

A Dubious Legacy

Abbé Grégoire and his Role in the Emancipation of the French Jews

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1. Introduction

Abbé Grégoire was a cleric, politician and revolutionary who is still strongly perceived in contemporary times. When the Nazis destroyed his statue in the French province in the 1940s or, more recently, the French Front National condemned him as the “emblem of all of France’s ills”, both parties showed their aversion against the legacy that has been developed around him.¹ This legacy depicts him as a defender of the oppressed groups in France, his main goals being the emancipation of the Jews and the abolition of slavery. In how far Grégoire’s legacy as supporter, defender and even liberator of the Jews is justified, will be one of the main fields of inquiry in this present study.

Henri Grégoire was born in Vého near Lunéville on December 4, 1750. He soon decided to follow a religious education and became priest and later bishop, but also worked as a politician during and after the French Revolution. Grégoire was a deputy of Nancy to the Estates General and participated, among others, in the National Assembly and the National Convention. Within these representative bodies, he played a great role as an enlightened member of the clergy. For example, he contributed significantly to the unification of the lower clergy with the Third Estate, which led to the establishment of the National Assembly. Furthermore, he actively helped to shape the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and he was one of the most outspoken members of the National Convention for the abolition of the monarchy.

Despite all these important contributions to the Revolution, Grégoire is mostly known for his role in the emancipation of the Jews. During his work as a politician, he always advocated the rights of minorities with a special emphasis on the rights of Jews and slaves. He became famous for his *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs*, written in 1788, in which he demands equal rights for Jews. The Jews in France were finally emancipated by two different decrees, dating back to January 1790 and September 1791.

In a time when anti-Semitism was still widespread and Jews were mostly seen as outcasts of the society, Abbé Grégoire’s attitude is remarkable, all the more because he was a member of the clergy and deeply religious. At first glance, Grégoire’s support for the Jews could be seen as stemming from compassion and a Christian feeling of responsibility for all fellow humans. However, Grégoire was also actively taking part in the French Revolution with its general notion of secularization and the decreasing importance of the Church as a result. Therefore, it is of great interest to scrutinize his motives more closely. What did Grégoire actually want to achieve with his support for the Jews and why was he for emancipation of this group? The main questions that will be discussed here are which role Abbé Grégoire played during the French Revolution regarding emancipation of the Jews in France and what his attitude was regarding this topic.

¹ A. Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution. The Making of Modern Universalism* (London 2005) 234.

A number of issues will be addressed in order to illuminate these questions. First, Abbé Grégoire's life as a cleric, politician and revolutionary will be summarized, including an outline of his belief system. Second, the situation of the French Jews at the eve of the French Revolution will be presented, followed by an examination of Grégoire's practical contribution towards emancipation. Third, Grégoire's attitude regarding Jews and their emancipation will be analyzed in detail. Lastly, it will be discussed how contemporary Jews assessed Grégoire's role and how he is perceived in recent academic works.

The research will be based on primary and secondary literature in French and English. Most prominently among the primary sources is Grégoire's *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* (1788), in which he outlines his opinion regarding French Jews. This essay will be analyzed in depth because it presents the most coherent outlining of Grégoire's ideology concerning the Jews and their emancipation. Moreover, the essay is the best-known work of Grégoire and, therefore, deserves special attention in its own right.

The secondary sources studied for this research include books and articles in French and English, dating from 1907 to 2013. They either address emancipation of the Jews or the work and ideology of Abbé Grégoire. Some were also studied for obtaining background knowledge of the situation regarding French Jews before, during and after the French Revolution. Not many authors studied address Grégoire and his role in Jewish emancipation as the focus of their study, which makes it difficult to obtain a coherent image of his life and ideology. The main secondary source on which the present research is based is Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall's biography *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution* (2005). While relying heavily on her work, it is always kept in mind that the author is herself Jewish and that, therefore, she could be biased regarding the topic of Jewish emancipation. The same caution is applied to other sources that are either relatively old or easily identified as biased.

2. The Life and General Ideology of Abbé Grégoire

The life of Abbé Grégoire can be divided into three different eras, namely before (1750-1789), during (1789-1799) and after the French Revolution (1799-1831). Grégoire was particularly active and influential in the first part of the French Revolution; after the Reign of Terror, he withdrew more and more from the prominent political stage. After the Revolution, his views regarding the Church and the preferable state system increasingly marginalized him as a cleric and politician until he was almost living as an outlaw in his own country. The focus in this research will be on Grégoire's life on the eve of the French Revolution and his work regarding emancipation of the Jews, which was

accomplished in 1791. However, to grasp the full meaning of Grégoire's alleged support for the Jews and the events that developed after emancipation, it is necessary to outline his whole life and general worldview.

2.1 Abbé Grégoire's life

Henri Grégoire was born on 4 December 1750, as the son of two modest artisans of the French countryside in Vého near Lunéville in the east of France. His origin does not give any reason to assume that he would later have substantial influence on French society. He chose a religious career because he was a genuine believer in God and because it would allow him to receive a decent education. Henri was first educated in different institutions close to his hometown until he received his ordination in Metz in 1775. He held different minor posts as a priest until becoming the abbot of Embermenil in 1782. During his work as a priest, he had already acquired a somewhat controversial reputation because he was interested in the Enlightenment and developed programs for church reform that were not appreciated by conservative clerics.² In 1788, he was one of the winners of an essay contest conducted by the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Metz regarding the status of the French Jews. When Grégoire's *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* was published in the same year, he became known to a broader public outside of his home province of Lorraine.

Grégoire was chosen as deputy to the estates General for the clergy of Nancy and arrived in Versailles in May 1789. Instead of being overshadowed by the hundreds of other deputies from all over France, the abbot made a lasting impression right from the beginning. He was a talented public speaker who could convince people of his rather radical ideas and impressed other deputies with his charismatic appearance, youth and drive.³ Due to his unique qualities, he was able to convince many members of the lower clergy to join the Third Estate, which made it possible to form the National Assembly.⁴ Consequently, he was one of the first members of the National Assembly to take the Tennis Court Oath. Grégoire was, therefore, one of the key actors during the first months of the Revolution and he would continue to play an important role. In the following years, he was elected secretary (1789) and president (1791) of the Constituent Assembly, worked with several committees and became an active member of the Breton and later the Jacobin Club. Moreover, Grégoire was contributing greatly to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (introduced in 1790) of which he, over time, "secure[d] for himself the virtual leadership".⁵ In 1791, he was chosen bishop of Blois in Loire-

² Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 21.

³ Ibidem, 82.

