

## Introduction

There is one type of institution which must be considered an integral part of public education, by which I mean the national festivals. Bring men together and you make them better ... give a great moral or political meaning to their meeting and love of the truth will fill their hearts.<sup>1</sup>

Maximilien Robespierre, *Rapport sur les idées religieuses et morales* (1794)

On the 20th Prairial Year II of the Republic (8 June 1794), the whole of France was united in the celebration of the Festival of the Supreme Being. Two days later, Vaud, the secretary responsible for incoming correspondence, reported to the Convention on the exceptionally large number of letters which had been received relating to the great festival. He described them as demonstrating the joy which the nation had expressed at the idea of 'a family of twenty-five million brothers and sisters rising before day-break to lift their hearts and voices toward the Father of all'.<sup>2</sup> His was not the only voice to express these feelings. Three days later, the official report on the Festival in Paris stated that 'Of all the festivals celebrated since the beginning of the Revolution, none had demonstrated more harmony, brotherly love or solidarity.'<sup>3</sup> It concluded the report on the day's events with the following words:

The beauty of the day, the purity of the decorations, the open happiness of the people, the solidarity of feelings expressed by every attitude, every movement, every utterance by the citizens, finally the friendliness and good order which marked every aspect of the ceremonies created the most beautiful of festivals, one whose memory will last for ever in the records of the Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Even allowing for the tendency of the scribes of the Revolution to use the over-flowery and oratorical prose of the period, it would seem the festival of June 1794 was indeed something special in the sequence of great national

Revolutionary Festivals. Not only was the event received with warm words, the contemporary commentators noted that the ladies had brought out their pre-revolutionary finery for the occasion.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore all the more surprising that, with this type and level of reaction, this particular festival has been almost universally regarded as a dull uninteresting event, most often seen as an unsuccessful attempt by Robespierre to impose his dictatorial rule on republican and Revolutionary France. The manner in which historians have looked at this seminal event has changed from the political histories of the nineteenth century, and the socio-economic perspective of the early twentieth century, both of which concentrated on the political importance of the Festival. More recently there has been an increasing acceptance of the idea that the Festival was an equally important key cultural event within the overall context of the Revolution.

With the lone exception of Ernest Hamel who boasted of being 'Robespierre's apologist',<sup>6</sup> the early French and English historians of the Revolution all vilified Robespierre – as they did Saint-Just – as the source of all that was bad in the early years of the Revolution, and as the bloody tyrant of the Terror.<sup>7</sup> It was only after the insistence by Aulard and Mathiez that historians should only work from verifiable sources, rather than from what was often highly selective, if not downright dubious, anecdotal data, that historians began to examine the evidence more deeply. Even so, Aulard dismissed the importance of Robespierre and his moral concept. To begin with he refused to see in Robespierre the personification of the Revolution, 'I refuse to personify the French Revolution in the person of this pious liar and mystical assassin.'<sup>8</sup> He further denigrated the importance of Robespierre's concept of a Supreme Being against Chaumette's Cult of Reason since, in his view, 'The Cult of Reason or the Cult of the Supreme Being were, as far as public opinion, especially in the provinces, was concerned, the same thing ... So while worshipping Reason before 18 Floréal one could claim to be worshipping God, in the same way, after 18 Floréal, while worshipping God one could claim to be worshipping Reason.'<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary accounts, such as those by Sylvain Maréchal a noted atheist and member of the Convention, the jurist Vilate and the publicist Fiévée, all of whom claim to have been present at the Festival, are at one in agreeing that the Festival was a great popular success. They also indicate that the reason behind the Festival was purely political, a carefully constructed bid for total personal power by Robespierre. They were however all writing in the period immediately following Robespierre's fall, and were largely concerned to minimise, if not deny totally, any part they may have had in the Jacobin administration. Modern scholarship, based on closer examination of the available evidence, especially Robespierre's

own written and spoken words, does show a steady progression in his personal thinking on public morality. This can be seen to reach its peak in late 1793 and early 1794 when he appears to be moving towards the acceptance of the necessity for the establishment of some form of acceptably revolutionary yet still fundamentally Deistic, moral code. Logically – and Robespierre was nothing if not logical – this led to his attempt to meld his own predilection for the stern and unbending moral code of the ‘man of virtue’ with a semi-Rousseauvian form of Deism. The result, as he suggested in his speech of 18 Floréal, was the vision of a virtuous Nation advancing in unison towards the ideal Republic, under the benign protection of a Supreme Being.

