

The Cult of the Supreme Being

By Maximilien Robespierre

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SPEECH TO THE FRENCH NATIONAL CONVENTION, May 7

The world has changed, and is bound to change again. What is there in common between that which is and that which was? Civilized nations have taken the place of savages wandering in the desert; fruitful crops have taken the place of the ancient forests that covered the globe. A world has appeared beyond the limits of the world; the inhabitants of the earth have added the seas to their immeasurable domain; man has conquered the lightning and averted the thunderbolts of heaven. Compare the imperfect language of hieroglyphics with the miracles of printing; set the voyage of the Argonauts beside that of La Pérouse; measure the distance between the astronomical observations of the wise men of Asia and the discoveries of Newton, or between the sketch drawn by the hand of Dibutade and the pictures of David... .

All has changed in the physical order; all must change in the moral and political order. One half of the world revolution is already achieved, the other half has yet to be accomplished... .

The French people appear to have outstripped the rest of the human race by two thousand years; one might even be tempted to regard them as a distinct species among the rest. Europe is kneeling to the shadows of the tyrants whom we are punishing.

In Europe a ploughman or an artisan is an animal trained to do the pleasure of a noble; in France the nobles seek to transform themselves into ploughmen and artisans, and cannot even obtain this honour.

Europe cannot conceive of life without kings and nobles; and we cannot conceive of it with them.

Europe is lavishing her blood to rivet the fetters on humanity; and we to break them.

Our sublime neighbours discourse gravely to the universe of the King's health, amusements and travels; they insist upon informing posterity of the time at which he dined, the moment at which he returned from hunting, the happy soil which had the honour of being trodden by his

august feet at each hour of the day, the names of the privileged slaves who appeared in his presence at the rising and the setting sun.

As for us, we shall make known to it the names and virtues of the heroes who died in the fight for liberty; we shall make known to it on what soil the last satellites of tyrants hit the dust; we shall make known to it the hour which sounded the death-knell of the oppressors of the world.

Yes, this delightful land which we inhabit, which Nature favours with her caresses, is made to be the domain of liberty and happiness; this proud and sensitive people is truly born for glory and virtue. O my country, had fate caused me to be born in a foreign and distant land, I should have addressed to heaven my constant prayers for thy prosperity; I should have shed tears of emotion at the story of thy combats and thy virtues; my eager soul would have followed with ardent anxiety every movement of thy glorious Revolution; I should have envied the lot of thy citizens, I should have envied that of thy representatives... O sublime nation! Receive the sacrifice of all my being; happy is he who is born in thy midst! Still happier he who can die for thy happiness! ...

The sole foundation of civil society is morality! ... Immorality is the basis of despotism, as virtue is the essence of the Republic... Study the good of the country and the interests of humanity alone. Every institution, every doctrine which consoles and elevates men's souls ought to be welcomed; reject all those which tend to degrade and corrupt them. Encourage and exalt all generous sentiments and great moral ideas which men have attempted to extinguish; draw together by the charm of friendship and the bonds of virtue those men whom there have been attempts to divide... .

You who lament a virtuous friend, you love to think that what is finest in him has escaped death! You who weep over the bier of a son or a wife, are you consoled by him who tells you that all that remains of them is base dust? Wretch expiring beneath the assassin's blow, your last sigh is an appeal to eternal justice! Innocence on the scaffold makes the tyrant turn pale upon his triumphal chariot: would it have this power if the tomb levelled the oppressor with the oppressed? Wretched sophist! By what right dost thou come and wrest the sceptre of reason from innocence to place it in the hands of crime, to encourage vice, to sadden virtue and to degrade humanity? The more richly a man is endowed with sensibility and genius, the more attached he is to the ideas which expand his being and elevate his heart; and the doctrine of men of that stamp becomes that of the universe. Ah! Can such ideas be other than truths? At any rate I cannot conceive how nature can have

suggested to men fictions more beneficial than all realities; and if the existence of God, if the immortality of the soul were but dreams, they would still be the finest of all the conceptions of human intelligence.

I need hardly say that there is no question here of arraigning any particular philosophical opinions, or of denying that this or that philosopher may be virtuous, whatever his opinions may be, and even in spite of them, by virtue of a fortunate disposition or a superior intelligence. The point is to consider nothing but Atheism, in so far as it is national in character and bound up with a system of conspiracy against the Republic.

Ah! What does it matter to you, legislators, by what varied hypotheses certain philosophers explain the phenomena of nature? You may hand over all these subjects to their everlasting discussions: it is neither as metaphysicians nor as theologians that you have to consider them. In the eyes of the legislator, truth is all that is useful and of practical good to the world... .

