CHAPTER 4

The Popular Piety of Catherine Théot

There is no evidence that Suzette Labrousse and Catherine Théot ever met. They probably did not, for during the months Labrousse spent in Paris in early 1792, Théot was living obscurely on the rue des Rosiers in the Marais, attended by a few disciples. It was after Labrousse had set out for Rome that some of her own followers, most notably Colonel Pescheloche and Dom Gerle, began visiting the worship services conducted by the aged former domestic servant who called herself "Mother Catherine."

Catherine Théot's prominence as a prophet was never as great as Suzette Labrousse's had been in 1790 nor as great as Richard Brothers's would be in 1795. It is ironic, therefore, that the political machinations connected with the overthrow of Robespierre should have given her not only brief prominence in 1794 but also a celebrity in the histories of the French Revolution that Labrousse and Brothers will never enjoy. Also, thanks to the scrupulous care with which the Paris police and the surveillance committees of the Paris sections recorded and filed their interrogations of suspects, it is possible to know in considerable detail who Théot's followers were and what she and they believed.

Albert Mathiez pointed out fifty years ago that Catherine Théot deserved more respectful attention from historians than her contemporaries had given her. Relying on the materials (now in the Archives Nationales) collected on the Théot "conspiracy" by the Committee of General Security, the police, and the committees in the sections, he argued that she represented the end of that "Christian revolutionary mysticism . . . which had moved one part of the masses at the beginning of the Revolution."1 The "regeneration" that 1789-90 seemed

to embody was translated into Christian terms. Men would become moral, the church would return to its ancient simplicity and purity, and finally, Jesus Christ would return to rule for a thousand years.

More recently, Albert Soboul has called attention to the emergence of cults of the Revolutionary martyrs Marat, Dugué, and Chalier. These cults, he contends, differed profoundly from the bourgeois and official expressions of revolutionary religion that Mathiez studied in that they derived from the traditional religion of popular culture, with its veneration of saints and martyrs. Olwen Hufton has recently taken Soboul's argument one step further. The shocks of 1792, she maintains, produced among the women of the poor a religious fervor of an intensity "without parallel in the eighteenth century." The object of this fervor, which lasted into 1794, was the revolutionary nation. But hunger, unemployment, and the failure of the social revolution gradually led the women to turn away from the Revolution and to revive a "visceral" popular Catholicism, which "owed its strength to the rigours of the times, the imminence of death from disease or undernourishment, shame, failure, the sense of contrition which sought as solace . . . the sort of expiatory religion which defies rooting out."3

Unfortunately, in concentrating on revolutionary religion as an expression of working-class consciousness, Soboul and Hufton have ignored an implication of Mathiez's work that does have significance for the study of the religious history of the French Revolution. Théét and her followers represented the persistence into the French Revolutionary period of that tradition of devotion, sometimes heretical, often anticlerical, that can be described as "popular piety." George Mosse defines the phrase as "the hopes and aspirations of the multitude, whose religious awareness tends to be immediate and naive. . . . There is a sameness about such popular piety which preserves the traditional texture of its modes of thought and expression from the Middle Ages into recent times."4

In a recent article, Michel Eude questions Mathiez's interpretation of the Théét affair. He contends that there was a genuine "inquiétude" in 1794 among the members of the ruling committees of the National Convention concerning the extent of mystical religion ("Points de vue sur l'affaire Catherine Théét," Annales historiques de la Révolution française 41 [1969]: 606-29).


In the case of Suzette Labrousse, the traditions of popular piety can be seen in her mission—a pilgrimage to the holy city, made barefoot, begging, in the dress of a Beguine. These traditions may be supposed to underlie the *Enigmes* and her other writings, but vagueness, her miscellaneous notions on politics and science, and the guiding hand of Pierre Pontard make it possible to perceive them only dimly. With Catherine Théot, whose sermons and letters were copied out by faithful secretaries, the persistence of popular piety into the French Revolution is seen much more clearly. And while it is only a guess it is at least arguable that Théot's circle was not unique; that throughout France there were similar groups which accepted the Revolution just as wholeheartedly, which also met to read the Bible, sing, hear sermons, and pray for the salvation of themselves and the French nation.

Catherine Théot was born at Barenton, near Avranches, in Normandy on 6 May 1716. Her parents were illiterate peasants. It is unclear whether Catherine knew how to read and write. She was unable to sign her name to the police interrogation in 1794, but by then she was severely crippled by a palsy. Like Labrousse, her sense of religious vocation had begun in earliest childhood. She wrote during the Revolution that she had been "given to God from infancy"; one of her disciples recalled hearing her say that when she was only four years old, "God had made known to her that he would make an alliance with her."6

Having acquired a reputation in her village for piety, Théot was sent by her parish priest to Paris and placed her under the spiritual direction of the abbé Joseph Grisel. After having left his native Normandy, Grisel won some eminence both at the court of Louis XV and as the author of mystical tracts aimed primarily at an audience of women. Grisel placed her in the Convent of the Miramionnes, where she worked for many years as a domestic servant.7 At one point she returned to Normandy and sought admission to a convent near her home, but God told her to return to "the greater world that there is in Paris," where she "would be all the joy of Israel" and "would deliver his people from the wiles of Satan."8 She returned to Paris, where she spent the rest of her life.