Early historians of the Revolution, such as Mignet or Buchez and Roux, using the evidence from the letters received from the provinces, saw the Festival of the Supreme Being not only as a great event, but as one particularly notable for the depth of national participation. Regrettably, from then onwards, the great classical historians and their successors from Michelet and Quinet through to Aulard and successive holders of the Chair of Revolutionary Studies in Paris, maintained the view that the Festival should be regarded as an oddity, an aberration, an uninteresting one-off. Any suggestion that it might have been a genuine attempt by Robespierre to try to move the revolution towards a new and acceptable republican morality was totally dismissed. This view of the Festival continued through into the mid-twentieth century until, shortly before the Bicentenary, some historians began to look for an explanation as to why not only this particular Festival, but also other major Revolutionary Festivals, were considered so important within their own time.

It was during the Colloquium on the Revolutionary Festivals held in Clermont-Ferrand in June 1974 that the lines began to be drawn publicly between the two completely different readings of the importance and meaning of the Revolutionary Festivals in general, and that of the Supreme Being in particular. In separate sessions, Mona Ozouf and Michel Vovelle laid down not merely their own readings of the importance of the Festival but effectively the battle lines of what became a bitter controversy through the celebrations of the bicentenary of the revolution in 1989.<sup>10</sup> Ozouf invited historians to look more closely at ‘everything we can see and hear, everything that was moved and carried, everything that was sung, sculpted, mimed, declaimed, inscribed in the festivals.’<sup>11</sup> Vovelle replied by dismissing this in unequivocal terms, ‘there is a different reading, a different encoding between the approach of historians and those of many of our literary colleagues ... I believe these two readings are incompatible. No compromise is possible. The one must disappear should the

other prevail.<sup>12</sup> Ozouf set out the area of debate clearly in her major work, *La Fête Révolutionnaire 1789–1799*:

Is the Festival of the Supreme Being (as Daniel Guérin holds) an ingenious conceit, a clever stratagem designed to strengthen the position of those in power, or is it, as Mathiez maintains, a serious attempt to reconcile patriotic Catholicism with the Revolution? Is it, as Aulard claimed, the result of a religious vision, the product of a naturally mystical thinker? In short, when Robespierre instigated this festival was it as a clever politician or as a real believer? Plotter or priest?<sup>13</sup>

Despite considerable work by local historians on the Festival in their own areas,<sup>14</sup> the majority of commentators have tended to concentrate on the Festival's centralist and political aspects, most often limiting themselves to the Parisian celebrations, thereby not only seriously undervaluing the Festival's impact in the rest of France, but strengthening the tendency to see the picture through the distorting mirror of Paris.<sup>15</sup> Aulard's dictum that no-one outside Paris cared a jot for either the Cult of Reason or the Cult of the Supreme Being remained the accepted wisdom. This, in turn, led to a general disregard for the potential importance of the evidence available in provincial archives, evidence rather cavalierly dismissed by Ozouf as being nothing more than 'minutes of meetings, often inelegant, invariably dull'.<sup>16</sup>

The first hurdle to be overcome for any historian attempting to evaluate the genuine popular experience of a particular phase or aspect of the Revolution is the availability of reliable evidence, particularly when the area of inquiry is outside the capital and away from the narrow confines of the Convention and its Committees. There is always a paucity of reliable evidence of the state of public opinion outside Paris. The official sources in provincial France were primarily concerned with recording meetings of administrative bodies and their committees and sub-committees so that, while there are extensive records of the formal and invariably positive response to whatever the latest initiative from Paris was, there is little or no indication of any discussions of other matters, even serious and immediate local problems. In Amiens, for example, for several months since mid-1793 there had been an acute local problem of lodging and feeding large numbers of refugees from Flanders who, together with wounded soldiers from both the French and Imperial armies, had been dumped on the city by the regional authorities, yet the only document in the official archives which directly refers to this problem is a letter from a member of the local *Société Populaire*, protesting at the imposition of yet another 'voluntary' subscription list.<sup>17</sup>

