French Calendar Reform: The De-Christianization of France

By eLaine Vornholt
Laura Lee Vornholt-Jones

Calendars are and always have been *religious* devices.

The notion that the calendar was devised by and for farmers so that they would know when to sow and when to reap has been taken for granted too long; it fails both the test of logic and of fact. Farmers do not need a formal calendar to know the seasons, and primitive societies have managed to feed themselves for generations without a calendar.

The historic fact is that the calendar was devised in order to *predetermine the precise time of festivals honoring the gods. The calendar, in other words, was a religious device.*

During the French Revolution, France set aside Christianity and in public forum denounced the God of Heaven. “The world for the first time heard an assembly of men, born and educated in civilization, and assuming the right to govern one of the finest of the European nations, uplift their united voice to deny the most solemn truth which man’s soul receives, and renounce unanimously the belief and worship of a Deity.”

France is the only nation in the world concerning which the authentic record survives, that as a nation she lifted her hand in open rebellion against the Author of the universe. Plenty of blasphemers, plenty of infidels, there have been, and still continue to be, in England, Germany, Spain, and elsewhere; but France stands apart in the world’s history as the single state which, by the decree of her Legislative Assembly, pronounced that there was no God, and of which the entire population of the capital, and a vast majority elsewhere, women as well as men, danced and sang with joy in accepting the announcement.

On October 23, 1793, just nine days after Queen Marie-Atoinette was executed, the Republican Calendar was decreed. The French calendar reform was an attempt to de-Christianize the

---

3 *Blackwood’s Magazine*, November, 1870.
calendar, in keeping with the Revolution’s stated goal of promoting Reason as opposed to Religion. “Reason” was worshipped and religion denounced as superstition. This was the main motivation behind the French reform of the calendar. Pierre-Sylvain Maréchal, who originally proposed the change, declared: “the calendar of the French Republic . . . must not resemble in any respect the official annuals of the apostolic and Roman Church.”

The new calendar bore a striking resemblance to the old Egyptian solar calendar. There were 12 months, each containing 30 days each. The months were broken up into 10-day décades with the final day being a day of rest. This was not a day to worship the God of Heaven. This was merely a day of rest from labor. At the end of the year, following the 12th month of Fructidor, a final five days were added to the calendar (six in a leap year.) These were each named in celebration of various revolutionary principles: Fete de la vertu (Celebration of virtue); Fete du genie (Celebration of genius); Fete du travail (Celebration of labor); Fete de l’opinion (Celebration of opinion); Fete des recompenses (Celebration of rewards); and, the leap day Jour de la revolution (Day of the revolution). According to article VII of the decree, the last five days did not belong to any month.

---

Whereas the Roman Catholic calendar (the Gregorian calendar) linked Easter to the spring equinox of March 21, the French Republican calendar decreed that New Year would be anchored to “midnight of the day of the autumn equinox for the Paris observatory” (Article III).

The 10-day week completely demolished any sanctity for Sunday as a holy day and the most important day of the week. By instituting a 10-day week, the French government exerted power over the Roman Catholic Church in her main area of influence: control of time. Throughout the middle ages, the people had been taught to reverence Sunday and lived in fear of the power of the papacy. Even the name of “Sunday” was removed from the new week, the days being numbered instead: *Primi*di, *Duodi*, *Tridi*, *Quartidi*, *Quintidi*, *Sextidi*, *Septidi*, *Octidi*, *Nonidi*, *Décadi* (First, Second, Third, etc.).

The new calendar was promoted as “rational” and “scientific”. In 1791, the National Assembly had ordered the *Académie des Sciences* (Academy of Sciences) to “rationalize” the current system of weights and measures. The new and “rational” system it established is still used today: the metric system. The calendar, thus, was merely the next logical unit of measure to bring to a new, modern, scientific standard.

However, the *primary* purpose was to destroy the traditional seven-day week and Sunday, the worship day for most of Christendom. When Charles-Gilbert Romme, its chief architect, was asked what the main reason for the new calendar was, he emphatically stated: “To abolish Sunday.” “The *décade* [the new “week”] – or, rather, to be more precise, its “peak day,” Décadi – came to be the single most important symbol of the de-Christianization of France.” Churches were forbidden to hold services on any day except for Décadi and citizens were not to close their stores on Sunday or acknowledge it by wearing their *habits du dimanche*, or “Sunday best”.

The education of the people was not overlooked in the calendar reform decree. Article XIII of the decree stipulated: “The calendar, as well as the instructional material [commanded to be printed in Article XII], shall be sent to administrative bodies, municipalities, tribunals, judges-of-the-peace and to all public officers; to the army, to the popular societies, and all colleges and schools. The Provisional Executive Council shall pass it on to ministers, consuls and other French agents in foreign countries.”