Théot became convinced that God had called her "to do penance for all the nation." She submitted herself to an austere penitential regimen, which included wearing a hair shirt and a barbed crown. Until she abandoned the sacraments in about 1769, she had taken daily communion at 5 A.M. Since she had to work during the day, she spent part of each night carrying out the penances she imposed upon herself.9

It was in 1769 that Théot met Michel Hastain, a writer and former royal official from Saint Lô, not far from her native village in Normandy; for twenty-five years, he would be her disciple and sometimes her secretary.10 In April 1779, Théot, Hastain, and three aged followers were arrested.

According to a nephew, Raphael Théot, a vicar at the church of Saint Roch in Paris until he abjured his vows in 1794, Catherine had been inspired by reading the lives of Saints Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena and had come to believe that she alone could understand the Scriptures. He complained that she had filled his life "with bitterness and vexation, by the public scenes she had caused at different times, by her stubbornness in making proselytes," and that she had hampered his career by prejudicing the archbishop, Christophe de Beaumont, against him.11

Beaumont, despite his distaste for her activities, had a use for the pious domestic servant. Knowing that she "ran to all the sermons," he wrote her a letter inquiring about them and about "the knowledge that God had given her." She cherished the letter and soon began to get up in church and preach against the preachers. She spoke, her nephew wrote, "against the priests and their doctrine, until a curé of Paris of the parish Gervais obtained an order to have her sent to the Bastille."

After six weeks in the Bastille, Théot was moved to the mental hospital of the Salpêtrière, where she remained for three years. Very little is known of her activities between 1782 and 1793. She went to live in the Marais with Marie Madelaine Amblard, the widow Godefroy, a middle-aged seamstress with whom she had probably been acquainted before her arrest. The widow Godefroy continued to care for the increasingly infirm Mother Catherine until they were both arrested in

9. Chenon, Vie privée de Catherine Théot, se disant Mère de Dieu (Paris, 1794), p. 4. Chenon was commissaire de police at the Bastille in 1779, and the Vie privée de Catherine Théot is his report prepared at the time of Théot's arrest in that year. He was still commissaire in 1789 (Robert Darnton, communication in Annales historiques de la Révolution française 42 [1970]: 666).
1794. Perhaps Théot again attracted a circle of followers, but only one of the persons interrogated in 1794 (aside from Godefroy and Hastain) had known her before the Revolution. When asked by the police how they had learned about her, they all said that a friend, relative, or neighbor had invited them to one of her meetings initially.

Théot's next brush with the authorities came in January 1793. When neighbors complained about the number of people observed going in and out of her apartment on the rue des Rosiers, the police investigated. In February, the public prosecutor of the Commune of Paris, Anaxagoras Chaumette, had Théot's dossier brought to the Hôtel de Ville. Chaumette, future apostle of the Cult of Reason, was apparently fascinated with the letters and sermons that it contained. He contacted Hastain, who obligingly provided him with a "Précis des sentiments et de la religion de la Citoyenne Catherine Théot," transcribed from the words of Mother Catherine herself and concerned primarily with the age of the Reign of God, which she said was "very near."12

All these documents show that Théot, like Labrousse, interpreted the French Revolution as part of a divine plan by which true morality and the true church would triumph and the way be prepared for Christ's return. Théot, however, claimed that she never commented on "affairs of the time," because, as she told her followers in October 1791: "... We are not of this world." Her references to events are vague: men should trust in God. One disciple recalled that she had urged those who attended her sessions "to fulfill their duties as citizens . . . and to observe the law."13 Her only political activity was dictating letters, which she sent not only to the clergy but also, according to her nephew, to the different presidents of the National Convention.

The same disciple, a retired banker named Delaroche, told his interrogators in 1794 that Théot had said "it was God who had permitted the year 1789." She also claimed that it was because of her that the Swiss troops had left Paris after the crisis at the Champs de Mars in 1791. Delaroche had been attending her sessions for three years. A servant named Marie Bousquet, who had been going to them even longer, said that Théot had predicted that all nations would

12. The letters and sermons are included with Chaumette's papers in the Archives Nationales, T604. The "Précis" is in F74775, doss. Théot. See also Eude, "Points de vue," p. 608.
submit to France and the world would become "a family of brothers. . . . The French are destined to bring happiness to all nations, because they are the people chosen by God." 14

This sense of France's special destiny was intensified when France declared war on Austria and Prussia in April. In one of her letters, Théot called on the Legislative Assembly, the king, the municipality of Paris, and the bishop of Paris to sign a statement urging the soldiers to pray to "le Seigneur de Nous" to bring peace and "to make us triumph over the enemies of Our Safety." 15

There were more complaints about the daily assemblies at the widow Godefroy's in June 1793, and she and Théot were again interrogated by the police. They were again released, but when Hastain went to the surveillance committee of the section to protest the behavior of the agents who had raided Godefroy's apartment, he was sent to the Hôtel de Ville for further questioning. The committee suspected Hastain of believing doctrines similar to those of "the counterrevolutionaries of the Vendée"—doctrines that could be "disastrous to the republic." 16 About a week earlier, Théot had moved across the river to the rue Contrescarpe, near the Pantheon, so that she could continue to hold meetings without interference.