Fanatics, hope for nothing from us. To recall men to the pure cult of the Supreme Being is to strike a death-blow at fanaticism. All fictions disappear before the truth, and all follies collapse before Reason. Without compulsion, without persecution, all sects must mingle spontaneously in the universal religion of Nature. We shall counsel you, then, to maintain the principles which you have hitherto displayed. May the liberty of worship be respected, that reason may triumph indeed, but let it not disturb public order or become a means of conspiracy. If counterrevolutionary malignity is shielding itself beneath this pretext, repress it, and, for the rest, rely upon the might of principle and the innate force of things... .

Ambitious priests, do not wait for us to work for the restoration of your dominance; such an enterprise would indeed be beyond our power. It is you who have killed yourselves, and one can no more return to moral life than to physical existence. Besides, what is there in common between the priests and God? Priests are to morality what charlatans are to medicine. How different is the God of nature from the God of the priests! The God of nature knows nothing which resembles Atheism so much as priest-made religions. By dint of distorting the Supreme Being, they have destroyed Him, as much as in them lay; they have made of Him sometimes a ball of fire, sometimes an ox, sometimes a tree, sometimes a man, sometimes a king. The priests have created God in their own image; they have made Him jealous, capricious, greedy, cruel and implacable. They have treated Him as the Mayors of the Palace in olden days treated the descendant of Clovis, in order to reign in his name and put themselves in his place.

They have relegated Him to heaven as to a palace, and have only brought Him down to earth in order to demand tithes, riches, honours, pleasure and power for their own profit. The real priest of the Supreme Being is Nature; His temple, the universe; His worship, virtue; His festivals, the joy of a great people gathered together beneath His eyes in order to draw close the sweet bonds of universal brotherhood and offer Him the homage of pure and feeling hearts... .

May they all tend to arouse those generous sentiments which are the charm and adornment of human life: enthusiasm for liberty, love of country and respect for law. May the memory of tyrants and traitors be held up to execration at them; may that of heroes of liberty and benefactors of humanity receive the just tribute of public gratitude; may they draw their interest, and their very names, from the immortal events of our Revolution, and even from the things dearest and most sacred to the heart of man; may they be beautified and distinguished by emblems suggesting their special objects. Let us invite nature and all the virtues to our festivals; let them all be celebrated under the auspices of the Supreme Being; let them be consecrated to Him, and let them open and close with a tribute to His power and goodness... .

[Robespierre then proposed the following decree:]

DECREE ESTABLISHING THE CULT OF THE SUPREME BEING

Article I. The French people recognizes the existence of the Supreme Being, and the immortality of the soul.

Article II. It recognizes that the best way of worshipping the Supreme Being is to do one's duties as a man.

Article III. It considers that the most important of these duties are: to detest bad faith and despotism, to punish tyrants and traitors, to assist the unfortunate, to respect the weak, to defend the oppressed, to do all the good one can to one's neighbour, and to behave with justice towards all men.

Article IV. Festivals shall be instituted to remind men of the Deity, and of the dignity of their state.

Article V. These festivals shall be named after the glorious events of our Revolution, the virtues which are most dear to men, and most useful, and the chief blessings of nature.

Article VI. The French Republic shall celebrate every year the anniversaries of July 14, 1789, August 10, 1792, January 21, 1793, and May 31, 1793.

Article VII. It shall celebrate, on successive decadis, the following festivals: the Supreme Being, and Nature; the human race; the French people; the benefactors of mankind; the martyrs of freedom; liberty and equality; the Republic; the liberty of the world; patriotism; hatred of tyrants and traitors; truth; justice; modesty; glory and immortality; friendship; temperance; courage; good faith; heroism; impartiality; Stoicism; love; conjugal fidelity; fatherly affection; mother-love; filial piety; childhood; youth; manhood; old age; misfortune; agriculture; industry; our ancestors; posterity; happiness.

Article VIII. The Committees of Public Safety and of Education are instructed to present a scheme for the organization of these festivals.

Article IX. The National Convention invites all those whose talents are worthy of serving the cause of mankind to the honour of assisting in the establishment of these festivals by submitting hymns or civic songs, or anything else likely to contribute to their beauty or utility.

Article X. The Committee of Public Safety shall award distinction to such works as appear to it calculated to achieve these objects, and shall reward their authors.

Article XI. Freedom of worship is confirmed, in the terms of the decree of 18th Frimaire.

Article XII. Any meeting of aristocrats, or any that contravenes public order, shall be suppressed.

Article XIII. In the event of troubles caused by or arising out of any form of public worship, all those who excited them by fanatical preaching or counter-revolutionary suggestions, and all those who provoked them by unjust or uncalled-for acts of violence, shall be equally punished, with all the rigour of the law.

Article XIV. A separate report shall be prepared, dealing with the detailed arrangements consequential upon the present decree.

Article XV. There shall be celebrated, upon the 20th Prairial next, a national festival in honour of the Supreme Being.