The one source which does offer the potential of finding a more genuine exchange of views, and therefore a truer picture of local feeling, is the correspondence between provincial cities and towns and the various committees in Paris regarding local participation in the Revolutionary Festivals. These produce a very different sort of correspondence from the interminable succession of letters formally eulogising the latest political initiative of the Convention. This was first acknowledged by Buchez and Roux who, in their *Histoire Parlementaire de la Révolution Française* in 1838, singled these letters out as being more indicative of genuine local feeling than the usual formal responses to any official papers from the Convention.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that these documents offer a rare opportunity to obtain an insight into the real feelings in the country, they seem to have been very little used by historians for this purpose. It should be emphasised that this evidence is in no wise new or previously unobtainable. Quite the contrary, since it formed the basis both of the work of Vovelle and his students and of Ozouf's detailed commentaries on the provincial aspects of the Festival of the Supreme Being.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Festival of the Supreme Being was not only the amount of correspondence which it drew from the provinces; it was the nature of the correspondence itself. Well before the actual day of celebration, messages had been arriving addressed to the Convention, the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of Public Education, all welcoming the upcoming festival in the warmest terms. Correspondence between the provinces and central government in Paris was normally conducted in the stilted 'official' language of Revolutionary rhetoric, a language designed almost as much to obfuscate as to inform. What is so noticeable about many of the documents relating to the Festival of the Supreme Being is how the content cuts through the officialese, to give a real sense of an awakening of national solidarity. The specific coupling in the declaration of 19 Floréal (8 May 1794) of the two propositions that the nation accepted, not only the existence of a Supreme Being, but also the immortality of the Soul, had never before been hinted at, let alone formalised in an official statement by a revolutionary government.

There is some debate on the real meaning of the messages; these expressions of joy and hope were, after all, happening at the height of the Terror and in a society where, in many areas, the practice of religion, even if not actually forbidden, was at best difficult and often dangerous. It has been argued by those historians who support the more established thesis on the import of the Festival that the tenor and content of such documents show nothing more than the automatic reaction of provincial

worthies fearful of being seen as out of step with what was being decreed in Paris. Against this must be set the actual language of reports from all parts of the nation. In the report from Amiens the City Council speaks of giving 'the impression of a large family coming together in piety'.<sup>19</sup> Lyon reported that 'All hearts were suffused with tender feelings of brotherhood'<sup>20</sup> while in Angers local people had 'contested for the honour of taking part'.<sup>21</sup> This is certainly not the sad, monotonous language with which Ozouf characterised these documents. These are merely some examples typical of many more quoted in Chapter 4, all of which demonstrate the general feeling of joy and hope engendered by a combination of an acceptable ceremonial of worship of a Supreme Being, and the reaffirmation of the immortality of the soul which France had now officially committed itself to recognise.

Against this, Vovelle, firstly in his major work on de-Christianisation published in 1974,<sup>22</sup> and later in his 1993, *La Révolution contre l'Église: De la Raison à l'Être Suprême*, published in 1988, uses the same archives to define a very different set of concepts and their consequences. Drawing on his personal research at both national and local level, as well as a considerable number of detailed regional studies he led with his postgraduate students,<sup>23</sup> he produced work which concentrates on the socio- and geo-political impact of the spread of de-Christianisation, to the detriment of the examination of any other dimension, going so far as to refer to the Festival in a later work as mere 'Smoke and mirrors'.<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of this book is therefore to look again at the enormous amount of available evidence, not only centrally in Paris but also in departmental and civic archives throughout France. I believe that this demonstrates clearly that the Festival of the Supreme Being, far from being an event characterised by sterile compulsion, only of importance as part of the evidence of Robespierre's failure to take total control of the Revolution, was on the contrary an intensely participatory experience. It is this amazing outpouring of feelings from the whole nation which leads me to the belief that these documents are far from being the response of people or organisations afraid to speak out against central government. The overriding effect is that of a clear feeling that the idea of recreating some form of national morality, especially when seen to be linked to widely expressed sentiments of unity, was very much in resonance with the feeling in the nation, especially outside Paris.