It is surely not coincidental that Théot's new lodgings were a few blocks away from those of Dom Gerle on the rue des Postes. The principal leaseholder of the building to which Théot and Godefroy moved was Colonel Pescheloché, the man who not long before had first brought Gerle to meet Mother Catherine. Gerle's involvement with Théot was known to the police, for at the time of Hastain's interrogation, he had been asked if he knew Gerle's address. He had answered (incorrectly, it seems) that Gerle lived "chez Cambeau." 17 Apparently the bustling Gombault, who knew everybody in Paris's mystical underground, had taken the exmonk into his charge.

Théot was allowed to continue her meetings for nearly a year without further interference, despite the rather extensive dossiers concerning her which had been collected by the Revolutionary security network. Furthermore, many of her followers in the Marais continued to come to sessions at the new location across the river. Although the new neighbors also complained about the activities in Théot's apartment, the authorities took no action until May 1794, when two gendarmes, acting either on their own authority or on that of the Com-

mittee of General Security of the National Convention, denounced Catherine Théot once again. This time, the Committee of General Security itself ordered two of its agents, Heron and Senar, to infiltrate the group and to arrest any members who seemed to be politically suspect.

Five days later, on 17 May, the agents attended a session at the rue Contrescarpe. During the service of worship, they called in the police who were waiting outside on the street. Fourteen of those present were charged and jailed, including Théot, Godefroy, and Gerle. These suspects were interrogated, and they in turn led the Committee of General Security and the section committees to other persons allegedly associated with the aged prophetess. Most of those arrested were artisans and working people, but the list also included Michel Hastain and a number of veterans of the duchesse de Bourbon's circle at Petit-Bourg, among them Quevremont, Bishop Miroudot, and Madame Law de Lauriston. In August, warrants were signed for the arrest of Pontard, Madame Pescheloche, and Claude de Saint-Martin, but they were saved by Robespierre's fall and the abrupt dismantling of the machinery of revolutionary justice. 18

Théot and her followers were now made into a political issue by Robespierre's rivals and enemies in the two ruling committees. On 15 June, the fierce old atheist Marc-Guillaume-Alexis Vadier, in a speech to the National Convention, denounced "a primary school of fanaticism" which, while centered in Paris, had infected all of France and even the armies. He claimed that Théot, its leader, was known to the faithful variously as "Mother of God," "Mother of the Word," and "the New Eve" and that she promised "immortality of the soul and the body to those whom she has initiated into her mysteries." And in the rhetoric of the Terror that was either paranoid or hyperbolic or both, he further claimed that the sect was in fact part of a conspiracy that included royalists, mystics, emigres, "fools, egoists, fops," William Pitt, and the King of Prussia. 19

Although he did not dare say so, Vadier deplored Robespierre's religious policies. For him, Robespierre's projected Cult of the Supreme Being, Roman Catholic orthodoxy, and the millenarian fantasies of Catherine Théot were at bottom alike; all were fanatical, and all were fit only for mockery and contempt. By implicating Robespierre in

some fashion in the activities of the rue Contrescarpe, he could then portray him as a fanatic who sought dictatorship for himself.

Robespierre managed to persuade the Committee of Public Safety to keep the case from coming to trial, although the National Convention had supported Vadier's request that Théot and the four he named as her chief disciples be brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Perhaps Robespierre sensed in the whole affair a trap that was being laid for him; certainly he believed the prisoners to be a harmless group of zealots without political importance. Tensions increased within the ruling committees as the anti-Robespierre faction sought to destroy his prestige and power.

In the climactic session of 9 Thermidor, Vadier claimed that a letter addressed to Robespierre had been discovered under Théot's mattress; it announced that his mission had been "predicted in Ezekiel" and that he would establish a "new cult." It is unlikely that this revelation was crucial in persuading the convention to vote for Robespierre's arrest. After Vadier's speech, Robespierre's other adversaries quickly shifted the attack to other, more tangible grievances.

It is doubtful, indeed, that the letter even existed. Robespierre and Dom Gerle had had a few casual contacts in the years since they had both sat on the Left in the National Assembly in 1790-91. Robespierre had written a letter stating that Gerle was a "bon patriote" after Gerle had been refused a certificat de civisme by the surveillance committee of his section because of his ill-fated motion, in 1790, to make Roman Catholicism the state religion. Gerle had also tried unsuccessfully to persuade Robespierre to get him an administrative post to supplement his small pension, but there is no evidence either that Robespierre belonged to Catherine Théot's sect or that Théot knew him. There are three contemporary accounts that claim to quote Théot's letter to Robespierre, but their versions of its contents vary so widely that one suspects the whole story to have been a fabrication by the Committee of General Security and its secret agents.

