Preface 11

Ecclesiastes 12:12

James H. Billington's
FIRE IN THE MINDS OF MEN

(Part 1)

by David Chilton

If you read only one book on revolution during your entire life, you must read Billington's. This book is absolutely unequalled in its 'scope,' depth, and detail, In its magnificent literary power, and in its biting, trenchant analysis of what the subtitle calls the "Origins of the Revolutionary Faith."

For revolution *is* a religious faith; as Billington says, it is "perhaps *the* faith of our time" (p. 3), and his massive study abundantly demonstrates the anti-Christian and pseudo-Christian character of revolutionary ideology. One of the major theses of his book is that the revolutionary faith originated not in the critical rationalism of the French Enlightenment (which, admittedly, was a religion as well), but rather in the blatantly occult romanticism of secret societies, which stirred a heretical brew of Christian symbolism and pagan mysticism. Out of this demonic mixture were distilled the intoxicating revolutionary ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idolatrous attempts to replace the Christian faith, preaching and practicing the gospel of salvation through the shed blood of man.

Incubus and Incarnation

The modern revolutionary faith was born, not in France, but in 18th-century Germany. Frederick the Great, the anti-christian statist and occultist who turned his kingdom of Prussia into the foremost military machine of Europe, began to develop a philosophy of revolution as a secular, redemptive convulsion which would radically transform the world. Frederick's ideas were then imported into France where. they were translated into action in the French Revolution, one of the most crucial turning points in history. It was "the hard fact" of the French Revolution which "gave birth to the modern belief that secular revolution is historically possible" (pp. 20f.). The dream of a totally secular order– i.e., a world ruled by Man as God—is the most basic lure of the revolutionary faith. The French Revolution, a self-conscious attempt to overthrow Christian society, has since served as the standard for all subsequent revolutions, right down to the present-day "Christian Marxists" of Europe and Latin America. As one example of the self-conscious, atheistic nature of the Revolution, Billington cites the strange fact of the origin of the terms Left and *Right*: It began in the political polarization in the French National Assembly, where the radicals (who sat on the left) proudly adopted the designation as a dramatic symbol of their "revolutionary defiance of Christian tradition, which had always represented those on the right hand of God as saved and those on the left as damned" (p, 22).

In many ways, the French Revolution set precedents for those which were created in its image. Beginning ostensibly as a revolution for 'democracy" in the name of "the People," it soon revealed the irresistible drive toward centralization that is the hallmark of modern revolutions. The Reign of Terror, that eminently logical application of the Enlightenment, claimed 40,000 victims in 1793-94, but that was only to be the beginning. For, as the Revolution progressed, its leaders calmly calculated the number of citizens who would have to be exterminated, laying elaborate plans for the methodical liquidation of two-thirds of the population– more than sixteen million people (see Nesta Webster, *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy,* 1919, pp. 423-429).

The Search for Legitimacy

The revolutionary drive toward *centralization* can also be seen as an urge toward *simplification,* the monistic insistence that all reality can and must be reduced to One. The search for revolutionary simplicity required the destruction of the complex fabric of Christian civilization, the dissolution of the many estates into one unitary State, the substitution of slogans for thought. Tied to belief in a secular salvation, radical simplicity led to violence: a ritual of blood atonement, providing deliverance through destruction (cf. Otto Scott, *Robespierre: The Voice of Virtue,* 1974).

Central to the revolutionary activity in Paris was the Palais-Royal, headquarters of Philip, Duke of Orleans (who had begun his radical education in Freemasonry). The Palais-Royal l-renamed "the Garden of Equality"–was immune from arrest because it was owned by royalty, and under Philip's protection and sponsorship revolutionary intellectuals, plotters, and pornographers thrived in the numerous cafes stationed around the gardens there.

