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 101–102.

³⁴ One of the foremost – especially for my argument here – was that the goddesses ended up creating so many different interpretations as to their meaning and function, as well as how exactly this female body symbolized the social and cultural world and the “cognitive claims of reason and sense perception” (noted by Perovic as being called ‘the reentry problem’ by Ernst Gellner). Notable, as well, was the further rift it created between those in the Convention that believed in the existence of some form of deity, and the radical atheists. Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 165–168.

and artistic image) with the Calendar, failed to help cement this Republican time in French society. If anything, it may have further widened the gap between the successful implementation of the new Calendar and the French attachment to Gregorian time.

Seen through the unyielding secular ideology of the Republic, the *ancien régime* could not produce a division of time as rational as Enlightened revolutionaries could. And yet, undeniably, the Gregorian Calendar was a perfectly reasonable, rational division of time which was held onto by the Republic not *just* for reasons of practicality, but also because of the immense problems the Republican Calendar created.³⁵ Issues such as intercalary days – “solved” by the Republicans, initially, by simply stuffing these five days with extra celebrations³⁶ – had already been solved by the calendar that preceded it. These issues that plagued the new calendar were never fully resolved, and often, the resolutions were seen as unsatisfactory. This can be seen very readily in that, aside from state matters (including these celebrations) and the upper circles of government officials, its use was generally avoided.³⁷

The transcendent meditation attempted by this enforced restructuring of time was unsuccessful from its onset and created an Ouroboros of arguments that certainly tended to produce more heat than light. Indeed, the Calendar’s enforcement during Year II was sometimes done by force. The French army was

³⁵ One deputy by the name of Lanjuinas referred to the republican calendar as the “calendar of tyrants.” Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 140.

³⁶ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 162–163. It is noted that, on the leap year, this sixth day would bear witness to a national game that was supposed to be “the festival of festivals.”

³⁷ Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 4. It should be noted here, and I will note it again, that there was significant resistance even within these circles, and a knowledge that it would take a great deal of work to ensure people would even consider its use. Philippe Fabre d’Eglantine, who was involved in the calendar’s creation, had some of the most vicious criticism for Romme’s initial proposal of the Calendar, referring to it as “locution abstraite, sèche, vuide d’idées, pénible par sa prolixité & confuse dans l’usage civil, sur-tout après l’habitude du calendrier grégorien.” Quoted in Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 117. It is worth noting, in the first place, that Fabre d’Eglantine’s criticism is not *just* directed at the calendar’s ability to cause confusion for citizens generally, but also for “l’usage civil” which is entirely understood and conducted *already* through the Gregorian Calendar. The ensuing pages in Perovic’s book confront Fabre d’Eglantine’s contributions to the calendar, which are not my focus here, but center around Fabre d’Eglantine’s theories surrounding an “affective immersion in images” as a means of ensuring a deep bond to this new structure of time.

sent into Toulouse, for example, to enforce adherence to the *décade* structure, but immediately after the army withdrew, the Gregorian structure of time reigned again.³⁸ It must be noted that, “throughout the whole [French] territory, and even in communes reputed to be patriotic, what the community rejected, in a reaction of brutal or obstinate opposition, was the division of time imposed on it by the Republican calendar.”³⁹ After the rather dramatic step was taken in the Allier department (located in central France) to try and encourage Constitutional priests to start holding a *décadi* mass (and forsaking Sunday), some of these priests began to accept this proposition. However, quite quickly, these Constitutional priests were shamed by a widely distributed letter from the distinguished Abbé Henri Grégoire (a Catholic priest *and* Revolutionary), which completely reversed this *décadi* mass and reinstated the solemn Sunday mass.⁴⁰

The area of the country where the Calendar’s implementation failed the most dramatically was in the countryside. Free from close watch by the government that the urban landscape provided (and where, still, the Calendar did not take root deeply enough for it to be anything but easily swept aside with the arrival of Napoleon), the peasant culture and symbolic systems surrounding Christianity continued to permeate all aspects of their day-to-day lives. Indeed, in some respects, peasant Christian culture was given new life without the close regulation of church officials.

Among the most important examples of this new vibrancy peasant culture gained was in Sunday observance. Sunday’s celebration gained a new “festive” quality with the advent of the Republican Calendar that was not as pronounced before 1789, precisely *because* the Church would not allow for such a joyous, flamboyant manner of Sabbath observation. At any rate, commissioners noted that, while on Sunday the people would wear their finer clothes, do their hair nicely, and present themselves with some degree of reverence (until, of course, the festivities began), on the *décadi* people continued to wear their unclean clothes, and overall

³⁸ Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 137.

³⁹ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 228.