One of the accounts is Vadier's. The other two were written by men who had worked for the ruling committees during the Reign of Terror. Both Gabriel Senar and Joachim Vilate had direct knowledge of the Théot affair. Senar had in fact been one of those who arrested and interrogated Théot and her followers in May, but his version of that episode, written and published while he was in prison in 1795, differs markedly from the report he signed at the time of the arrests. Both he and Vilate were primarily concerned with exculpating themselves from "the crimes of Robespierre." Both invented details to make their stories more interesting, and both tended, like Vadier, to use the rhetoric and preconceptions of deism to describe the doctrines of Mother Catherine and her followers. The uneducated Jacobins in the sections who interrogated Théot's believers were no more sympathetic with what they heard, but at least they transcribed as faithfully as they could what they were told by the suspects. Therefore a reliable estimate of the religious ideas of Théot and her group will depend almost entirely on the police records in the French Archives.

These records show that certain significant changes took place in the ideas and practices of Théot's sect after 1793. Mathiez believed that these modifications derived from the influence of Dom Gerle, but it may have been that the sense of revolutionary excitement, the alternations of hope and despair that the Revolution produced in the spring of 1794, penetrated in a vague way to Théot and her followers. She had been a millenarian at least since the 1770s; at her interrogation in 1779, she had described herself as "the virgin who would receive the little Jesus, who would come from heaven to earth ... to bring peace to all the earth and to receive all nations." But as late as 1791, her message was primarily that the time had not yet come and that all would be well.

There was a heightened and more precise sense of eschatological urgency in the "Précis" that Hastain prepared for Chaumette in 1793, but by 1794 Théot was alluding directly to the book of Revelation. The gendarme Pidoux, in his denunciation of her to the Committee of General Security, reported her claim that "all the nations [would] be obliged to come to her, that there [were] seven seals and the sixth had been broken, and that she had received the power from God only a month [before] to break the seventh." The moment was near and all the events would come to pass at Paris, which God had chosen as the greatest city.

24. Chenon, Vie privée de Catherine Théot, p. 4; Archives Nationales, T6042.
Why are there not more indications in the police records that Théot expected an imminent Second Coming? The reason may be that she had only recently come to that conviction. It may also be due to the failure of the interrogators to ask her disciples the right questions.\textsuperscript{26} Their main concern was to find the names of other disciples and to discover if Théot had expressed politically subversive sentiments or taught doctrines that were either aristocratic or pessimistic. That the doctrines were all within a Christian tradition, partly orthodox and partly heretical, was of no interest to them.

France’s war against the monarchs of Europe continued to have God’s blessing, according to Théot. One disciple told the authorities that Mother Catherine had said that “all the Children of the Fatherland would be his own and that they... would shed their blood in order to speed Liberty and that they would return victorious” and that there would be no more kings. God would preserve the National Convention from harm.\textsuperscript{27} Senar and Heron reported that one of the hymns sung at the service they attended proclaimed that “the armies of the Serpent” would be conquered and that God was the general in command of the French armies.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1792, “the Serpent” meant the devil or, perhaps, Antichrist. Théot’s letters of 1791 had promised that the Reign of God would begin soon. “Satan will have no power to hold us because death will be destroyed and the Serpent will lose his life.” By 1794 she also identified that serpent with the enemies of France. The French, on the other hand, according to one disciple, were destined “to bring happiness to all the Nations, because they are the people chosen by God.”\textsuperscript{29}

Théot had believed for some time that the school of law, near the Pantheon, was specially favored by God. In one of her letters, she declared that New Saint Geneviève (as the Pantheon was still known) should be the house of prayer for the school “until God comes into his Reign.” As her millenial expectations intensified, the role of the school of law became still more exalted. It would be the site “for rallying around Mother Catherine as the daughter of God,” said one disciple. Another declared that Théot lived near the Pantheon so that when the time came, she could “give her instructions publicly there.” Senar and Heron reported hearing Godefroy say that after the minis-

\textsuperscript{26} This point is suggested by Claus-Peter Clasen, “Medieval Heresies in the Reformation,” \textit{Church History} 32 (Dec. 1963): 392-414.
\textsuperscript{27} Archives Nationales, F74720, doss. Gautherot.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., F74775\textsuperscript{27}, doss. Théot. The Heron-Senar report from the Théot dossier was printed by Mathiez in “Catherine Théot et le mysticisme chrétien révolutionnaire,” \textit{Révolution française} 40 (1901): 515.
\textsuperscript{29} Archives Nationales, F74768, doss. Lauriston.
ters and armies of the serpent had been destroyed, Théot herself would govern the world. In another report, however, a disciple declared that God would rule.30