Another nursery of revolution was the press, which was central—or, as Billington observes, *left*-center—to the Revolution at every point. Radical journalism increasingly took on the Church's abdicated role as the chief source and instructor of social mores and cultural values. A generation of talented journalist-agitators appeared on the scene, using the new tactics of "linguistic shock"– meaningless vulgarity and the ritual desecration of authority–as a means of bringing a highly traditional, verbal culture to its knees. In terms of this same perspective, revolutionary journalists attempted to destroy the provincial dialects (and thus local loyalties) by enforcing the use of their new creation, *la langue universelle*. In revolutionary Newspeak, old words were redefined, new words corned, in a dazzling fusion of Christian, occult, and sexual imagery. The language, and thus the thought processes of those who spoke it, were revolulionized. Words were seen as having mystical power, and were used "for incantation more than explanation" (p. 38); attempts were made to compile the "ultimate dictionary" in order to conjure absolute power.

Of all the secret conspiracies flourishing within the gardens of the Palais, the *most* secret and conspiratorial

was the Social Circle, founded by the pioneer of revolutionary journalists, Nicholas Bonneville. The Social Circle formed the inner, ruling core of the 6000-member Friends of Truth, a self-conscious, self-proclaimed, power-seeking intellectual elite, composed of "superior intelligences" who advocated "permanent insurrection" on behalf of universal social "equality" and "direct democracy." A standard pattern –elitist egalitarianism—was thus established, to be imitated and refined by dictatorial aspirants for centuries to come. At the heart of the Social Circle was the press, which served to spread Bonneville's concept of an international, egalitarian transformation of society. The Social Circle –globalist, ideological, disciplined – was the prototype of the modern revolutionary organization; and its locus of legitimacy, its unifying authority, was the press. Radical journalism has remained the central, surrogate authority for revolutionaries ever since.

The Conflict of Slogans

The revolutionary era offered three basic answers to the question of the purpose of society–answers which can be summed up in the slogans of the day: *Liberty, Fraternity,* and *Equality.* The ideal of liberty spread throughout Europe, but was soon eclipsed by the conflict between the more collectivist ideals of fraternity and equality. We should remember that the secular goal of liberty led to tyranny: *"The European-wide revolutionary tradition began as a series of republican, constitutional conspiracies"* against imperial and monarchical despotism (p. 56). The basic struggle which surfaced among revolutionaries was that between *national revolution* for the sake of fraternity, and *social revolution* to bring about equality. *Revolutionary nationalism* was an essentially romantic, emotional ideal expressed in mythic histories, poetry, and opera about past and future national glory. Nationalism continued to be the major revolutionary ideal until the end of the nineteenth century. *Revolutionary communism,* on the other hand, was an essentially rationalistic ideal, which eventually discarded romantic forms of communication for more prosaic, didactic, and "scientific" forms of expression.

Fraternity: The Nationalist Ideal

The mythic concept of la *nation* developed out of the French Revolution. Citizens were forced to communicate only in French (which was not the native tongue of many); official prayers were addressed "to the body of the nation" (p. 59). Music became increasingly nationalistic during the Reign of Terror. Great open-air festivals popularized new patriotic compositions: the most electrifying was *La Marseillaise,* that bloodthirsty "war chant" which rallied the revolutionary nation and which was, fittingly, introduced at the same moment that the guillotine was first used in Paris. Nationalism also created a mytho-history centered around the ancient Germanic tribes, declared to be the prototype for a sovereign "people." Soon the revolutionary creeds proclaimed "the infallibility of the People" as an article of faith.

The living symbol of revolutionary nationalism was the ascetic young apostle of the French Revolution, Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, who carried his large, brilliant head on his shoulders 'like a holy sacrament." Characterized by Billington as the embodiment of "passion disciplined by an idea," SaintJust exercised revolutionary detachment "in order to attach myself to every thing." Seeking a return to "original virtue," he advocated a "renewed communion with the primitive simplicity of nature." For Saint-Just, the function of the Terror was not to punish crime, but to excite the people, 10 fan their energy into a blaze. As he put it: "That which produces general good is always terrible" (p. 66). His semi-erotic idealization of revolutionary brotherhood was accompanied by fear and loathing of women (concentrated in hatred for Marie Antoinette, whose execution "began a series of public guillotinings of symbolic women of the era in a short space of time"). Saint-Just was not seeking personal power, for himself or anyone else; yet he illustrates the revolutionary tendency to create a "tyranny of virtue" to counteract a real or supposed tyranny of vice. In order to destroy abuses of power, the revolutionary ends up justifying and enforcing absolute power.