⁴ N. Ravitch, 'Liberalism, Catholicism, and the Abbé Grégoire', *Church History* 36 (1967) 422.

⁵ Ravitch, 'Liberalism, Catholicism and the Abbé Grégoire' 423.

et-Cher. He moved there during the time of the Legislative Assembly to shortly withdraw from national politics.

However, one year later, Grégoire joined the newly established National Convention in which he quickly became one of the most important members.⁶ When the general revolutionary atmosphere grew more and more radical, Grégoire's own behavior adapted to the increased radicalism. For example, he motioned for the abolition of the monarchy (1792), played a critical part in the fall of the Girondins (1793) and used increasingly authoritarian methods to suppress opinions of the people that diverged from his own.⁷ During the Reign of Terror, he grew more and more discontent with the direction the Revolution had taken but could not express his genuine views for danger of his life. He abstained from voting on the death of his former friend Robespierre and became a critic of both Robespierre and the National Convention after the Terror ended.⁸ By then, Grégoire's most influential time as a revolutionary politician were over and he concentrated his efforts in the intellectual and religious spheres.

When Napoleon came into power, Grégoire's political career entered its last phase, as he became a member of the senate in 1801. While other former revolutionaries adjusted quickly to the new regime, Grégoire stuck to his radical views and "opposed Napoleon whenever possible".⁹ When the Concordat was signed between Napoleon and the Pope in 1801, Grégoire had to resign as a bishop, which ended his career as a cleric. His influence in France diminished rapidly; however, he stayed important as a symbol of the Revolution.¹⁰ In 1814, when the Bourbon monarchy was restored in France, he had to face persecution and attacks due to his radical past. Grégoire continued his writings in support of different groups, but his focus now shifted to issues outside of France.¹¹ At the end of his life, Grégoire increasingly faced depression and frustration, which resulted from the fact that he saw almost none of his political and religious goals achieved. Abbé Grégoire died on May 28, 1831. However, he would continue to affect the public life in France and other parts of the world even beyond his death.

2.2 The most important elements of Abbé Grégoire's ideology

During his whole life, Abbé Grégoire was a rather controversial figure. He was at the same time clergyman, politician, revolutionary and intellectual. Many people did not understand the way in which he saw the world as he often tried to reconcile two diametrically opposed concepts with each

⁶ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 118.

⁷ Ibidem, 117, 125, 121.

⁸ Ibidem, 136.

⁹ Ravitch, 'Liberalism, Catholicism and the Abbé Grégoire', 426.

¹⁰ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 162, 164.

¹¹ Ibidem, 199.

other. His ideology was influenced by his early education that exposed him to many different schools of thought. From his early teenage years on, he moved in circles that consciously tried to combine religious with worldly thinking, or, as Alyssa Sepinwall put it:

“Rather than being the product of any one ideological tradition, his intellectual affinities linked him to churchmen and unbelievers, Jansenists and Jesuits, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, Freemasons and profanes, Frenchmen and foreigners. The roots of his thought [...] were thus profoundly heterogeneous, with ancestry in Enlightenment, religion, and enlightened religion.”¹²

Stemming from his education was Grégoire’s conviction that it was possible to be deeply religious and follow principles of the Enlightenment at the same time. He was introduced early to philosophers of the Enlightenment and entered the *Société des Philantropes of Strasbourg* (SPS), a group of intellectuals who made the “coexistence of strong Christian and Enlightenment sentiments within the same society” possible.¹³ All these different influences led Grégoire to develop a reform program for the Church, based on a new form of Christianity, namely enlightened religion. Grégoire’s concept of enlightened religion and the interconnection between religion and Enlightenment ideas becomes most clear in his own words when he declares, “I am Catholic, not because my fathers were, but because *reason*, aided by divine grace, has led me to revelation.”¹⁴ However, when he had to choose between religion and Enlightenment, he would always stick to his faith instead of his philosophy.

Another cornerstone of Grégoire’s ideology was his conviction that a Republic would be the best possible state system for France (and any other country in Europe). One of the reasons why he supported the French Revolution so wholeheartedly was that he was disgusted by the monarchy and the system of nobility that was common during the *Ancien Regime*. Grégoire was one of the first deputies to demand the abolition of the monarchy openly, which was the main reason for his troubles later in his life when the Bourbons reestablished the monarchical system in France. Besides Grégoire’s reputation as enlightened clergyman, reformer of the church, revolutionary and republican, he also quickly became famous as a spokesperson for different oppressed groups. In the following, Grégoire’s work for one of these oppressed groups, namely the French Jews is analyzed more closely.

¹² Ibidem, 12.

¹³ Ibidem, 33.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 25. Emphasis added.

3. The Jews in France and Abbé Grégoire's Attitude towards Them

This chapter sets out to give some background information about the French Jews' situation before the Revolution and Grégoire's practical contribution to their emancipation. First, the situation of the different Jewish communities in France will be explained. Second, Abbé Grégoire's work concerning the Jews in the National Assembly will be portrayed in an attempt to evaluate his personal impact on the events that led to the emancipation of the Jews in 1791.

3.1 The Jewish communities in France

On the eve of the French Revolution, there were approximately 40.000 Jews living in France. They were mainly split into two big sub groups who were living in two different parts of France under completely different living conditions. The Sephardic Jews came from Portugal in the sixteenth century and had settled in the southwest of France in the area of Bordeaux where they were living in relative peace. They had assimilated into the French way of life and were respected for their skills in trading and other economic enterprises, which had earned them a certain wealth. The Sephardic Jews were proud of their communities' accomplishments and often emphasized their development and integration into the broader society. Therefore, they refused to be connected to the second big Jewish community in France, the German Ashkenazi Jews living in Alsace and Lorraine.

The situation of the Ashkenazi Jews differed greatly from the one of their Sephardic counterparts. They had already been subject to persecution under German authorities and the newly established French rule in the two provinces did not break with this dubious tradition but rather emphasized their isolation.¹⁵ Therefore, instead of integrating into the French way of life, the Ashkenazim focused on preserving their Jewish cultural and religious heritage. Moreover, as they did not have many opportunities for work, they were much poorer than the Sephardic Jews and often had to resort to the profession of money lending, which was stereotypical for Jews of that time.¹⁶ The alleged backwardness of the Ashkenazim caused many Frenchmen to develop a strong resentment against this group, which was particularly articulated in the East of France but could also spread to other Jewish communities.

The two main Jewish groups in France thus differed regarding "their origins, their customs, their community organization, and the circumstances of their attachment to the French state".¹⁷

¹⁵ R.F. Necheles, 'The Abbé Grégoire's Work in Behalf of Jews 1788-1791', *French Historical Studies* 6 (1969) 175.