An innovation in 1794 was a ceremony of ritual kisses, which Senar believed to be a rite of initiation into a secret society. The rite consisted of making the sign of the cross on the believer's forehead and kissing him on the two eyes, the two cheeks, the forehead, and the chin. Those interrogated all agreed that the ceremony, which one follower said Théot called "the sign of the Christian," had been practiced for a short time, two months at most.31 The significance of the ceremony may have been to assure the faithful that they would be preserved at the time of the Second Coming. This might explain why both Théot and Gerle admitted at the time of their arrest that many soldiers had come to her sessions before leaving for the front. Like the sealed letters that Joanna Southcott would issue to her followers in England a decade later, the ceremony of the kisses might thus offer the promise of personal immortality to men and women in whom intensified hopes for the millennium were accompanied by an increasing fear of death. And according to one disciple, Théot said the rite "would accomplish a great movement which will end the war."32

A disciple who was asked in June 1793 what sorts of people came to hear Théot replied, "des riches et des pauvres."33 The police reports indicate that there were indeed a few wealthy followers. A "farmer-general" and his wife were arrested with Théot, and also three persons "living on their income." The majority, however, were artisans, petty shopkeepers, and servants living either in the environs of the Marais or in the immediate neighborhood of the rue Contrescarpe on the Left Bank. Listed in the police reports were a lacemaker, a worker in linen, two lemonade sellers, a seller of meat at Les Halles, two cafe owners, two architects, a baker, and several shopkeepers. The great majority of the disciples were women.34

It is not clear when or how completely the duchesse de Bourbon's circle took up Catherine Théot. Pescheloche seems to have been the first to learn of her; he brought Gerle, who in turn may have brought Pierre Pontard. The time was mid-1792, after Suzette Labrousse had set out on her pilgrimage. One disciple said he had heard Gerle tell Pontard at about that time "that it is better not to die than to die,"

31. Ibid., F74768, doss. Lauriston.
32. Ibid., F74775, doss. Théot.
33. Ibid., F74739, doss. Hastain.
34. Ibid., F74775, doss. Théot, and F74768, doss. Lauriston; Eude, "Points de vue," pp. 600-615.
and that if the Legislative Assembly recognized Théot "for what she seemed to be, we would be at the end of the corruption of morals." She "would crush the head of the serpent," and there would be no more death and no more war. This testimony suggests that Théot did not replace Labrousse in the hearts of the prophetess of Périgord’s chief disciples. The nature of Mother Catherine’s spiritual pretensions was quite different, offering as they did both spiritual knowledge and the assurance of personal salvation. It was entirely possible to believe in both Labrousse and Théot.

The absence of references to Théot in the Journal prophétique and the bantering tone of the reference to her and Gerle in the letter Pontard wrote to Gombault at the time of his marriage suggest that for him, at least, the interest was rather casual. There is another possible line of connection between the old prophetess and the Bishop of the Dordogne. When Pontard returned to Paris on business in 1793, he told the readers of the Journal de Pierre Pontard that he could be reached at the presbytery of the Church of Saint Roch. Saint Roch at that time had three curés who had taken up arms and joined the Jacobins on the night of 10 August 1792. One of the three was Raphael Théot.

Pontard was never arrested and interrogated about his relationship with Catherine Théot. Neither was Pescheloche, who was serving with the army. Pescheloche’s wife, too, escaped arrest. The duchesse de Bourbon had been under arrest at Marseilles for some months but was not interrogated about Théot. Among the members of the Petit-Bourg circle who were arrested, several denied any but the most casual acquaintance with the aged prophetess. Miroudot, Quevremont, and Gerle all sent statements from prison protesting their innocence, although Gerle’s declarations conflicted pathetically with his own candid testimony to the police at the time of his and Théot’s arrest. A much more open and cooperative witness was Madame Jeanne Carvalho Law de Lauriston, a frequent guest at Petit-Bourg. She told her interrogators that she had seen Gerle, Quevremont, and Miroudot at Théot’s religious services and added that Théot and Godefroy had spent August 1793 at Petit-Bourg, where Pescheloche and Gerle were also staying.

Another visitor to the palace at that time had been Claude de Saint-Martin, the old friend and spiritual advisor of the duchesse. After the

Revolution, Saint-Martin recorded his recollections of the "Caterinettes." He rejected Théot's doctrines (just as he had rejected those of Labrousse the year before), but at the same time he was drawn to Mother Catherine because of "the strong attraction" that she radiated. 37

Senar claimed in his Mémoires that "the number of disciples of this sect is inconceivable; it has spread everywhere." 38 Senar certainly exaggerated wildly. About thirty persons were present when Théot was arrested in 1794, and half of these were released because they said they had only come out of curiosity. A casual visitor to Mother Catherine's meetings in 1793 said that there had never been more than fifteen persons present. 39 In all, some seventy individuals were named in Heron and Senar's report and in the various interrogations by the sectional surveillance committees.

There is no evidence that Théot's disciples in any way constituted a secret society. Nor, despite the involvement of the Petit-Bourg mystics, does it appear that Théot had any interest in mesmerism, Masonic ritual, and occultism. Hers were essentially lay prayer meetings, and they changed little in the course of the Revolution. They consisted of short sermons by Théot, readings from the Bible and the missal, and singing. Occasionally, the widow Godefroy or Dom Gerle would speak to the assembly.

In some ways, Théot's activities anticipated the revival of popular Catholicism that occurred in France in 1795. More striking, however, are those aspects of her beliefs that connect her with the heresies of the later Middle Ages.