6 It is ironic that the French viewed the old system as needing to be “rationalized.” The sexagesimal system upon which is based miles, yards, feet, inches, etc., is extremely accurate and continues to be used in geometry and in modern time measurement. Even among nations that adopted the metric system, the sexagesimal system continues to be used in geometry and time measurement: *i.e.*, 360 degrees in a circle, and 60 minutes in an hour. Pierre Gaxotte, *The French Revolution*, (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), p. 329.
Furthermore, Article XV commanded that “Professors, teachers, mothers and fathers of families, and all those who direct the education of children shall hasten to explain to them the new calendar, in conformity with the annexed instructional material.”

French reform of time did not end with the days, weeks, months and years. They even established a new clock. In a decree dated October 5, 1793, it was declared: “The day, from midnight to midnight, is divided into ten parts, each part into ten others, so on until the smallest measurable portion of duration.” (Article XI: Le jour, de minuit à minuit, est divisé en dix parties, chaque partie en dix autres, ainsi de suite jusqu’à la plus petite portion commensurable de la durée.) Like the metric system, this new arrangement was called “decimal time.” The hours of the day were divided ten decimal hours of 100 decimal minutes each. Each minute contained a 100 seconds, amounting to 100,000 seconds per day. On November 24, 1793, it was explained: “The hundredth part of the hour is called the decimal minute; the hundredth part of the minute is called the decimal second.”

This unique clock gives the French hour at the top, the date of the month to the left, and the standard hour on the clock face at the bottom.

This particular antique clock-face is intriguing because it shows both the traditional 24-hour day in Arabic numbers on the outer circle, with the 10-hour day in Roman numerals on the inner circle. Notice that one complete revolution of the day hand would be one complete 24-hour period. Thus, the new French hour was over twice as long as the standard 60-minute hour used by the rest of Europe. The Phrygian cap commonly worn by Revolutionaries as a symbol of liberation is seen perched atop the scales of justice, with the red, white and blue revolutionary flag thrust in above the cannon.

This complete and total realignment of time reckoning, not only destroyed the perception of

---

10 “La centième partie de l'heure est appelée minute décimale; la centième partie de la minute est appelée seconde décimale” (emphasis in original).

11 The Phrygian cap was worn by ancient Persian soldiers and the inhabitants of Phrygia. While French Revolutionaries viewed it as a symbol of liberty, it was grounded in paganism as it was also worn by and thus a symbol of the pagan god, Mithras.
Sunday as a holy day, but it also struck right at the foundation of the papacy’s claim to power: the change of the Sabbath from the seventh-day of a lunar week to the first day of a continuously cycling week on a solar calendar. It was this reform of time reckoning itself which gave to the papacy the deadly wound prophesied in Revelation 13 and which various Bible expositors have linked to 1798.

In 1798, the French general, Louis Alexandre Berthier, a Huguenot, took the pope, Pius VI, a prisoner. Many Bible scholars point to this as The Event which delivered to the papacy the prophesied deadly wound. However, taking the pope prisoner was only one act in a series of events. The process of giving the papacy a deadly wound began in 1793 with the introduction of a calendar whose main purpose was to destroy any link to Christianity. This process did indeed culminate in 1798 when, on April 3, the ruling Directory “for the first time, made the observance of the ten-day week mandatory.”

The Directory’s main goal was obvious – to pull the entire social and economic life of France outside the sphere of the traditional Christian weekly rhythm, so as to make the latter absolutely irrelevant to daily life. . . . The French [found] it almost impossible to even keep track of the days of the seven-day week when almost their entire affairs would be regulated by a ten-day rhythm of activity. Furthermore, how would anyone be able to preserve the traditional Christian way of life and attend church regularly every Sunday, when stores could be closed only on Décadis and Quintidi afternoons? Similarly, given that fish markets were held only on Duodi, Quintidi, and Septidi, how would citizens be able to keep eating fish every Friday?

Besides being difficult to maintain one method of time-reckoning while all surrounding countries used another, the French Republican calendar fell into disfavor because workers were given one day off in ten rather than the previous system of one day off in seven. While the new calendar had always been opposed by the devout, a series of reforms under Napoleon Bonaparte began easing the enforcement of the new calendar. On July 26, 1800, Napoleon “issued a decree announcing that, with the single exception of public officials, who would still be bound by the mandatory Décadi rest, French citizens were free to rest on whatever days they wished.” The Concordant of 1801, which was an agreement between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII, restored some civil status to the Roman Catholic Church in France, and acknowledged the Church as the majority church of France. September 9, 1805, decreed that Sunday was once again the official rest day of France.

14 Zerubavel, op cit., p. 32.
15 Zerubavel, op cit., p. 34.
The Republican Calendar was finally abolished by Napoleon a little over 12 years after it was legislated. France returned to the Gregorian calendar January 1, 1806. The papal calendar had triumphed.