

WHAT'S A NICE GIRL LIKE YOU DOING WITH A PRIEST LIKE THIS? BIOGRAPHY, JEWISH STUDIES, AND GENTILE SUBJECTS

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When I began graduate school at Stanford University in 1992, I certainly did not imagine writing a biography of a French Catholic priest. As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, I had eaten my dinners at Hillel, but spent my days studying European intellectual history rather than Jewish studies. After a postgraduate year in Israel working with new immigrants and immersed in the rich texture of Jewish life, however, I arrived at Stanford eager to delve more deeply into Jewish history. Already planning to study the Enlightenment and French Revolution in Stanford's History Department, I decided to pursue my degree jointly with the university's Program in Jewish Studies.

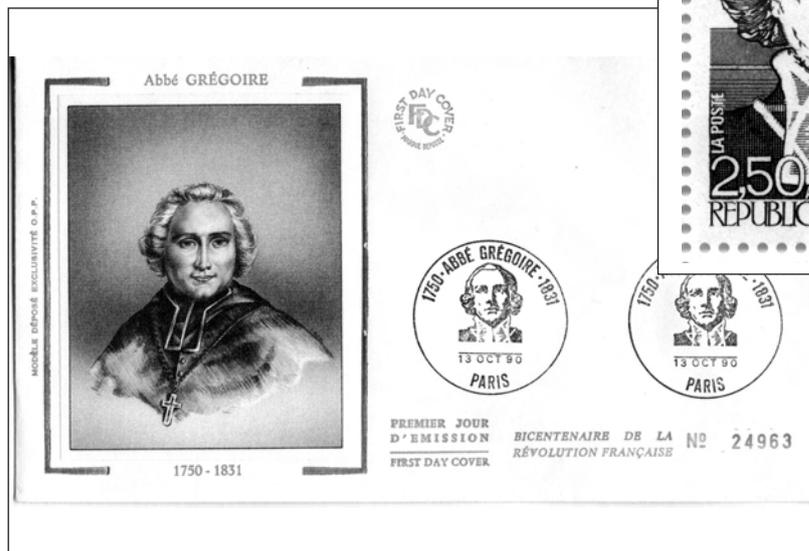
During my first year in graduate school, I wrote a seminar paper on the debates during the French Revolution over Jewish citizenship; for my second-year seminar, I analyzed Orientalism among London Jews in the 1890s. For my dissertation, I knew I wanted to pursue a topic related to Jews and the French Revolution, but I was also developing broader interests in issues of universalism/particularism, particularly regarding comparisons between the status of Jews and that of colonial subjects. I tried to imagine a dissertation project that

would allow me to think about universalism comparatively, studying Jews while also involving a colonial and/or gender dimension. I considered comparing the Revolution-era debates on granting citizenship to Jews, women, and people of color in the French Caribbean, but pursuing archival work on all three topics would have involved far more sources than was feasible for a doctoral thesis. Other possibilities I considered seemed unattractive as well, either because of the opposite source problem (too few materials) or because they did not let me look at universalism as comprehensively as I hoped.

In the end, I opted not to make Jews the center of my study, and instead wrote a biography of the French revolutionary and priest Henri Grégoire (later published as *The Abbé Grégoire and the French*

Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism, Berkeley, 2005). Grégoire is most well known among Jewish historians for his 1789 *Essai sur la*

régénération physique, morale et politique des juifs, which urged tolerance towards Jews but also their conversion to Christianity. He was also involved, however, in a host of other issues, from campaigning for the abolition of slavery to seeking to Christianize the French Revolution. One might think that my choice to work on Grégoire detached me from Jewish studies, since recent scholarship in the field has emphasized Jewish agency, studying Jews as actors rather than as objects discussed by others. In some ways, the decision did take me away from Jewish



Abbé Grégoire stamp cover issued for the French Revolution Bicentennial by La Poste in France, 1989.



Stamp featuring the abbé Grégoire issued for the French Revolution Bicentennial by La Poste in France, 1989.

studies, in that the expertise I developed in my research on Grégoire has led me to work at least as much in Enlightenment and postcolonial studies as in Jewish history. Moreover, my days spent with Grégoire were not always easy; I wrestled with his texts and with how he described Jews, sometimes feeling grateful, sometimes repulsed.

Nevertheless, writing about a Catholic priest enabled me both to reexamine universalism and to elucidate key questions in Jewish studies in ways that

I would not otherwise have been able to do. First, studying Grégoire and his views on multiple populations in France allowed me to look at

universalism in a more complex way than if I had focused on Jews alone. Second, following Grégoire's lifepath led me to new documents on French Jewry (both by Grégoire and by French Jews themselves) that historians had not previously found. Finally, by creative use of the biographical genre, incorporating insights from social history and postmodernism, I was able to gain a new perspective on reactions to Grégoire on the part of Jews in his own time as well as in the last two centuries.