¹⁶ I.H. Hersch, 'The French Revolution and the Emancipation of the Jews', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 19 (1907) 545.

¹⁷ M. Graetz, *The Jews in Nineteenth-Century France. From the French Revolution to the Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Stanford, 1996) 18.

Furthermore, they differed greatly in the extent of their emancipation. While the Sephardim enjoyed almost all rights that were enjoyed by Christian Frenchmen, the Ashkenazim were not allowed to vote, join guilds or trade and they even fell under special Ashkenazi (rabbinical) jurisdiction.¹⁸ It becomes clear that the situation of the French Jews at the eve of the French Revolution cannot be generalized very easily. One of Grégoire's contemporaries summarized the issue correctly, when he said that a "Portuguese Jew from Bordeaux and a German Jew from Metz seem to be two absolutely different beings."¹⁹ Grégoire, who came from the region where the Ashkenazim lived, is said to have been "barely aware of the Sephardim's existence" while he was "deeply concerned about the Ashkenazim."²⁰ Therefore, the focus in this research will be on the Ashkenazi community. In the following, distinctions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim will be pointed out where necessary, otherwise when referring to 'the Jews', the Ashkenazi community will be implied.

3.2 Grégoire's practical contribution and personal impact on the emancipation of the Jews

When arriving in Versailles in May 1789 for the convening of the Estates General, Grégoire was already known as "defender of the Jews" because of his *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs*, published in 1788.²¹ After the establishment of the National Assembly, Grégoire quickly began to plea for the emancipation of the Jews within this body. He was the first one to address this topic after the Great Fear had caused anti-Jewish riots in the countryside of Alsace and Lorraine in the late summer of 1789.²² However, as many other members of the Assembly saw his views regarding the Jews as too far-reaching, they often prevented him from directly speaking on this topic to the Assembly.²³ Hindered in his efforts as a politician, Grégoire relied on his talents as a writer and published another of his main works, *Motion en faveur des juifs* in October 1789, in which he mainly repeated his arguments for emancipation from the *Essai*. Despite his efforts, Grégoire's demands were not met by the National Assembly. On January 28, 1790, one month after Grégoire handed in a resume with the demands of the Ashkenazi Jews, only the Sephardic Jews were emancipated by the Assembly. With this decision, the members of the National Assembly yielded to the increasing pressure put on them by the Sephardic Jews themselves and supporters of Jewish emancipation like Grégoire. However, this first emancipation cannot be seen as a success for Grégoire and his Ashkenazi protégées. Emancipation for this Jewish community was still seen as too

¹⁸ Graetz, *The Jews in Nineteenth-Century France*, 20, 23.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 18.

²⁰ Necheles, 'The Abbé Grégoire's Work in Behalf of Jews', 175.

²¹ Sepinwall, 82.

²² R. Hermon-Belot, *L'Emancipation des Juifs en France* (Paris 2000) 45.

²³ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 91.

radical and, therefore, Grégoire did not even succeed in convincing the Assembly to discuss, let alone vote on, this issue. As a result, the already very well integrated Sephardim were emancipated with the decree of 28 January, while the Ashkenazim who really lived in a precarious situation were completely left out of consideration.

After emancipation of the Sephardim, many moderate supporters of the Jews were satisfied with their efforts and ceased caring for the destiny of other Jewish communities.²⁴ This once again shows the double standards that were applied to the question of Jewish emancipation. Due to the lack of further interest on behalf of the moderates, Grégoire could not make any significant contribution to Jewish emancipation within the National Assembly after January 1790. However, he continued to lobby for the improvement of the Ashkenazim's rights.²⁵ Because of his efforts, Grégoire was widely known as a supporter of Jewish emancipation and his opponents skillfully made use of his reputation. They questioned Grégoire's suitability as a representative of the Catholic Church and, as a result, his status as one of the most outspoken church reformers began to be threatened. Grégoire was confronted with "the anti-Semites' insistence upon linking church reform with philo-Semitism" and started to limit his efforts for the Jews to not endanger his vision for church reform, which he considered an even more important issue than Jewish emancipation.²⁶ In the end, Grégoire had to choose one of his main political goals above the other. When the National Assembly emancipated all French Jews on September 27, 1791, Grégoire no longer belonged to the main political players who achieved this success as he had even abstained from the ultimate debates about this topic.

At first glance, Grégoire's practical contribution to Jewish emancipation is quite disillusioning. As a politician, he was only actively participating in the struggle for emancipation during a comparatively short time span, namely from fall 1789 until spring 1791. During this time, he was one of the foremost members of the National Assembly and even held leading positions numerous times. Despite this prominence, Grégoire did not manage to realize the emancipation of the Ashkenazim when he was really pressing for it. Moreover, instead of sticking to his position openly, he abandoned the Jewish cause when the success of his other political project of church reform seemed to become endangered. Grégoire directly addressed the National Assembly only a few times on the topic of Jewish emancipation while the debate was continuing over a time span of about two years. In the end, it was not Grégoire who introduced the successful motion of also emancipating the Ashkenazi Jews, but Adrien Duport, another French revolutionary and supporter of emancipation.

However, despite his limited influence in the political arena, Grégoire is still seen as one of the main actors in advancing the rights of French Jews during the Revolution. For example, Dubray argues that the reason that the Jews' "struggle for the same rights was successful is largely the work

²⁴ Necheles, 'The Abbe Gregoire's Work in Behalf of Jews', 181.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

of Grégoire”.²⁷ Grégoire’s importance, however, lies outside purely political action. The most convincing account in this regard stems from Ruth Necheles. According to her, Grégoire was important as a “propagandist rather than as a legislator” and, therefore, his impact was “limited and indirect”.²⁸ Because Grégoire was not firmly attached to any party, he “depended on others to enact his dreams into laws and had little control over the form which these regulations took”.²⁹ Ultimately, according to Necheles, Grégoire’s importance for the Jewish emancipation movement lies in his potential as a symbolic figure. He was one of the few proponents of Jewish emancipation who were also devout Catholics. Therefore, Grégoire’s support for Jewish emancipation weakened many of the anti-Semitic arguments of that time that were based on an intolerant interpretation of the dominant Catholic faith. His “significance far outweighed the volume of his speeches and writings” as “he symbolized the small group of republican clergy who devoutly believed in political democracy, social justice, French nationalism, and a modified version of Catholicism”.³⁰ This complex relation between Grégoire’s faith and his support for the Jews resurfaces as a dominant element in the analysis of his motives for supporting the Jewish cause. As Grégoire’s ideas were obviously more important than his actions, the next chapter will focus on his mindset and how it relates to the support for Jewish emancipation.