THE FESTIVAL OF THE SUPREME BEING, JUNE 8, 1794

FIRST SPEECH

The day forever fortunate has arrived, which the French people have consecrated to the Supreme Being. Never has the world which He created offered to Him a spectacle so worthy of His notice. He has seen reigning on the earth tyranny, crime, and imposture. He sees at this moment a whole nation, grappling with all the oppressions of the human race, suspend the course of its heroic labors to elevate its thoughts and vows toward the great Being who has given it the mission it has undertaken and the strength to accomplish it.

Is it not He whose immortal hand, engraving on the heart of man the code of justice and equality, has written there the death sentence of tyrants? Is it not He who, from the beginning of time, decreed for all the ages and for all peoples liberty, good faith, and justice?

He did not create kings to devour the human race. He did not create priests to harness us, like vile animals, to the chariots of kings and to give to the world examples of baseness, pride, perfidy, avarice, debauchery, and falsehood. He created the universe to proclaim His power. He created men to help each other, to love each other mutually, and to attain to happiness by the way of virtue.

It is He who implanted in the breast of the triumphant oppressor remorse and terror, and in the heart of the oppressed and innocent calmness and fortitude. It is He who impels the just man to hate the evil one, and the evil man to respect the just one. It is He who adorns with modesty the brow of beauty, to make it yet more beautiful. It is He who makes the mother's heart beat with tenderness and joy. It is He who bathes with delicious tears the eyes of the son pressed to the bosom of his mother. It is He who silences the most imperious and tender passions before the sublime love of the fatherland. It is He who has covered nature with charms, riches, and majesty. All that is good is His work, or is Himself. Evil belongs to the depraved man who oppresses his fellow man or suffers him to be oppressed.

The Author of Nature has bound all mortals by a boundless chain of love and happiness. Perish the tyrants who have dared to break it!

Republican Frenchmen, it is yours to purify the earth which they have soiled, and to recall to it the justice that they have banished! Liberty and

virtue together came from the breast of Divinity. Neither can abide with mankind without the other.

O generous People, would you triumph over all your enemies? Practice justice, and render the Divinity the only worship worthy of Him. O People, let us deliver ourselves today, under His auspices, to the just transports of a pure festivity. Tomorrow we shall return to the combat with vice and tyrants. We shall give to the world the example of republican virtues. And that will be to honor Him still.

SECOND SPEECH

The monster which the genius of kings had vomited over France has gone back into nothingness. May all the crimes and all the misfortunes of the world disappear with it! Armed in turn with the daggers of fanaticism and the poisons of atheism, kings have always conspired to assassinate humanity. If they are able no longer to disfigure Divinity by superstition, to associate it with their crimes, they try to banish it from the earth, so that they may reign there alone with crime.

O People, fear no more their sacrilegious plots! They can no more snatch the world from the breast of its Author than remorse from their own hearts. Unfortunate ones, uplift your eyes toward heaven! Heroes of the fatherland, your generous devotion is not a brilliant madness. If the satellites of tyranny can assassinate you, it is not in their power entirely to destroy you. Man, whoever thou mayest be, thou canst still conceive high thoughts for thyself. Thou canst bind thy fleeting life to God, and to immortality. Let nature seize again all her splendor, and wisdom all her empire! The Supreme Being has not been annihilated.

It is wisdom above all that our guilty enemies would drive from the republic. To wisdom alone it is given to strengthen the prosperity of empires. It is for her to guarantee to us the rewards of our courage. Let us associate wisdom, then, with all our enterprises. Let us be grave and discreet in all our deliberations, as men who are providing for the interests of the world. Let us be ardent and obstinate in our anger against conspiring tyrants, imperturbable in dangers, patient in labors, terrible in striking back, modest and vigilant in successes. Let us be generous toward the good, compassionate with the unfortunate, inexorable with the evil, just toward every one. Let us not count on an unmixed prosperity, and on triumphs without attacks, nor on all that depends on fortune or the perversity of others. Sole, but infallible guarantors of our independence, let us crush the impious league of kings by the grandeur of our character, even more than by the strength of our arms.

Frenchmen, you war against kings; you are therefore worthy to honor Divinity. Being of Beings, Author of Nature, the brutalized slave, the vile instrument of despotism, the perfidious and cruel aristocrat, outrages Thee by his very invocation of Thy name. But the defenders of liberty can give themselves up to Thee, and rest with confidence upon Thy paternal bosom. Being of Beings, we need not offer to Thee unjust prayers. Thou knowest Thy creatures, proceeding from Thy hands. Their needs do not escape Thy notice, more than their secret thoughts. Hatred of bad faith and tyranny burns in our hearts, with love of justice and the fatherland. Our blood flows for the cause of humanity. Behold our prayer. Behold our sacrifices. Behold the worship we offer Thee.

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