Equality: The Socialist Ideal

The third revolutionary ideal, that of social & economic egalitarianism, was the progenitor of modern communism. Grounded in Rousseau's call for a social contract based on the general will, "common happiness"–at the expense of freedom–was proclaimed the proper goal of society. The ideal of social revolution *(equality)* thus began to rival, and came eventually to replace, the ideal of national revolution *(fraternity);* and the titanic struggle between these two totalitarian ideologies destroyed the originally professed ideal of revolution: *liberty.*

Social revolution found an able spokesman and organizer in François-Noël Babeuf, whose short-lived conspiracy became a model for later revolutionary organizations. Babeuf, like many other revolutionaries, used the journalistic profession as a means of propagating his ideas and fomenting revolution. He hailed Robespierre as "the genius in whom resided true ideas of regeneration" (p. 73). He worked out a plan to organize all of society as a military force, along the lines of the Greek phalanx. All government would be destroyed by revolution; through revolution everything returns to chaos, and out of chaos comes "a new and regenerated world" (p. 75). The names of Moses, Joshua and Jesus were invoked as forerunners of the revolutionary faith.

Linked to Babeuf through Nicholas Bonneville's Social Circle was the inventor of the term *communism,* the journalist and pornographer Restif de la Bretonne (dubbed the "Rousseau of the gutter"). Restif virtually worshiped the printed word; his attachment to printing, Billington says, was "almost physiological" (p. 79). His detailed blueprint for communist society envisioned fantasies which became essential aspects of the socialist utopia: a total "community of goods" (another term Restif invented), the abolition of private property and possessions, universal forced labor, communal eating, and the abolition of money. In one of his saner moments, he suggested that an appropriate site for the communist experiment might be the planet Venus–a point which brings us to the heart of the revolutionary faith. For, despite their differences and individual idiosyncrasies, the common bond which tied together the revolulionaries was the antichristian religion of *romantic occultism.*

The Occult Origins of the Revolutionary Faith

With the coming of the Napoleonic reforms, the revolutionaries retreated to secret societies, where they nursed their envies, cultivated the fond myth of the "Unfinished Revolution," and took on the air of an elect waiting for the Second Coming. Revolutionary secret societies multiplied throughout Europe, and reached even into Latin America and the Middle East. Billington's thesis here—a central aspect of the book– is "that the modern revolutionary tradition as it came to be internationalized under Napoleon and the Restoration grew out of occult Freemasonry; that early organizational ideas originated more from Pythagorean mysticism than from practical experience; and that the real innovators were not so much political activists as literary intellectuals, on whom German romantic thought in general—and Bavarian Illuminism in particular–exerted great influence" (p. 87). While Billington could not afford the embarrassment of acknowledging the fact, his landmark work is substantially a confirmation of the thesis developed by Nesta Webster, a historian whose solidly documented findings are taboo among Establishment scholars. (See Webster's *French Revolution,* cited above; also, *World Revolution: The Plot Against Civilization,* 1921; and *Secret Societies*

and Subversive Movements, 1924.)

Romantic occultism provided the underground revolutionaries with ground for resistance against Napoleon and his glorification of Enlightenment rationalism. The myths of the "Unfinished Revolution" and the return to "nature" and "primitive equality" were refined and developed within the sanctuary of occult organizations modeled on the structure of Masonic Lodges, in which many revolutionaries were trained and discipled. The radicals borrowed from Masonry not only the basic metaphor of the revolutionary mission – that of architects building the new society–but also the symbols and forms used in the conspiratorial groups. In the borrowing process, the Masonic orders themselves became fertile recruiting grounds for the conspiracies.