4. Abbé Grégoire’s Attitude towards the Jews and his Concept of Jewish Emancipation

This chapter introduces Abbé Grégoire’s attitude towards the Jews and his very own concept of Jewish emancipation. While one might expect a coherently positive attitude of Grégoire towards the Jews and their emancipation, his argumentation is more ambivalent. The following analysis will be based on Abbé Grégoire’s main work on the emancipation of the Jews, namely his *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs*, written in 1788. With this work, he contributed to a contest initiated by the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Metz who wanted to know from the participants if there were ‘means of rendering the Jews happier and more useful in France’. Grégoire, and two other writers who had answered this question positively, won the contest and their works were published subsequently. For the present research, the English translation of Grégoire’s *Essai* has been studied. This version was published in London in 1791 under the title

²⁷ J. Dubray, *La Pensée de l’abbé Grégoire: despotisme et liberté* (Oxford 2008) 176.

²⁸ Necheles, ‘The Abbe Gregoire’s Work in Behalf of Jews’, 184.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

'An essay on the physical, moral, and political reformation of the Jews'. The translator addresses the reader in a translator's preface; however, his identity remains unknown.

4.1 Grégoire's Attitude towards the Jews

Grégoire's attitude towards Jews is not as clear-cut as one might expect from a supporter of Jewish emancipation. One look at the contents of his *Essai* surprises the reader with chapters named "Excessive population of the Jews. The Causes of it.", "In what manner the Jews became a commercial people, and Usurers.", "Is it possible to train up the Jews to the Arts and Trades and to Agriculture?" and such like. In the first few chapters of the *Essai*, Grégoire develops a very stereotypical image of the Jews. He repeats the assertion that the typical appearance of the Jews entails "hooked noses, hollow eyes, prominent chins, and the constrictor (*sic*) muscles of the mouth very apparent."³¹ According to Grégoire, Jews are physically degenerated, which entails having a darker skin-color than Christian Frenchmen and lacking the muscles Frenchmen have built up due to their hard manual labor.³²

While acknowledging that there are some minor differences among the Jews themselves, and that the Jewish community cannot be judged without taking into consideration the acts of individuals, Grégoire nevertheless makes sweeping generalizations when talking about the Jewish character and customs. The Jewish character, according to Grégoire's *Essai*, is remarkably different from the Christian one and, because of the Jews' life in closed communities, their differentness has only been increased during the last centuries.³³ Grégoire sees the most important positive characteristics of Jews in their benevolence directed at needy members of their community and their esteem for their parents, teachers and old people.³⁴ However, their negative characteristics far outweigh their virtues. While Grégoire mentions the Jews' "frugality and their aversion to luxury", one of the main concerns of the *Essai* is the Jews' alleged usury.³⁵ Great parts of Grégoire's work are concerned with this topic, which shows its importance to the Abbé and his contemporaries. He defines a "spirit of avarice" as their "ruling passion" and describes the Jews as a deceitful people who are only concerned with their own well-being, which is often achieved at the expense of Christians.³⁶ This assertion is emphasized with a religious component when Grégoire explains that "the sacred books have served the Jews as a pretense for their robbery".³⁷

³¹ H. Grégoire, *An essay on the physical, moral, and political reformation of the Jews* (London 1791) 55.

³² Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 65, 56.

³³ *Ibidem*, 36.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 44-45.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 36, 90, 92.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 89.

Another issue that arouses Grégoire's concern is the size of the Jewish population and its supposedly extraordinary growth. According to Grégoire, Jews are a people that strives to reproduce quickly, due to their tradition of early marriage as well as religious belief and the hope for the Messiah to enter the world as one of their offspring as soon as possible.³⁸ Grégoire outlines a very threatening scenario when speaking about Jewish population growth. He seems to be warning his readership, in which he sees mostly Christian Frenchmen, about the danger of the increasing Jewish community. According to him, the Jews are even able to surpass the number of Christians in France within a relatively short period of time.³⁹ However, this would have bad consequences for France as the Jews "are like those creeping plants which waste the substance of the trees to which they attach themselves, and which may at length exhaust and destroy them."⁴⁰ Furthermore, Grégoire condemns parts of the Jewish faith. Jews allegedly show an "obstinate attachment to their belief" and are eager to convert others to their faith.⁴¹ Moreover, their Scripture shows that they possess an intense aversion against Christianity and that they would kill any Jews who wants to convert.⁴²

Most of Grégoire's above mentioned remarks can clearly be defined as anti-Semitic in our modern terms. He developed a very negative stereotypical image of the Jewish people, whom he saw as a people apart. However, the historical context and the context of the *Essai* itself have to be kept in mind when evaluating his statements. For his time, Grégoire's image of Jews did not stand out as particularly negative. Even more important, however, is the way in which Grégoire explained the supposedly degenerated status of the Jews. In his opinion, Jews had only become so inferior to Christians because of their history of expulsion and dispersion. Mainly responsible for this development were the Christians themselves who had always persecuted and marginalized the Jews. According to Grégoire, Jews had become usurers because Christians did not offer them any possibility to participate in the labor market.⁴³ Equally, the Jews' appearance had been corrupted by their impaired living conditions and the refusal of Christians to let them work in agriculture.⁴⁴ Instead of making Jews responsible for the development of their supposedly bad character, Grégoire directly accuses the Christians who over centuries had mistreated the Jews and thus had created the miserable situation most Ashkenazi Jews were living in during Grégoire's times.⁴⁵ Moreover, while this development was unique only for Jews, Grégoire claims that "all people indeed who are placed in the same circumstances as the Hebrews [...] will become like them."⁴⁶ With this statement,

³⁸ Ibidem, 70.

³⁹ Ibidem, 75.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 76.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 36, 48.

⁴² Ibidem, 82-85.

⁴³ Ibidem, 91.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 65.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 54.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 46.