⁴⁰ Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 202–203. This was also attempted in other departments, with varying degrees of success.

displayed a more disinterested affect.⁴¹ Even after the aforementioned step was taken to try and institute a *décadi* celebration of mass, its failure was most notable, once again, “in the countryside.”⁴² This can be partially attributed to the dechristianizing effort of the commissioners, who all around France were tasked with uprooting crucifixes, tearing them from buildings, and bringing them down from steeples. Some commissioners even went so far as removing them from the graveyards, though this was far less common. Ozouf notes that something of “a war broke out: crosses taken down during the day were put up again at night.” These villagers would continue to gather at places where crosses once stood, would gather in the graveyards if crosses were still there, and ensure that crosses would remain standing in the villages if at all possible.⁴³ Similarly, the rural people would continue, every Sunday, to walk obstinately to the Church whether a priest performed a service there or not.⁴⁴ Just as tensions with the peasant culture surrounding these crosses grew, so would Sunday become something of a cultural battle between the peasants, and the coerced implanting of a secular authority over the lives of these citizens.

Another dismal failure of the Calendar’s implementation concerned attempts to abolish the patronal festival. This is perhaps where we see most clearly the misunderstanding of the Republican government’s rigid ideology and its conflicts with peasant culture. Whatever the Church’s accusations against the peasants’ ‘bastardizations’ of Christian worship,⁴⁵ the Republicans were just as uninterested in grasping the meanings of the patronal festival for rural life, preferring instead to characterize it as superstitious, a symptom of peasant credulousness, or a sort of

⁴¹ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 228–229.

⁴² Shusterman quotes a departmental administrator’s report this effect. *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 203.

⁴³ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 224–226.

⁴⁴ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 229.

⁴⁵ As Shusterman points out, “the government failed to distinguish between adherence to Catholicism and attachment to traditional behaviors. While the Counter-Reformation had aimed at eliminating that distinction, its success was limited. Priests who advocated post-Tridentine Catholicism often saw the French population as mired in superstition.” Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 134. I would ask, in line with assuming some of the Religious Studies methodologies noted above: what is the distinction between ‘adherence to Catholicism’ and a ‘traditional behavior,’ especially when both have influenced each other over the course of (potentially) centuries?

fanaticism. That being said, the commissioners *did* see that it was not merely a religious festival, and thereby attempted to reconfigure these festivals into the Republican Calendar, albeit while doing violence to the day's meaning by eschewing any mention of the Saint's name, and ignoring "complaints from parishioners."⁴⁶ Peasant culture – its symbols, habits, meanings – were utterly inseparable from Christianity, and did not exist without Christianity. As noted by Arnal and McCutcheon, "names and identities are not neutral and thus interchangeable descriptors of stable and natural items in the world. Instead, they are devices that we use and argue about during the mundane business of making a world that suits our various and always changing purposes."⁴⁷ It is vital to understand, as a starting point, that the Republican Calendar is an important aspect of the attempt to craft a new identity for the French people – including the rural citizens of the country. As such, taking a particular patronal day and emptying it of its former significance, and thereafter reformulating its meaning in a Republican context, is not such a simple process – and indeed, the resistance to this on the part of the villagers amply demonstrates that.

While certainly articulated by these citizens through deed more than word, the meaning of the Cross, the patronal festival, and the Liberty Tree (as it became a symbol of oppression the peasants saw fit to employ in something of an iconoclastic fashion) were unfailingly clear to these people on a surprisingly uniform level. The Liberty Tree in particular became a symbol of the Republic's oppression of peasant culture. It was meant to symbolize many things – a silent witness to the age of freedom, a symbol of stability,⁴⁸ a symbol of exiting the age of the *ancien régime* and entering the new world.⁴⁹ The trees were vandalized almost universally – sometimes with actual tools, such as an axe, and other times by simply stripping the tree of its bark. Most dramatically, crosses were erected in the place of trees that were cut down.⁵⁰ Other symbols the authorities attempted to impose upon peasant

⁴⁶ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 231. What exactly these complaints were can be imagined but are not explicitly mentioned by Ozouf.

⁴⁷ Arnal and McCutcheon, *The Sacred is the Profane*, 122.

⁴⁸ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 247.

⁴⁹ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 255.

⁵⁰ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 259–261.

culture were physical copies of the calendars themselves, which were often adorned with the previously mentioned images of Goddesses of Reason.⁵¹ What is notable is, again, the fact that the profound ties both culturally and religiously that people held to various aspects of Gregorian time, and the visual representation in its Calendar could, quite simply, not be disposed of, and this attempt at their disposal was seen as oppressive.

The assumptions, on the part of the Republicans, as to the nature of the Cross for villagers contained a further degree of misunderstanding aside from simply assuming the “religious Cross” could be removed from daily life without also offending against the symbol’s broader significance. The Republicans also seemed to have clung to a deep-rooted assumption about what Saba Mahmood refers to as a “singular religious logic”⁵² – an assumption that probably stems from the same thinking that developed the concept of the *ancien régime* as the Republic’s alter ego, and religion as an alter-ego to secularism.⁵³ It is clear that peasant culture had an attachment to Christianity that differed sharply from that of the clergy, and there is at least some evidence that there was no love lost between rural villagers and the clergy when the Republic attempted a more firm enforcement of how religious life took place.