What is unclear is what these unprecedented crowds were really celebrating on the great day. There is considerable evidence from contemporary sources both inside and outside Paris that there was a general and widespread expectation that the day of the Festival of the Supreme

Being could also see the proclamation of some form of general amnesty, the end of the Terror and even perhaps the beginning of the Republic of Virtue. Some of the participants would undoubtedly have been hoping that this Festival, held as it was on the day of the feast of Pentecost in the old calendar, was a sign that some form of real religious toleration was returning to public life. Others, while accepting that the removal of atheism as an official facet of public life was on balance positive, frankly saw no great difference between a Goddess of Reason and a Supreme Being; neither was real, neither was part of the public consciousness, neither had any impact on everyday life. The 'consoling idea' of immortality had its positive aspects, but was that all that was on offer? No-one seemed to be seriously working towards the apparent need to fill the missing religious element in people's lives, and this new moral system, unlike a real religion, seemed to be totally lacking in the essential ingredients necessary for its successful continuation. Unlike a 'real' church there was no rulebook, no uplifting or edifying stories to be heard, no martyrs and saints to look up to; even the martyrs of the Revolution were sidelined. There were no pastors or community leaders, no spokesmen were visiting the Paris *sections* or the provincial Republican Clubs to imbue them with the necessary fervour any new cult needs to survive. Equally, none of the official slogans offered those two vital elements of any religion: the long-term prospect of salvation and the short-term prospect of charitable assistance.

While it is undoubtedly stirring to have a great festival which unites the whole of the nation in joyful celebration, it is quite another to follow it up and lay the groundwork for the basic ideology behind the celebrations to become an intrinsic part of national life. It might have been expected that, following the success of 20 Prairial, these questions would be properly addressed, and that the new belief system would be incorporated into the life of the nation as quickly and as deeply as possible, although in view of the general lack of organisational ability throughout the various committees, it was perhaps not altogether surprising that it did not happen. The result was inevitable; in the absence of any strong commitment to the continuation of the worship of the Supreme Being, it would be the negative comments of Robespierre's political opponents which would sound loudest. Despite their assertion that they were not attacking the idea of the Supreme Being as such, these comments led inescapably to the whole idea being considered as being nothing more than a vehicle for the self-aggrandisement of its chief advocate, Robespierre. What happened to the Cult of the Supreme Being after 20 Prairial, why it failed, why it disappeared almost without trace, is both baffling and fascinating.

## Notes

- 1 'Il est cependant une sorte d'institution qui doit être considérée comme une partie essentielle de l'éducation publique, je veux parler des fêtes nationales ... donner à leur réunion un grand motif moral et politique, et l'amour des choses honnêtes entrera avec le plaisir dans tous les cœurs.' (Robespierre, 'Rapport sur les idées religieuses et morales, 18 Floréal Year II' (7 May 1794))
- 2 'une famille de vingt-cinq millions de frères devancer ensemble la naissance du jour pour élever son âme et sa voix vers le Père de la nature.' *Moniteur*, 23 Prairial Year II (11 June 1794), Vol. 20, p. 701.
- 3 'De toutes les fêtes célébrées depuis le commencement de la Révolution aucune n'a été exécutée avec plus d'harmonie, de fraternité et d'ensemble.' *Moniteur*, 23 Prairial Year II (11 June 1794), Vol. 20, p. 702.
- 4 'La beauté du jour, la fraîcheur des décorations, la franche gaieté du peuple, l'unanimité des sentiments exprimés par toutes les attitudes tous les mouvements tous les discours des citoyens, enfin la cordialité et l'ordre qui ont régné dans tout le cours de la cérémonie en ont fait la plus belle fête dont le souvenir puisse être perpétué dans les fastes de la révolution.' (*Moniteur*, 23 Prairial Year II (11 June 1794), Vol. 20, p. 702)
- 5 See Chapter 6 for specific quotations from Vilate *et al.*
- 6 E. Hamel, *Histoire de Robespierre d'après les papiers de famille, les sources originales et des documents entièrement inédits* (Paris, 1865).
- 7 This theme can be seen running throughout the nineteenth century from F.A. Mignet, *Histoire de la Révolution française depuis 1789 jusqu'en 1814* (Paris, 1827), T. Carlyle, *The French Revolution; A History* (London, 1837) and P.-J.-B. Buchez and P.-C. Roux, *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française: ou Journal des assemblées nationales depuis 1780 jusqu'en 1815* (Paris, 1838) and on through J. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, Vol. VI, *La Révolution* [originally published 1847–52], P. Villaneix, ed. (Paris, 1974) to Charles Nodier, *Souvenirs de la Révolution et de l'Empire* (Paris, 1850), and in the works of Quinet and Louis Blanc through to Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* [originally published 1901], A. Soboul ed. (Paris, 1972).
- 8 'Je me refuse à personnifier la Révolution Française dans ce pieux calomniateur et dans ce mystique assassin.' A. Aulard, 'Aux apologistes de Robespierre', *La Justice*, 28 September 1885.
- 9 'Culte de la Raison, culte de l'Être suprême, ce fut pour l'opinion, surtout en province, la même chose ... Ainsi, avant le 18 floréal, en adorant la Raison on se vantait d'adorer Dieu; après le 18 floréal, en adorant Dieu on se vantait d'adorer la Raison.' A. Aulard, *Histoire politique de la révolution française: origines et développement de la démocratie et de la république 1789–1804*, 5th ed., 2nd reprint (Paris, 1921), p. 493.
- 10 For an account of some aspects of the violent confrontations of the Bicentenary celebrations see M. Agulhon, 'Faut-il avoir peur de 1789?', *Histoire Vagabonde*, 2 (1988): 244–61.