A much more radical group was the Order of Illuminists, which provided the actual organizational plans of the revolutionary societies. This explicitly antichristian Order, founded in 1776 and modeled on the Jesuit hierarchical system (its various levels were given ecclesiastical names), was dedicated to the perfection and freedom of humanity apart from established authority in general, and the Christian faith in particular. Its ideals, though often expressed in Christian terms such as "regeneration" and the "rebuilding of Jerusalem," called for a recovery of ancient, pagan, "natural" religion and the destruction of the institutions of private property. The State was to be the sole owner, and man would be liberated from his slavery to God. More than just a secret fraternity, Illuminism was a militia, organized and disciplined for the purposes of world revolution, and using Masonic lodges as both a training camp and a cover for its activities. After about ten years of recruiting and social agitation, the Order of Illuminists was forcibly dissolved and its members dispersed by the government, Up to this point everyone is agreed. The disagreements are over what happened next. According to most conspiracy theorists, the Illuminate went under cover, using numerous fronts and surrogates to gain and retain control of world events ever since. In Billington's account, however, the Order of Illuminists died out institutionally, yet acquired a posthumous influence which was greater than that exercised during its actual existence. Fascinated revolutionaries, seeking the same mysterious allure held by the Illuminate, adopted its symbols, rites, structures, and principles. To a great degree, says Billington, the attraction of Illuminism was caused by its right-wing enemies, whose fear of an international Illuminist plot was so constantly expressed that the revolutionaries' interest in studying and imitating the movement never waned. Illuminism, Billington argues, was perpetuated (paradoxically) not by the Left, but by the *Right* (see pp. 96,99,106,118,141, 549). (At this point conspiracy buffs would probably point out, in hushed tones, that since Billington is Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a card-carrying, high-ranking member of the Establishment himself, he is probably an Illuminist anyway-so of course he would try to cover up their actual history. . . .)

Revolutionary revelation was also sought in Pythagorean mysticism; prime numbers held a special fascination for occult revolutionaries. One theorist even "derived the entire structure of revolutionary history from the number 17" (p. 100). The desire for revolutionary simplicity revealed itself in a mad search for geometric harmonies within the Masonic movement, on the grounds that the occult mastery of circles, triangles, and mathematical laws would lead to the rational organization of society. The use of the term *circle* to describe a gathering of people came into popular use at this time; by drawing all men into the redemptive influence of the magic Circle, man would become God, democracy would become "deocracy" (p. 103). Revolutionaries such as Thomas Paine began advocating sun worship as an ideological alternative to Christianity; a popular song exhorted the faithful to study "Those truths of holy law/Given you by Geometry" (p. 105).

Geometric forms served practical purposes of organization as well. Just as the Circle symbolized the egalitarian objectives of revolution, so the Triangle represented a means of reaching those goals. Three-man triangles came into use in revolutionary circles, and have continued in use down to the present day. Triangular organization, apart from occult significance, had the practical results of decentralizing the revolutionary movement, keeping the various levels ignorant of each other, and foiling governmental attempts to infiltrate and control the movement. A variant on the three-man cell was the five-man cell, originating in mystical fascination with the pentagon; the most famous development of the five-unit organization was the Slavic "Black Hand" society, a member of which assassinated Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, triggering World War 1; the terrorist methods of the Black Hand were later adopted as a model by the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Revolutionary occultism also looked to music as a source of illumination, seeing it as "the science of harmonic relationships of the universe" and mystical "conversation with the cosmos" (p. 116), a medium which would enable regenerated man to transcend human limitations. The Romantics were seeking, as they frankly admitted, "a politics of the miraculous" (p. 115), a new world with man as Creator. In all of this there is the old, pagan desire to be free of one's humanity, and to liberate oneself from language. One major difference between orthodox Christianity and paganism is the fact that *Christianity is a linguistic religion:* it stresses doctrine, content, the importance of linguistic communication; in short, the primacy of the Word. The Bible is a revelation in *words,* and calls for an intelligible (which is not to say only *intellectual*) response: "What shall we then *say* to these things?" Pagans, on the other hand, are always carping about the limitations of language, seeking a new knowledge through mystical experience. Revolutionist, like all paganism, is essentially the religious substitution of either rationalism or romanticism for the word of God. And at the core of revolutionary ideology is the self-conscious recognition of its own religious and idolatrous character. The same, of course, is to be said for non-Christian anti-revolutionary movements. A former revolutionary leader's perceptive observation reflects this in his advice to rulers on how to suppress revolution: Simply keep the people dazzled with "the magic of the throne" (p. 122).