The above data reveal the profound traditions, images, and meanings attached to the Gregorian Calendar and Christian celebration which anchored virtually all aspects of French society – as we have seen, culturally, civilly, economically, and politically. What is demonstrated by the very idea of requiring a new calendar is centrality of time to culture in order to require regulation of it by the State in an attempt to overlap all other identities of French citizens to mediate their way of life. The other thing the calendar’s very invention demonstrates is

⁵¹ Perovic includes, in his book, several engravings from it. Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 153-154.

⁵² Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” in *Is Critique Secular?* ed. Judith Butler, et. al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 60.

⁵³ A process well-developed by Asad in several different places. See for example, in a very highly distilled form in Asad, *Formations*, 94: ““Religion” . . . when purified of its “magical” elements, was held to be the original site of morality, because religious morality had to do with the responsibility of agents *for* their actions and *to* their God. Secular morality could simply replace God by the individual conscience of men and women.”

something I alluded to earlier in this article, which is the conception of the *ancien régime* as wholly irrational. Caught up, of course, in the conceptualization of the *ancien régime* was Christianity, especially as it was allied with, and reinforced the ideology of the monarchy. Christian thought as an epistemology was often debated in the higher spheres of the Republican government. The presence of people like the Abbé Grégoire in government office alongside atheists, and the deistic thinking of people like Robespierre, demonstrate that discussion about the transcendent supernatural was not unknown to the French government in this period. Christianity itself, however, was more often than not conceived of as a failed, irrational system that was, in essence, meant to die along with the failed system of the monarchy.

This treatment of Christian thinking as irrational and the secularism of the Republican Government as rational led to a sea of contradictions, some of which have already been addressed. It is worth underlining – rather than repeating – the most essential of these. The attempt to, in the first place, straightjacket the measurement of the rotation of the earth around the sun into a system that fetishizes (essentially, arbitrarily) the number 10 is the most important – and obvious – example. There is little doubt that the Gregorian Calendar – a solar calendar that accounts, in its hourly structure of the day, division of weeks, and months of the year, and its ability to account for leap years in a smooth fashion – is a perfectly rational way to structure time. More than this, however, we see the assumption at play which Mahmood pointed out, that the Gregorian Calendar emerged from a “singular religious logic” that the Republicans could somehow “fix,” rather than a logic intent on establishing a calendar synced to the natural solar cycle – albeit, to solve a “religious” problem (making consistent the date of Easter).

This is an explicit way in which not only religious logic is defined, but a secular government defines religion *against* itself. Again, this is not to dismiss the fact that religious people were involved in government office during the Revolutionary period, but by the overt attempts to dechristianize France we see again and again the basis on which Christianity was defined *against* the secular government. Notable in this process is the degree to which such a definition of

Christianity was *not* accepted – neither by the rural population of France nor, evidently, by the Christian upper classes in France, as is evident by how quickly the old Calendar was restored as was the place of Catholicism in French life.⁵⁴

These assessments of the Republican Calendar, its implementation and its effects are not entirely new or groundbreaking. However, it is important as historians to assume a level of responsibility regarding our relationship with the past, how we assess it, and craft the narratives that we do. Assessing the Republican Calendar in light of recent methodological innovations in the academic study of religion allows us fresh insight into a heated and complex interaction between state secularism and the Christian Church. Using these methodological innovations can also prevent – or, at a minimum, make the historian self-conscious of – the interpretation of one’s data as a teleology, or a justification for a present condition.⁵⁵ What we can begin to see with the aid of these theoretical and methodological techniques is different foci on how the Republican Calendar was implemented, such as the process by which certain things were declared religious while others were not; the incongruities of assumed secular “rationality” and religious “irrationality;” the complex interaction between culture and religion without assuming that one is separate from the other. The attempts to implement the Republican Calendar forced the government to struggle against the boundaries of a worldview that was thought to be universal, rational, and capable of replacing an ‘unreasonable’ way of life. So too, if we take the cautions of this generation of academics of religion, must we

⁵⁴ The seventh chapter of Shusterman’s book is an assessment of Napoleon’s government on the religious life of France. Shusterman notes that Napoleon was innovative in the Church-State relationship in several ways, and that while the Republican Calendar no longer ruled time in France, the state *did* maintain this control over time. Napoleon also consolidated his control over the festivals celebrated in France, save for Sunday: “The tradition of episcopal control over religious holidays, present since the Middle Ages and strengthened by the edict of 1695, was now over.” Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*, 209.

⁵⁵ In this case, the teleology most often debated in the field today would be the secularization thesis. While I do not want to enter into too deep a discussion on the topic of the secularization thesis, we can see in this example of the Republican Calendar the ways in which secularization was not only resisted, but indeed, was seen as oppressive – both within and without government. In addition, while I am only surveying a period of less than ten years – not the overview needed to assess the secularization thesis’ claims – the Calendar seems to have had very little effect on French religiosity. This is obviously too deep an argument to digress on in any detail, but it is increasingly the focus of scholarly attention. Arnal and McCutcheon refer to the “now-discredited secularization thesis” in *The Sacred is the Profane*, 8. Talal Asad offers a more extensive critique of it in chapter six of *Formations of the Secular*.

struggle with the boundaries and incongruities of our own ways of writing the history of such events.

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