The decision to write a biography for my dissertation was not in fact an easy one. By the time I began graduate school, biography seemed passé to many academic historians. Its decline began in the early twentieth century, when members of the *Annales* school argued that historical change occurred because of structural forces, not the actions of individuals. Biography was further hampered in the 1960s by the ascent of "history from below," which regarded studies of political leaders as elitist and old-fashioned; and in the 1980s by the writings of

poststructuralists, who were skeptical about the idea of a coherent "self" and about whether individuals could transcend the dominant thinking of their eras. For many historians, biography seemed a sort of hagiography, presenting an old-fashioned recitation of an already-famous figure's heroic achievements.

As I learned when I began to consider writing about Grégoire, however, the genre was in the process of being reformulated in

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certain corners of the historical profession. A movement of "social biography" arose in the 1980s in American women's and social history, which focused on recovering the lives of marginalized individuals. Within French history, scholars influenced by postmodernism began to use notions of "self-fashioning" to do cutting-edge work in gender history; they argued that the study of individuals was an especially effective way of dissecting complex issues. Even scholars influenced by the *Annales* began to reassess biography, suggesting that where structural studies lent a sense of inevitability to historical change, biographical studies could restore attention to chance.

In my case, I found that writing a biography of a figure like Grégoire allowed me to contribute to modern Jewish historiography in several ways. First, focusing on Grégoire's early years led me to an essay contest on the Jews sponsored by the Société des Philantropes de Strasbourg (SPS) in 1778, seven years before the more famous Metz

Academy contest of 1785–1788. Though the Strasbourg contest was eventually cancelled for lack of funds, it may have had a powerful impact on the development of emancipationist ideas in Europe. Both Grégoire and the Prussian writer Christian Wilhelm Dohm (*Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden*, 1781) were SPS members, and Grégoire would later say that the contest "gave [me] the idea of considering this question proposed later by the Academy of Metz."

Second, by reading more of Grégoire's oeuvre (encompassing more than four hundred books, articles, and parliamentary

discourses), I was able to arrive at a fuller understanding of philo-Semitic ideas such as his than could be gained by reading the *Essai* on regeneration alone. In later writings, Grégoire made clear his certainty that the Jews would "return to Him whom their ancestors pierced." I came to understand that, for him, writing about Jews and other persecuted groups represented genuine interest in helping them, but also a particular kind of Christian apologetics in the age of Enlightenment.

In addition, focusing on Grégoire's relationships with Jews led me to new information on late eighteenth-century Jewish leaders' views on emancipation and "regeneration." Grégoire's private papers include letters from *maskilim* such as Isaiah Berr-Bing and Moses Ensheim, showing their warm affection for Grégoire while also some discomfort with his ideas. These letters, plus careful reading of printed texts, helped me understand the "strategic friendships" that these men had with Grégoire, an idea I

developed in my essay in *Renewing the Past, Reconfiguring Jewish Culture* (Philadelphia, 2003).

Though the abbé liked to portray himself as the Jews' great hero, my sources suggested that Jews had a range of reactions to the priest, depending on their vision of the best path for Jews to take in the future. Jewish leaders' conflicted feelings about Grégoire paralleled their feelings about emancipation. Even as they embraced many aspects of the Revolution, they did not always agree with Grégoire and other revolutionaries.

Finally, examining Grégoire's views on other marginalized groups in the French empire enabled me to understand French universalism in a new way, and to realize that

categories such as race, religion, and language were viewed by the revolutionaries as pliable, whereas gender was not. The two years it took the National Assembly to award equal citizenship to Jews seemed inconsequential compared to the longer wait for free and enslaved people of color (whose equality was decreed only after they launched a revolt in what is now Haiti, and then revoked in 1802), and to women, who were barred even from participating in political clubs.

Certainly, not every non-Jewish figure would be as useful a biographical subject for Jewish studies as the abbé Grégoire. In general, I would agree that focusing on Jews themselves remains the best

way to write Jewish history. Yet Grégoire shows us that we can occasionally learn more about Jews by shifting our gaze away from them. More broadly, he reminds us that biography remains a uniquely valuable historical genre, particularly when we study figures not only in terms of their own actions, but also in terms of their reception by others. An icon of universalism long since his death, the abbé Grégoire is a prime example of how individuals can be extremely useful sites for studying complex historical processes such as emancipation.

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