Grégoire makes clear that he does not believe in insurmountable differences between Jews and Christians. All the negative Jewish characteristics were, in his eyes, a product of their specific history and could be changed if Jews were treated differently.⁴⁷ Thus, the “dreadful injustice” that had been inflicted upon Jews by Christians was to be reversed by their emancipation.⁴⁸

4.2 Grégoire’s Understanding of Jewish Emancipation

Emancipation is generally understood as the “fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions” or “liberation”.⁴⁹ Abbé Grégoire’s understanding of emancipation, however, had more far-reaching consequences as he connected emancipation to specific conditions. His understanding of Jewish emancipation entailed the following elements. First, Jews would be allowed to partake in agriculture and possess land, be able to trade and hold the same civil offices as Christians. The job market would be opened to them so that they have the same opportunities as Christians and were not forced to stick to their traditional occupations that had caused a great part of their negative characteristics, as for example usury. However, Jews would stay excluded from some professions (e.g. attorneys, tax-gatherers, cashiers), as these would only encourage their supposedly erroneous behavior. According to Grégoire, the process of emancipation thus had to be carried out with care, as “we must never lose sight of the character of the people we wish to reform.”⁵⁰ Apparently, the Jewish character would retain an affinity with former bad characteristics even after emancipation and, therefore, in Grégoire’s opinion, Jews were inherently unsuitable for some professions.

A second element of Grégoire’s envisioned emancipation regards the question of Jewish education, which had to be changed profoundly. While “complete religious liberty” would be given to the Jews, they would also be obliged to undergo Christian education, which would entail the study of Christian Scripture and the like.⁵¹ In Grégoire’s opinion, even future rabbis had to undergo this basic Christian education and only the rabbis who passed some form of scrutiny by Christian teachers would be allowed to start working in their communities.⁵² After having undergone Christian instructions, Jews would also be allowed to study at institutions of higher education. By imposing these measurements, Grégoire hoped to “rectify” the Jewish education to improve the people

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 135.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, 9.

⁴⁹ Oxford Dictionaries (version 2015), <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/emancipation> (June 7, 2015).

⁵⁰ Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 182.

⁵¹ Ibidem, 165.

⁵² Ibidem, 208-209.

themselves and their bad properties.⁵³ Grégoire obviously saw education as one important element by which Christians could check the development of Jews. He seems to have hoped that Christian education would remodel even the most religious Jews and bring them closer to Christian standards and values.

Another important element of Grégoire's emancipation plan was the Jewish dispersion among Christian Frenchmen. Jews would be mixed with Christians in two different ways. The first was very practical: Jews would not be allowed to live in segregated quarters any longer as this would increase the aversion of Christians towards them and render the Jews more successful in resisting change.⁵⁴ The second way was more profound: Intermarriage between Jews and Christians would be allowed and even encouraged. Intermarriage would have positive consequences for both Jews and Christians. Jews would slowly lose their alleged degenerated appearance that had developed due to their practice of interbreeding and the mixed marriages would form a "new bond of union" between the faiths.⁵⁵ Children of such marriages would preferably become Catholics, or stick to the religion of their parent with the same sex. In general, it would be necessary to check the population growth of the Jews as they "cannot be multiplied too much."⁵⁶

The above review of Grégoire's concept of emancipation only discusses some of the most important elements of it. However, it becomes quite clear that the emancipation he envisaged to some extent maintained the inequality between the Jewish and Christian communities in France. For Grégoire, emancipation did not necessarily mean freeing Jews from oppressive rules and make them equal citizens while retaining their specifically Jewish characteristics. Rather, emancipation was seen by Grégoire as an instrument to reform Jews by changing essential parts of their customs and trying to bring them in line with Christians. The reasons for this patronizing form of emancipation will be discussed next.

5. Grégoire's Attitude towards Jewish Emancipation

This chapter sets out to explain Grégoire's attitude towards Jewish emancipation based on the most important elements of his ideology. His Catholic faith stands in the focus of the analysis as it sheds light on his ultimate goals connected to Jewish emancipation. Moreover, the two important concepts of universalism and regeneration will be explained and put into the present context. Catholicism,

⁵³ Ibidem, 87.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 185, 188.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 192, 206.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 205, 206.

universalism and regeneration are the three main concepts of Grégoire's ideology regarding the Jews. In the following, his understanding and application of these concepts will be explained.

5.1 Grégoire's Catholic faith and its implications for Jewish emancipation

First of all, it has to be emphasized that Grégoire was a true believer in the Catholic faith, despite his participation in the Revolution and his early encounters with enlightened ideas. While working as a politician, he always presented himself as a representative of the Church and its ethics. Therefore, all topics he discussed throughout his career were "overshadowed by his religious concepts."⁵⁷ At the outset of the Revolution, Grégoire was convinced that the Catholic faith could be preserved amidst the revolutionary turmoil and all the changes it brought to French society. He envisioned a revolution in the service of Christianity and even saw it as a chance for the Church to reorganize and purify. Important elements of this reformed Church would be that it had to function under a republic and that it had to become less hierarchical and less corrupt. In the end, his Church was to become universally appealing for all men as he saw Catholicism as "the one true religion."⁵⁸

Furthermore, Grégoire was convinced that the French Republic needed the Church to retain morality and ultimately succeed.⁵⁹ He was sure that the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, introduced in 1790, could be combined with the Church and he fiercely attacked all its opponents.⁶⁰ However, when the Revolution became increasingly anti-religious, Grégoire was forced to take a stand on the now conflicting issues of revolutionary ideals and religion. In 1793, his rejection to put down his clerical duties brought him into conflict with the majority of revolutionaries and during two tumultuous weeks, he even had to fear for his life.⁶¹ This account not only shows that Abbé Grégoire was a genuine believer, but it also highlights his general priorities. When forced to make a choice between his convictions, he chose religion over the Revolution and its enlightened ideas. As mentioned before, he also chose to abandon the issue of Jewish emancipation not to endanger the project of Church reform, which was his main goal as politician and cleric.

After having outlined more practical implications of Grégoire's faith, the focus will now be on the implications Grégoire's faith had for Jewish emancipation. Grégoire was convinced that Catholicism was the only religion that would ultimately lead to salvation for all people.⁶² Remarks in his *Essai* make clear that he did not take Judaism seriously. He describes the Talmud as a "vast

⁵⁷ B. Chaouat, H. Minczeles (ed.), *Combat Pour la Diaspora. Les Juifs et la Révolution Française* (Paris 1989) 39.

⁵⁸ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 143.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 149.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 110.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 131.

⁶² Necheles, 'The Abbe Gregoire's Work in Behalf of Jews', 172.

reservoir [...] in which is accumulated every folly that the human mind is capable of inventing” and that is “filled with so many [...] reveries, which disgust the dullest person of good sense.”⁶³ His judgement of the rabbis is equally pejorative. He thinks that the rabbis are the main reason for the disparity between Jews and Christians as they watch over Jewish customs and keep them in place. However, what the rabbis say cannot be taken seriously because they often contradict each other and make their adherents believe in opposing statements.⁶⁴ While the *Essai* shows that Grégoire is an expert in Jewish history, he obviously never seriously engaged in religious dialogue with his protégées and, therefore, does not understand the deeper meaning behind Jewish religious traditions.