There is, for example, her anticlericalism, which included a denial of the efficacy of the sacraments. Sounding very much like a Spiritual Franciscan, Théot contended that God's elect must break with the guilty church. After she had quarreled with her confessor in about 1769, God told her that "she no longer needed to take communion, and that he would lead her himself." 40 It was her denunciations of priests that put her in the Bastille in 1779. One disciple told the police in 1794 that Théot had in effect converted him from the usages of the Roman Catholic Church. She had "enlightened him," he said,

38. Senar, Mémoires (inédits) de Senart, p. 186.
40. Chenon, Vie privée de Catherine Théot, p. 4.
concerning "the uselessness of confession and priests and of the
sufficiency of looking to God himself for the remission of sins." 41
Another disciple said that Théot had told her followers to pray and
to seek the temple of God only within their own hearts. 42 Théot wrote
in the "Précis" that the true church, which had not yet been estab-
lished, would be for all the world, something that the Roman Catholic
church had never been: "Of all the churches, has it ever been uni-
versal? . . . It is to his elect that the Lord speaks when he says . . . go
out, my people, from this guilty Babylon, for fear of sharing with it the
punishment that I am preparing for it." 43

It is not clear exactly what Théot conceived her own role to be.
She had told the police in 1779 that she was the "virgin who would
receive the little Jesus," that God had revealed his "mysteries" to her
alone, and that it was she who was "destined to accomplish them." In
one of her 1791 letters, she announced: "I am the first of the Christians;
I am the first who has received from God his spirit and grace." God
had given her knowledge of the past, the future, and "the true Religion
that is not established and that is to be established only at the end of
the times in which we are now." 44

There is no evidence that Théot (unlike Joanna Southcott twenty
years later) ever believed that she would give birth to a baby. Senar
said to her at the time of her arrest, after he had received the cer-
emonial kisses and before he called in the police: "It is you, then,
mother divine, who protects us . . . so that we will not die." Théot
responded, "Yes, . . . I am sent from God. The Virgin has spiritually
conceived Jesus Christ and I produce the Word of God, which is the
same thing." 45 Asked by her interrogators if it were not true that Théot
expected to give birth to a child, a disciple replied that it was not "a
carnal childbirth" but rather a "spiritual" one that gave "the knowledge
that everything that comes from God is spiritual." 46

Théot did regard herself as the New Eve. She stated in one letter
that "God has announced a New Eve who will deliver us from the
iniquity into which the first Eve led us by her disobedience." Gerle
told Senar that she was "destined by God to give happiness to the
world and to repair the misfortune of the first Mother." He wrote a
verse in her honor that concluded with the lines:

43. Ibid., F74775 27 , doss. Théot.
44. Chenon, Vie privée de Catherine Théot, pp. 4, 6; Archives Nationales, T604 2
46. Ibid., F74768, doss. Lauriston.
Concerning the New Eve, Théot was probably influenced by the ideas of Guillaume Postel, a native of her own village of Barenton and one of the leading scholars of sixteenth-century France. Postel had met an old lady in Venice who claimed to be inspired by God, and in 1553 he published a book in which he contended that this woman, "Mère Jeanne," would redeem the human race, an act only a woman could accomplish, by freeing men from the damnation imposed by Adam’s fall. This is precisely what Théot promised to do as the New Eve. Like Postel, she declared that there would be a new gospel for the new dispensation, and like him she said that the prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself were only "figures" who presaged the spiritual era that would come soon. It may have been Michel Hastain who introduced this notion into her doctrines. In any event, the similarity of Postel’s doctrines to those of Théot’s "Précis" is striking.

Théot’s growing millennial expectations had little to do with the nature of the world after the Second Coming. In the "Précis," she declared it false to say that all human beings would die at the last judgement. God "in his omnipotence will sweep iniquity from the earth, as the autumn wind sweeps the dust and the leaves, so that the face of the earth will be purified to be the eternal abode of man." And elsewhere in the "Précis" she stated: "the reign of God that I announce to you is therefore the reestablishment of the earth in its first degree of beauty and felicity," as it was when "Adam lived in it before the fall." 50

The idea of a new gospel did not originate with Théot or Postel; the notion of an "Eternal Gospel" which would supersede the two Testaments and serve as the final revelation of God to man in the Third Age that was to be the culmination of human history dates back to the thirteenth-century followers of Joachim of Fiore. Like Postel

47. Archives Nationales, T604, and F74775, doss. Théot; Gerle, "Mémoire," in Mège, Révolution française, p. 32. Gerle claimed that the subject of this verse was "truth."
49. Guillaume Postel, Le trésor des prophéties de l’univers, ed. François Secret (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), pp. 40-41; Archives Nationales, F74775, doss. Théot. Joachim of Fiore also spoke of “figures” which hid true reality: Left, Heresy in the Later Middle Ages, 1: 76. It will be recalled that Duguet and other Jansenist millenarians also believed that the prophetic events promised in the New Testament had been prefigured in the Old.
and others in the Joachimite tradition, Théot conceived her mission to be that of a prophet not only of the millennium but also of a new and final revelation from God. In a letter, she referred to "the gospel of the Reign of God," which "contains the word of God entirely pure; it was announced since the beginning; it is going to appear only with the Religion of Jesus Christ." 51 In the next letter, she explained that God had reserved knowledge of his gospel and his religion "to the last times." Madam Law de Lauriston and Marie Bousquet both believed that Théot intended to present the new gospel to the National Convention at the proper time. Then, if the Convention accepted it, "all the earth would be happy" and "wars would cease throughout the earth." If they did not, "things would be otherwise." 52