The Constitutional Revolutionaries

The first political youth movement of modern times occurred in the decade after 1815, in which liberal, constitutional revolutionaries mobilized for national goals. Often, the desire for a constitution was mystic and hazy, with no clear objectives; a peasant was asked what precisely the proposed constitution would mean, and he replied: "I don't know anything about it, but they had better give us one!" (P. 130).

The most important of the constitutional revolutionary organizations was a new Italian brotherhood. Abandoning the occult symbolism of the aristocratic Mason for the more democratic image of a "charcoal burner," the Carbonari quickly attracted over 300,000 followers. Professing to be simply a higher Christian fraternity, it made extensive use of Christian imagery in its structure and rituals: initiates would attain higher grades of membership by passing through a series of steps symbolizing the passion of Christ; and revolutionary organizers sometimes traveled as agents of the Bible Society (not the first or last time missionary organizations have served as a cover for revolution). The myth of "Nature" was also invoked: the Carbonari held their secret meetings in the forest, a loving brotherhood surrounded by unspoiled goodness. They preached three of the most basic revolutionary canons: 1) the Unfinished Revolution; 2) the authority of Nature over tradition; and 3) the necessity of secret, hierarchical organization. The Carbonari are significant, not

only for what they accomplished themselves as the first secret organization to lead a large-scale revolution in Europe, but because they were revered and imitated by other European revolutionary societies. Constitutional rebellions in the image of the Carbonari followed, in Greece (the only successful revolution) and other Balkan states, France, Germany, and Russia. The Carbonari era failed initially, but it left behind a widespread acceptance of conspiracy, violence, and political uprising–and an even stronger belief in the myth of the Unfinished Revolution.

Romance and Revolution

The period from 1830 to 1848 saw an increasing polarization between the romantic nationalist revolutionaries and the rationalistic socialist revolutionaries, pitting 'the nationalists' emotional love of the unique and organic against the socialists' intellectual focus on general laws and mechanistic analysis" (p. 147). For nationalists, revolution was seen in terms of regeneration and resurrection; for socialists, it was a scientific application of natural law and philosophical principle. Revolutionary nationalism, however, remained dominant until the closing quarter of the nineteenth century. This was not always recognized. Writing in *The Communist Manifesto,* Karl Marx triumphantly announced: "The workingmen have no country. . . . National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing. . . ." That was written in 1848, the year which saw more than fifty nationalist revolutions throughout the European countries. (An excellent study of the period is Priscilla Robertson's *Revolutions of 1848: A Social History,* 1952.)

The man who did most to incite the revolutions of 1848 was the Italian leader Giuseppe Mazzini, a veteran of the Carbonari revolts. He created an "international nationalism," a universal rationale for national uprisings which fired the imaginations of romantics across Europe. More than a philosopher, he founded an international federation of nationalist revolutionary clubs with names like Young Italy, Young Poland, Young Germany, Young France, Young Switzerland. The groups sported black flags and red shirts, and gathered regularly for nights of emotion-filled, patriotic singing.