That Grégoire does not take Judaism seriously as a faith is also obvious when he outlines his expectations for the Jewish faith after emancipation of the Jews. On the one hand, he argues for the importance of “granting the Jews liberty of conscience, with all the privileges that proceed directly from it”.⁶⁵ On the other hand, it becomes clear that this seemingly tolerant statement is very confined. After emancipation, the practice of Judaism would be confined to the private sphere. For example, synagogues would be allowed but should not be marked as such. Also, if Jews want to work on Sundays, they should do so without disturbing Christians.⁶⁶ All different kinds of measurements would be taken to ensure that the Jews do not stand out as a different religious community. Freedom of conscience would thus be granted for everyone; the privileges of a public religion, however, would only apply to Catholicism.⁶⁷

Grégoire’s version of tolerance is a very pragmatic one that rests on very realistic assumptions. For example, he is aware that “to persecute a religion, is always the sure means of rendering it dearer to those who profess it.”⁶⁸ Therefore, instead of persecuting Jews, Grégoire’s emancipation concept entails all the already discussed aspects of bringing Jews in line with Christian Frenchmen. Once the Jews are accepted into the Christian community as equals, they will be so impressed by Christian laws and values that they will change their degenerated behavior for the better.⁶⁹ Grégoire’s ultimate aim, which is articulated clearly in his *Essai*, is that the emancipated Jews would realize the superiority of Christianity and, as a consequence, convert voluntarily to Catholicism. According to Grégoire, the possibility to convert is an inherent part of Judaism and Jews throughout history have always willingly abandoned parts of their faith even if they were not forced to do so.⁷⁰ Therefore, and because many Jews are “disgusted already with the nonsense of the Rabbis”,

⁶³ Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 80, 231.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 82.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 189.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 149.

⁶⁷ Hermon-Belot, *L’Emancipation des Juifs en France*, 61.

⁶⁸ Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 235, 236.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 126.

Grégoire is convinced that the Jews will easily assimilate into French society until, within the next two generations, they have completely adopted Christian customs and values.⁷¹ Diluting Jewish (religious) customs and replacing them by Christian ones to ultimately convert the Jews is thus one of the main reasons why Grégoire supported the emancipation of the Jews.

5.2 The ultimate aims of Grégoire's concept of Jewish emancipation

After concluding that Grégoire wanted to ultimately convert the French Jews, the questions must now be asked why and how he tried to achieve this goal. The answer to the first question can be summarized in one word, namely universalism. Grégoire was convinced that "republican universalism and the Christian faith were the key to social and moral progress".⁷² In addition to a genuine belief in Christianity, the French people were thus required to be as homogenous as possible. All the conditions Grégoire connected to Jewish emancipation (e.g. their dispersion among Christians, the abandonment of their customs, Christian education including French lessons) aimed at decreasing their particularity and increasing their uniformity regarding the Christian Frenchmen. According to Grégoire, the Jews were equally human as the Christians and their humanity came before their religion.⁷³ Therefore, there were only superficial differences between Christians and Jews that could and should be eradicated – of course in the favor of Christian instead of Jewish particularity. With this view, Grégoire echoed the general notion of the Revolution and upcoming nation states that a universal (Christian) society would strengthen the nation and was therefore worth striving for.⁷⁴

Apart from this rather pragmatic political reason, Grégoire's concept of universalism was also religiously motivated. He believed in the intrinsic dignity and equality of all people and that they all belong to one universal human family.⁷⁵ This explains his efforts for other oppressed groups as well, for example slaves in the French colonies. In the Jews, he saw the brothers of Christians as they all had the same Father.⁷⁶ It also makes clear why Grégoire wanted to build a universal society by homogenizing and not expulsing the Jews. According to him, the world was created for all men and, therefore, a way had to be found in which Jews could be incorporated into society.⁷⁷ However, at the same time Grégoire stuck to his conviction that only Catholicism could function as the right religion for the universal family as he was convinced that only this belief would lead to salvation and could

⁷¹ Ibidem, 132.

⁷² J.F. Brière, 'Abbe Gregoire and Haitian Independence', *Research in African Literatures* 35 (2004) 34.

⁷³ Grégoire, 136.

⁷⁴ W. Safran, 'State, Nation, National Identity, and Citizenship: France as a Test Case', *International Political Science Review* 12 (1991) 221.

⁷⁵ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 54.

⁷⁶ Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 240.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 78.

function as an “answer for the world’s problems”.⁷⁸ Concluding, it can be said that Grégoire’s aim to convert the Jews stemmed from his conviction that a universal society that adopted Christian customs and values was the best for the nation and everyone individual. His universalist notion carried the potential to both include and exclude people, depending on their willingness to be homogenized for their and the nation’s own good.

Grégoire tried to achieve his goal of a universal society applying the concept of regeneration to Jews. When he introduced this term into the debate about Jewish emancipation, it entailed the following elements. Regeneration was mainly a process of social and cultural revolution that would eventually lead to the assimilation of (underdeveloped) minorities to the general status quo established by the Catholic majority in France. The focus during this process would lie on an enlightened form of education that would be adhered to voluntarily. By following such an education, the oppressed groups would “naturally grow upright and embrace truth”.⁷⁹ It was thus important to transform the minds of the people first before improving their economic and social standards. For the Jews, regeneration implied a new professional orientation, as they would be retrained to be able to work in almost all sectors of the economy, especially trade and agriculture.⁸⁰ Moreover, they had to “cast off their history [...] since their ‘traditions’ were considered by definition retrograde”, also by Grégoire.⁸¹ Professional, religious and cultural reorientation of Jews would lead to “a new era unencumbered by the failings of the past”.⁸² It would also improve the Jews’ situation significantly. They would be included in the general society and, in so doing, they would become more happy and productive and would both be more useful for their country and inclined to love it.⁸³ With this, according to Grégoire, the question of the Metz Academy if there were any measures to render the Jews more happy and useful in France was answered satisfactorily.

By supporting the Jewish efforts of emancipation, Grégoire thus aimed at reaching a universalist society through the process of regeneration. How Grégoire’s Jewish protégées received his efforts and how Grégoire’s role in and motives for Jewish emancipation are assessed in recent scholarly literature, will be the topic of the next chapter.

⁷⁸ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 216.

⁷⁹ L.S. Lerner, ‘Beyond Grégoire: A Third Discourse on Jews and the French’, *Modern Judaism* 21 (2001) 208.