What was the message of the eternal gospel? None of the interrogators thought to ask. Quite possibly Théot expected it to contain teachings similar to a passage in the "Précis" she had submitted to Chaumette: "Why will the Elect be saved? It is that they will have the true faith in the name of the Lord which I announce to them; it is by their good works, their charities, and their patience." 53 Here the vision is not very different from that of Pierre Pontard and Suzette Labrousse. At last there would be one religion for all men and one gospel. Their reception by mankind would constitute "the beginning of the Reign of God which will be established in our hearts and our spirit which will form the church of Jesus Christ and which will be universal."

According to the comtesse de Bohm, an inmate of the prison to which Théot and her female disciples were taken in 1794, the group's arrest did not shake their conviction that the millennium was at hand. One of them told the comtesse that soon everything in France would be transformed. Mother Catherine died in prison, a month after Robespierre had died on the scaffold. She never lost her serenity or her faith, the comtesse wrote, and when she died, her followers lighted candles and patiently awaited her miraculous resurrection. 54

There were a few alarms in 1794 that sects similar to Théot's had appeared elsewhere in France. The district of Tanargue, in Provence, reported that "a new Catherine Théot" was winning converts in the countryside there, but the local authorities vowed that she would not escape arrest. Senar claimed that shortly after he had taken Théot

51. Ibid., T604.
prisoner, he arrested "the prophet Elias, who wandered the fields and isolated quarters of Paris."55

A more dramatic episode occurred early in November in the mountainous region of the Forez, west of Lyons. Local authorities reported to the Committee of General Security that they had arrested some eighty men, women, and children found wandering in the forest. These people told their interrogators that they had gone into "the desert" to do penance before going to Jerusalem.56 The great majority of the wanderers were local peasants, but there were indications that the movement was more widespread. When asked to give their names, almost all replied "Bonjour." This, coupled with the fact that some of the suspects came from the Bonjour brothers' former parish of Fareins, led the authorities to assume that these wanderers were somehow connected with the brothers and their sect, now centered in Paris. The authorities were probably correct, although there is no evidence that either the Bonjours or their associates Fialin and Drevet were directly responsible for the events in the Forez.

The Forez authorities, like those who interrogated Catherine Théot and her followers in Paris, were not interested in the religious beliefs that had led these peasants to abandon their farms and set out for Jerusalem. They were concerned instead with the threat to public order in a region that had so recently witnessed the terrible rebellion of Lyons against the Republic. Nevertheless, some indications emerge from the testimony to suggest that they, too, were imbued with an essentially traditional piety to which the revolutionary crisis had given a heightened sense of eschatological urgency.

The peasants said that by leaving their farms they had carried out the wishes of "Grand-papa, Jesus Christ," for the land was "striken with plague [pestiférée]; it was absolutely essential to abandon it." They had brought their children with them because the Holy Spirit was "on earth, hidden in the shape of a child."57 The authorities inferred, probably rightly, that they were talking about the prophet Elias, whose birth the Bonjours had announced two years before. It was known that missionaries for this Elias had been in the region since 1792.58

Like the Convulsionaries, the sectaries in the Forez had a special affinity for the Old Testament. Their assumption of the name Bonjour suggests that they saw themselves as a tribe of Israel, a possibility made more likely by the fact that each subgroup was led by a man who was called "Moses." There are indications in the testimony that the group saw itself as a kind of republican counterpart of the Kingdom of the New Jerusalem of millenarian tradition. They were organized, the authorities reported, into "the Republic of Jesus Christ," which was divided into a number of municipalities. They may also have been communists.

The National Convention sent two representatives-on-mission to investigate. They freed many of the Bonjour tribe and sent them home, keeping only the leaders under arrest. The representatives were somewhat concerned by signs that the movement had spread beyond the Forez and by the arming of many of the men, but they were contemptuous of people they considered to be ignorant and harmless religious zealots. Both the representatives and the local authorities reported that the group was sexually promiscuous. It was said that its members cohabited "pell-mell" and called it marriage. Like the Fareinists and other Convulsionaries, they were accused of believing that nothing God commanded them to do could be evil. There is some question whether these allegations were more than the usual gossip against heretics of antinomian and Free Spirit tendencies. Both before and after the Revolution, the Convulsionaries of the Lyonnais were known for their ascetic piety.