- 11 'tout ce qui est donné à voir et à entendre, ce qui est promené et transporté, ce qui est chanté, sculpté, mimé, proclamé, inscrits dans les fêtes.' M. Ozouf, 'Le renouvellement de l'imaginaire collectif', in *Les Fêtes de la Révolution: Colloque de Clermont-Ferrand, juin 1974*, J. Erhard and P. Viallaneix, eds (Paris, 1977), p. 303.
- 12 'il y a entre l'approche des historiens et l'approche de toute une partie de nos collègues littéraires, une lecture et un codage différent ... Deux lectures inconciliables, me semble-t-il. Il n'y a pas de compromis possible. L'une disparaît là où l'autre s'impose.' M. Vovelle, 'Sociologie et Idéologie', in *Les Fêtes de la Révolution*, Erhard and Viallaneix, p. 478.
- 13 'La fête de l'Être Suprême, est-ce une ingénieuse trouvaille, ruse malintentionnée, destinée à asseoir la fortune des possédants (Daniel Guérin), ou ruse bien intentionnée vouée à réconcilier avec la Révolution le catholicisme patriote (Mathiez)? Est-ce au contraire l'aboutissement d'un projet religieux, l'épanchement d'une âme naturellement mystique (Aulard)? Bref, Robespierre en instituant cette fête s'est-il montré fin politique, ou vrai dévot? Stratège ou pontife?' (M. Ozouf, *La Fête Révolutionnaire, 1789-1799* (Paris, 1976), p. 173)
- 14 Examples are publications on their local Festivals of the Supreme Being of the Historical Societies of Nancy in 1900, St Malo in 1908, Angers in 1916 and Calais in 1924.
- 15 See also S. Hazareesingh, 'Preface', in *Célébrer la nation: Les fêtes nationales en France de 1789 à nos jours*, R. Dalisson (Paris, 2009).
- 16 'des procès-verbaux parfois frustes, toujours monotones.' Ozouf, *La Fête Révolutionnaire*, pp. 27-8.
- 17 A.M. Amiens, Archives Révolutionnaires I/I,2.
- 18 Buchez and Roux, *Histoire parlementaire*, Vol. 33, p. 163.
- 19 'une grande famille réunie par les sentiments de la piété filiale.' A.M. Amiens, 1.D.10.9, p. 82.
- 20 'la douce fraternité embrasait tous les cœurs.' A.M. Lyon, 1.C.651107, p. 5.
- 21 'se disputer l'honneur de marcher.' A.M. Angers, 1.D.5, p. 88.
- 22 M. Vovelle, *Religion et Révolution, la déchristianisation de l'an II* (Paris, 1976).
- 23 In the bibliography of 1793, *La Révolution contre l'Église*, Vovelle acknowledges contributions from a total of fifteen unpublished postgraduate works, eleven from his own students and four more presented under other supervisors, and further doctoral students have amplified the regional research work since the original publication.
- 24 'Mystique et illusion.' M. Vovelle, *Les Images de la Révolution* (Paris, 1988).