⁸⁰ Graetz, *The Jews in Nineteenth-Century France*, 71.

⁸¹ R. Schechter, ‘Translating the “Marseillaise”: Biblical Republicanism and the Emancipation of Jews in Revolutionary France’, *Past & Present* 143 (1994) 126.

⁸² J.R. Berkovitz, ‘The French Revolution and the Jews: Assessing the Cultural Impact’, *AJS Review* 20 (1995) 47.

⁸³ Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 122, 138, 177.

6. Assessment of Abbé Grégoire's Work and Motives

This last part of the study will explain the reactions to Grégoire's work on behalf of the Jews by Jewish contemporaries and recent scholars. The consequences of Jewish emancipation in 1791 cannot be discussed here, as this would go beyond the scope of this research. However, it can be said with certainty that Grégoire's goal of building a homogenous French Catholic society by regenerating and emancipating the Jews did not work out. Grégoire himself became increasingly aware of this fact during his lifetime. In 1791, before the Ashkenazim were emancipated, he already expressed his frustration with his protégées who, in his opinion, were way too stubborn in holding on to their own customs and values. He did not understand how the Ashkenazim could try to receive equal rights while keeping their distinct Jewish identity and blamed them for the delay in emancipation.⁸⁴ In Grégoire's declining years, his incomprehension aggravated substantially until he even uttered doubts about the Jews' general ability to regenerate and become like French Christians at all.⁸⁵

6.1 Reactions of contemporary Jews

The reactions of contemporary Jews to Grégoire's work was twofold. On the one hand, the Sephardim criticized Grégoire openly in a letter sent to him in August 1789. Their main annoyance regarding Grégoire was that he did not make a clear distinction between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, which constituted an offense in the eyes of the Sephardim. They did not want to be equated with the Ashkenazim as they enjoyed very different sets of rights and privileges and, consequently, expected very different things from emancipation.⁸⁶ Furthermore, they did not agree with Grégoire's concept of regeneration, particularly with the fact that he singled out specific groups of society and tried oblige them to change in the way he envisioned to be best. For the Sephardim, regeneration could only take place if the whole French nation was to be regenerated and not only some handpicked groups.⁸⁷

The Ashkenazim, on the other hand, were more careful with the stance they took towards Grégoire. For them, the main annoyance of Grégoire's attitude towards their community and its emancipation did not lie in his concept of regeneration, but in the image he outlined of an inherently degenerated faith. As the Ashkenazim were less integrated into French society than the Sephardim, they actually profited from Grégoire's conviction that they could regenerate and thus become like Christian Frenchmen in their social status. Therefore, they generally supported the concept of

⁸⁴ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 94.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, 205-209.

⁸⁶ Hermon-Belot, *L'Emancipation des Juifs en France*, 45-46.

⁸⁷ Graetz, *The Jews in Nineteenth-Century France*, 105.

regeneration. At the same time, however, Ashkenazim were genuinely attached to their faith and criticized the dark picture Grégoire had painted of Judaism in general.⁸⁸ Berr Isaac-Berr, the leader of the Ashkenazi Jews, indeed initially favored the other non-Jewish winner of the Metz contest as spokesperson for his fellows as his position seemed to be more compatible with Jewish demands.⁸⁹ However, the Ashkenazim knew that they were not in a position of society from which they could expect too much support for their demands. Inevitably, they accepted the position of Grégoire as they clung to every support they could get. Therefore, their attitude towards Grégoire sprung more from necessity than from a genuine belief in his emancipation program.

6.2 Evaluation of scholarly literature

In his *Essai*, Grégoire depicts himself as maybe not the most eloquent defender of the Jews but certainly the most zealous.⁹⁰ The image of the Abbé as a defender of the Jews was established during the French Revolution and has been anchored in the general public awareness since then. Recent academic literature, however, gives more differentiated analyses regarding his role and motives. One of the most recent and most extensive works on Abbé Grégoire is his biography by Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (2005). In her analysis of Grégoire's work, she focuses mainly on his legacy and the malleability of his ideology. According to her, Grégoire is such an interesting personality to study because he is still celebrated as an important symbol, but only for a limited part of his ideology. Sepinwall explains that there is a "lack of public consensus" about Grégoire and that he is widely contested.⁹¹ At the same time, she criticizes the selective way of discussing him in academic literature and national memory. While the positive sides of Grégoire are emphasized and remembered, the darker positions he held are forgotten way too easily.⁹² For example, Sepinwall is the only scholar who mentions that Grégoire's *Essai* was first rejected by the Metz Academy because of its inferior quality and that it was the only one of the three winning essays that had to be published by the Academy itself because Grégoire was not able to find another publisher for it.⁹³ No other source mentions Grégoire's victory in the contest under these rather unflattering circumstances. Consequently, Grégoire could enter into the collective memory as an early ally of Jews and other oppressed groups. His support for the Jews, the slaves and other minorities is emphasized without critically scrutinizing his motives and ultimate goals, which were, as has been shown in this research, rather dubious.

⁸⁸ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 206.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, 75.

⁹⁰ Grégoire, *Essay on the reformation of the Jews*, 238.

⁹¹ Sepinwall, *Making of Modern Universalism*, 231.

⁹² Ibidem, 232.

⁹³ Ibidem, 61-62.

Regarding the content of Grégoire's ideology, Sepinwall mainly criticizes his concept of regeneration that she finds too abstract. In her view, universalism and regeneration were "simultaneously inclusive and paternalistic" and particularly regeneration was a broad concept that could be applied to almost everything.⁹⁴ Furthermore, she puts Grégoire's efforts on behalf of the Jews in the broader context of his work and concludes that Jewish emancipation was only a minor part of his concerted struggle for promoting the Catholic Church. Thus, Grégoire is better placed in an apologetic tradition in favor of Catholicism than oversimplifying his role and presenting him as emancipator of the French Jews.⁹⁵

In his article 'Beyond Grégoire: A Third Discourse on Jews and the French' (2001), Lawrence Scott Lerner agrees with Sepinwall in many aspects. He describes three different discourses regarding Jewish emancipation that existed during the French Revolution. According to him, Grégoire was the most outspoken representative of the first discourse that favored "radical assimilationism (*sic*)" of the Jews.⁹⁶ Grégoire combined a "combination of freedom and expectation, of the right to remain Jewish along with the expectation that one would not".⁹⁷ Because Grégoire favored religious freedom, his attitude could almost be called modern. However, the unique twist he gave to his ideology, namely aiming at ultimate conversion of Jews, disqualifies him as being grouped with contemporary thinkers.⁹⁸ According to Lerner, Grégoire's importance lies in foreshadowing position that would become common over the next decades as Jews more actively tried to find their place within French society and the topic of Jewish emancipation and the conditions for it, became more pressing.

