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Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005. xii + 341. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S.; £39.95 U.K. (cl). ISBN 0-520-24180-0.

Review by Gary Kates, Pomona College.

Very few leaders played as prominent role in the French Revolution as the Abbé Henri Grégoire. Born in Lorraine in 1750, Grégoire demonstrated intellectual acuity and religious passion at an early age. Despite his low birth (his father was a tailor), he was accepted into a seminary and became Curé of a parish near his hometown. At the end of the 1780s, he gained fame as an Enlightenment man of letters when his essay advocating civil emancipation for Jews shared the top prize in an essay contest sponsored by the academy of Metz. A few months later, his brains, oratory, and skillful connections got him elected as a deputy to the First Estate at the Estates General. Quickly (just how quickly can be seen by his prominence in David's famous painting of the tennis court oath), Grégoire became one of the Constituent Assembly's most radical leaders. In 1791 he was elected by the residents of Blois to become their first Constitutional Bishop. The next year found him back in Paris, as Blois's deputy to the National Convention. There Grégoire continued to assert his leadership, especially in the Committee of Public Instruction. Grégoire managed to avoid being purged with the Girondins and guillotined during the Terror. During the Directory, he was elected to the Council of Ancients, where he now spoke up increasingly as leader for the universal abolition of slavery and, thus, a supporter of Haitian independence. Elected to the Napoleonic Senate in 1801, he was excluded from politics during the Bourbon Restoration because of his republican views. He died in 1831.

Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall's first-rate intellectual biography explains the contradictions and contexts that have made Grégoire's ideas worth arguing about for over 200 years. "The crucial question of Grégoire's life," she argues, was "how to build a coherent and egalitarian national community out of a diverse people..." (p. 231). Grégoire answered this question using the idea of *régénération*, which in Sepinwall's rich analysis forms a sort of *leitmotiv* throughout virtually all of his works and activities. We see it first in his *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* (1789). Regeneration as a cultural program is clearly a two-edged sword. On the one hand, even before the Revolution Grégoire believed that all men and women who lived in France ought to be welcomed into the French national community, without regard to religion. And he believed that such a community ought to be organized along egalitarian lines, so that everyone held a similar status *vis-à-vis* the nation. On the other hand, he also recognized that Jews were "physically, morally, and politically" different from the French, often in a way that appeared to Grégoire as degenerate and inferior. In return for inclusion in the new nation, therefore, Grégoire envisioned a regenerated Jewish community, one that would be shorn (at least for the Ashkenazi in his home region of Alsace/Lorraine) of its rabbinical organization, Yiddish tongue, strange rituals, and communal exclusivity. He was a strong advocate of intermarriage as a means to hasten such regeneration.

Sepinwall is careful to present a balanced view of this new and potent idea. She notes how radical it was coming especially from a priest's pen. However, she also tells us about the unease felt by those to be regenerated. For example, Grégoire's Jewish friend, the prominent Jewish leader Berr Isaac Berr, arranged publication of a different pamphlet on the issue by a rival author, one that did not call for the Jews to give up their cultural and religious mores. Indeed, among the most interesting sections in Sepinwall's compelling narrative is a growing distance between the Ashkenazi community and

Grégoire. Sepinwall notes, for example, the curious silence Grégoire displayed in the Constituent Assembly when Jewish emancipation was finally debated. She argues that by 1791, Grégoire had become embittered by his Jewish friends' reluctance to accept emancipation on his terms. Later in his life, Grégoire would mock Jewish rituals in print and hope aloud for the full conversion of the Jews to Catholicism.

Sepinwall next uses regeneration to analyze Grégoire's efforts to eliminate patois and non-French regional languages. Here again Grégoire's attitude stemmed from a determination to fully assimilate all peasants into the nation, and to inculcate in them a strong sense of belonging. Not only was such a project folly ("The religious and political importance of destroying the Patois is nil," one civic servant wrote back to Grégoire [p. 106]), but Sepinwall rightly criticizes Grégoire for sacrificing cultural and linguistic diversity for national unity, a precedent that has had a very ugly legacy throughout modern times.

Grégoire applied regeneration to France's large slave colonies, although his thinking went through many stages, each analyzed skillfully by Sepinwall. In 1790 and 1791, he viewed the situation cautiously. While he acknowledged that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizenship had universal implications, and implied the immediate end of the slave trade, he did not believe that slaves should be immediately freed. "This would be putting a sword in the hands of the furious," he wrote. Instead he believed that black slaves needed, as Sepinwall puts it, "a long period of moral regeneration before membership in the nation could be considered" (p. 96). A few years later, even after the first black republic in the world, Haiti, had secured independence from the French, Grégoire still hoped that colonies would follow the moral, political, and economic lead of the European states. As Sepinwall argues, in Grégoire's peculiar form of abolitionist ideology lie the seeds for justifying France's nineteenth-century colonial empire.

Sepinwall notes how Grégoire's regenerative schemes purposively excluded women. His writings on women were Rousseauian at best, and verged on the misogynistic. "Universalism did not stand on its own," writes Sepinwall. "On the contrary, its implementation depended on the homogenizing action of regeneration. Women could not transform themselves into fully regenerated citizens in the same way as patois-speaking, Jewish, Protestant, mixed-race or black males; women's difference was a fixed one that could not be erased by converting, adopting a new language, or intermarrying" (p. 102). Nor was his attitude due to ignorance of modern feminist thought – he himself owned a copy of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

In the end, Grégoire never strayed from projecting an ideal of a universal Catholic republic. He made every opportunity to pick fights with atheists, and after the Revolution his attitude towards Jews and Protestants hardened. Although he remained tolerant of other faiths, and certainly wished them no harm, his view of French culture was inseparable from his love of Catholicism.

A final section on the book shows the surprising degree to which his legacy has been contested in the subsequent centuries. While some towns raise statues and name museums and schools after him, critics favoring cultural pluralism scorn his view of homogeneity.

Sepinwall's Grégoire is likely to sit on the shelf next to David Jordan's *Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre*, Leo Gershoy's *Bertrand Barère: A Reluctant Terrorist*, R. B. Rose's *Gracchus Babeuf, the First Revolutionary Communist*, and Keith Michael Baker's *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* in a series of standard outstanding biographies in English of important French revolutionary leaders. The book is strongest when focusing on the regeneration of Jews and blacks;

readers specifically interested in Grégoire's ideas on linguistic uniformity may be disappointed. Nonetheless, this is a book for all serious students of the French Revolution.

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