Music took on an increasingly central role during the nationalist revolutions. As a revolutionary testified at his trial, "People have left the churches for the theaters . . . opera is a spectacle to *awaken and excite* the senses" (p. 152). Opera, folk dance, symphony, and march combined to become a powerful, cohesive force for mobilizing the masses through revolutionary propaganda. Chopin's mazurkas were aptly described by Schumann as "cannons buned in flowers"; Liszt called for a renewal of music's ancient power through a revived paganism; the music of Berlioz, Wagner, Rossini, and Verdi, which played on the recurring theme of national uprisings, sent their audiences streaming out of the theaters and into the streets, clamoring for revolution. A single operatic performance could set off a political explosion, and the theater became a favorite location for assassinations.

The Romantic nationalist movements created the myth of the *People* as an infallible source of legitimacy. Revolutionaries began to speak of the People as God, and looked back to the French Revolution as "His Incarnation of '89" (p. 161). The messianic nationalism of the day centered around the fantasy of the pure, unspoiled people as liberating force. Like many romantic myths, it was an ambiguous concept, used by all sides, as it is today by "constitutional" anarchists in the U. S., Central American Marxists, and demogogic politicians of every party. Subtly, however, a change was taking place at mid-century. Already in 1848 the nationalist tricolors were being struck in favor of the red flag of socialism; and revolutionary rhetoric began to speak of *workers* instead of *people*. By the 1860s, with the widespread failure of nationalist movements and the rising consciousness of economic class as a social dynamic, national revolution began to give way to social revolution.

An important step in the development of the social revolutionary tradition was the growth and refinement of the idea of a revolutionary dictatorship. The failure of previous revolutions began to be attributed to the lack of strong leaders; revolutionary power, the theorists claimed, must be entrusted to a dictatorial elite. The "people" themselves were obviously unable to perfect the Unfinished Revolution; the task must be given over to a "vanguard." Even after the revolution, the people would need continuing "education"; hence continuing dictatorship, terrorism, and secret police surveillance would be required.

While these theoretical developments were taking place, the social revolutionary movement was receiving aid from an unexpected source: the revival of romantic Christianity *(not* to be confused with orthodoxy) in the 1840s. Terms such as "the Brotherhood of Man" struck a responsive chord in the hearts of many, who were making the simultaneous discovery that they belonged to a monolithic aggregate of like-minded people called "the proletariat." New organizations such as the Communist League, which had progressed from national to universal social perspectives, popularized the use of Christian terminology to influence followers toward egalitarian socialism. Food cooperatives were used, then as now, to create a sense of "solidarity" and serve as an outlet for class-warfare propaganda in the name of protecting the poor against exploitation. Increasing envy-manipulation, often in the name of Christ, led to an acceleration of strikes and violence, preparing the way for the thoroughgoing atheistic secularism of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

Antidote for Revolution

At this point Billington poses the question: Why didn't it happen here? What prevented the countries of England, the United States, and Switzerland from going the way of France, Italy, and Poland? Billington's answer is an apparently reluctant resurrection of certain aspects of what used to be called the "Whig interpretation of history," the very mention of which will cause any self-respecting associate professors lip to curl derisively. (We should not be too quick to condemn such a reaction, for it is merely an involuntary reflex due to intensive programming.) The key differences, according to Billington (and Lord Macaulay before him) are *Protestantism* and *Parliamentarianism* –essential antidotes to both stagnation and upheaval.

The differences between the American Revolution and the French Revolution are dramatic and radical; to call them both *revolutions* is somewhat like calling Presbyterianism and Satanism *denominations*. The American War for Independence was essentially *republican; the* French Revolution was essentially *democratic*. Republics resisted the revolutionary trend toward simplification of structure and centralization of power; they succeeded through a stubborn commitment to complex political systems, involving competing sovereignties and diffused power. And the basis for this was their theological commitment to (basically presbyterian) Protestantism, which sought a harmony of unity and diversity, leaning neither toward unitary statism nor anarchistic fragmentation. Political, social, and economic health flowed from a Spiritual and religious center in the Protestant faith.

(To Be Continued)

PREFACE Is published monthly by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. A free six month subscription is sent to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. Subscriptions: PO. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. All donations are fully tax-deductible; checks should be made out to Institute for Christian Economics.