According to the abbé Grégoire, a number of Convulsionary groups persisted in the Lyons area throughout the Revolution and into the nineteenth century, all awaiting the incarnation of the Holy Spirit upon the return of the prophet Elias. The largest group was associated with the Amis de la Vérité, Desfours de la Genetière's pre-Revolutionary agency of millenarian evangelism. Unlike the Republic of Jesus Christ or the Bonjour circle, the Amis de la Vérité were monarchists, uninfluenced in their beliefs by the events of the Revolution. They refrained from proselytizing, preferring instead to await the un-

60. Galley, Saint-Etienne, 3: 798. Galley (ibid., 1: 302) says that the Fareinist sect also practiced communism well into the nineteenth century.
folding of God's plan. They did, however, scan the newspapers for news that might suggest that the conversion of the Jews was at hand.\footnote{Gregoire, *Histoire des sectes religieuses*, 2: 185-93.} The Republic of Jesus Christ soon disappeared, but other Convulsionist offshoots, including the Fareinists, persisted in the Lyons region well into the nineteenth century. The same is not true of Catherine Théot's circle. By the end of 1795, all her adherents had been released from prison. With one exception, Dom Gerle, nothing further is known of any of them. Like Pierre Pontard, Gerle had abjured his clerical vows in the fall of 1793. Two years later, at age fifty-eight, the former Carthusian prior married Rose Raffet, one of Catherine Théot's most dedicated followers. He managed to find occasional Grub Street employment in Paris: library research, work at a newspaper, and finally, in 1800, a minor appointment in the Consulate's Ministry of the Interior.\footnote{Mège, *Révolution française*, p. 28; Lenôtre, *Robespierre et la "Mère de Dieu"*, pp. 327-28; and Henri d'Almeras, *Les dévots de Robespierre: Catherine Théot et les mystères de la Mère de Dieu* (Paris, 1905), pp. 255-56.} It is unknown whether he was in touch with Pontard, who had moved to Paris in search of the same sort of employment, or whether he saw Suzette Labrousse after her return there in 1799.

For some reason, Gerle now called himself Gerle-Chalini, adding what he said was his mother's name. A letter he wrote to Reubell in 1796 suggests that he felt shame about his past. One of the five members of the Directory, Reubell had been a colleague of Gerle's in the National Assembly in 1790. Gerle now requested a post in the Ministry of Finance, urging Reubell to consider "the person rather than the name." In another letter seeking a government post, he told another former colleague that he wanted a place "more in line with his merit than with his past."\footnote{Quoted in H.F., "Notes sur Dom Gerle," *Annales révolutionnaires* 4 (1911): 114; and Almeras, *Dévots de Robespierre*, p. 256.} Why did he change his name? Because it was associated with the notorious "Gerle motion" of 1790, or because Vadier had made it a target for jokes in the National Convention? There is no way of knowing. Gerle died in Paris in 1802.

Although he had freely admitted his belief in Théot's teachings at the time of his arrest, Gerle wrote from prison that for him the only true religion was "this ancient, true, gentle, and lovely religion, which tells me to believe in God, the sole supreme being, and to love my fellow men." Théot was just an old woman whom he had occasionally visited, and any kisses Senar had seen him give her had been no more than a friendly greeting.\footnote{Gerle, "Mémoire," in Mège, *Révolution française*, pp. 31-32.} Perhaps the collapse of his religious and
political careers, together with the humiliation of his imprisonment, led Gerle to abandon the millenarian convictions that had sustained him for so many years. It is possible, although it is at least as plausible that Gerle simply kept his beliefs to himself after 1795.

In his Mémoires, Senar printed a translation of a Latin manuscript he said had been found in Gerle's apartment after his arrest. The manuscript is not in Gerle's police dossier, but he may have been allowed to take such documents with him when he was released from prison. And it will be recalled that not long before his arrest, Gerle had sent Pierre Pontard a "catechism" of his beliefs.

Divided into three columns headed signa, verba prophetae, and eventus, the manuscript as presented by Senar does resemble the testimony of Théot and her followers. The eight "signs" included the rite of kisses and the sign of the cross. The "words of the prophet" included several of Mother Catherine's predictions, including the crushing of the head of the serpent and the victory of France's armies. The column headed "events" concluded:

5. The Mother will reign.
6. The prophets will govern.
7. The Supreme Being will direct all.67

Thanks to the vigilance of the Revolutionary police and surveillance committees, the sect of Catherine Théot made its brief appearance on the historical stage. Its importance certainly did not lie in the extent of its influence, and as in the case of Suzette Labrousse, there is no evidence that Théot had any followers after 1794. What she provides is a dimension too often missing in studies of the religious history of the French Revolution. Not only had the traditions of popular piety persisted into the Revolutionary era; they had also, in an obscure fashion, been associated by her believers with the new faith of secular revolution. More basic, perhaps, to understanding the attraction that Mother Catherine had in 1793-94 for her diverse collection of disciples was the assurance she offered them that the faithful would never die. Despite the fears and uncertainties of the present, she offered them the same assurance that the prophet Daniel and John of Patmos had offered their readers: new heavens, a new earth, and immortality for the elect of God.

67. Quoted in Senar, Mémoires, pp. 183-84.