Sepinwall, Lerner and Ruth Necheles, whose analysis of Grégoire's practical contribution has already been discussed, are some of the most recent and most outspoken scholars to assess Grégoire's general importance for Jewish emancipation. When combining their three accounts, an image of Grégoire arises that presents him as a more ambivalent actor than he is usually perceived. Older sources that have been studied for this research often present a slightly different picture of Grégoire, which is generally more favorable to him. For example, Hersch wrote a whole eulogy on him in 1907 wherein he presents Grégoire as a Jewish saint who abandoned the Church to restlessly work for Jewish emancipation and who was thus seen as a traitor by his fellow clerics.⁹⁹ These are, of course, great exaggerations of Grégoire's efforts that distort an objective view on him; nevertheless, this account certainly helped to shape his public image. Ravitch gives another distorted but less radical image of Grégoire in 1967. He claims that Grégoire initially had secular reasons for supporting

⁹⁴ Ibidem, 36, 165.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, 94, 165, 231.

⁹⁶ Lerner, 'Beyond Grégoire', 210.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, 209.

⁹⁸ Ibidem, 202.

⁹⁹ Hersch, 'The French Revolution and the Emancipation of the Jews', 549.

the emancipation of the Jews and that his religious grounds and the goal of conversion only developed after 1788.¹⁰⁰ However, Grégoire's *Essai*, written in 1785 and published in 1788, mentions explicitly the hope of Jewish conversion to Catholicism, which either shows that Ravitch did not read the *Essai* closely or that he did not take notice of Grégoire's remarks hinting towards the desired conversion. Berkovitz, in 1995, emphasizes another aspect of Grégoire's ideology, namely the way in which he envisioned the ultimate conversion of the Jews. According to him, Grégoire did not actively missionize the Jews by applying a "direct, aggressive policy", which seems to imply another scholarly defense of Grégoire's more positive image.¹⁰¹ A more critical evaluation of Grégoire stems from Schechter (1994) who argues that there was only one element that distinguished Grégoire from "the most zealous anti-Semites" and that was the fact that Grégoire did not attribute the degenerated characteristics of Jews as inherent to their people.¹⁰² In fact, Grégoire never spoke in terms of race but always in terms of nations and people and in the most benevolent cases, he referred to the universal human family.

From this study follows that Grégoire was a controversial figure, equally admired and condemned, both during his life and afterwards. His legacy threatens to overshadow the complexity of his ideology, his motives regarding the emancipation of Jews and his attitude towards them. It is important, however, that his role regarding Jewish emancipation is analyzed with regard to the whole body of his convictions, even if this means that his almost symbolic status as a defender of Jewish equality and fighter for oppressed groups in general has to be dismantled. Grégoire was certainly not an anti-Semite in terms of his times, even when some of his remarks come across as utterly wrong today. He was a true believer, and, as such, inclined to the creation of a better world in that all people would ultimately find salvation. As long as he saw Jewish emancipation as a way to reach this better world, he was greatly committed to the task. However, he was equally quick in abandoning his protégées, at least in public, when his greater goal of Church reform was in danger. Grégoire can be differentiated from his contemporaries in the way he blamed the Christians for the destiny and current situation of the Jews and his conviction that there was nothing inherently degenerated about Jews in general. A main fallacy that Grégoire committed was to think that Jews could be regenerated in his sense of the word and that they would eagerly abandon their faith in favor of Christianity. The inequality between religions that was intertwined with Grégoire's whole ideology stems from his genuine belief of the superiority of the Catholic faith. All in all, Grégoire's reputation as the ultimate defender of the Jews is at least questionable and should be discussed by examining all parts of his work and attitude. The Abbé Grégoire must be assessed in his totality to do

¹⁰⁰ Ravitch, 'Liberalism, Catholicism, and the Abbé Grégoire', 432.

¹⁰¹ Berkovitz, 'The French Revolution and the Jews', 45.

¹⁰² Schechter, 'Translating the "Marseillaise"', 119.

him and his visions justice. Picking parts of his ideology and omitting others gives a distorted image and leaves the most interesting issues unanalyzed.

7. Conclusion

The Abbé Grégoire had a colorful life. He developed early into a devout cleric who, nevertheless, was open for new influences as for example enlightened ideas. He combined seemingly contradictory concepts into a coherent ideology and worked hard to achieve his ambitious goals. During the French Revolution, he was playing an important part as a politician, always defending his vision of a French republic. His outspokenness and radical ideas haunted him after the Revolution when a new monarchy was established. Grégoire was forced to retreat into privacy, from where he continued to lobby for his goals until his death in 1831.

One of the most prominent discussions during Grégoire's lifetime was the issue of Jewish emancipation. Neither Sephardim nor Ashkenazim living in France were equal to Christian Frenchmen. Grégoire's practical contribution to this topic included his writings and his work in the National Assembly. However, due to the difficult circumstance under which Grégoire had to operate, this contribution was limited and not essential for emancipation, which was achieved in 1791. At that time, Grégoire had already abandoned the topic not to endanger his main goal of Church reform.

However, Grégoire's contribution to emancipation was important regarding his ideology. He developed the most prominent and consistent attitude towards Jewish emancipation that would also foreshadow the discussion regarding emancipation in the following decades. Grégoire was convinced of the degenerated character of Jews. However, this was the result of centuries of oppression for which Christians had to be blamed. Grégoire's understanding of emancipation entailed granting the same civil rights for Jews. While they were free to retain their faith in Judaism, different measures would be taken to bring them in line with the French Christians. Catholicism would be accepted as the only public religion and Jews would be obliged to obtain a Christian education. The different measures Grégoire envisioned to be taken to emancipate Jews would ultimately lead to the Jews' conversion to Catholicism.

Grégoire was convinced of the superiority of the Catholic faith and that the Jews would realize that conversion would entail a significant improvement in their lives. By regenerating the Jews, thus by bringing them in line with the Christians, they would quickly be convinced that conversion would be the best for them. Regeneration and emancipation of Jews was a means by which Grégoire wanted to achieve his ultimate goal, namely the establishment of a homogenous Catholic French society. The motives for his universalist goals were driven by pragmatic and religious reasons. On the one hand, a universal society would strengthen the French nation-state; on the other hand, all

human beings were essentially the same and had to be able to enjoy the best Catholic rights.

While the Sephardi Jews distanced themselves early in the debate from Grégoire's point of view, the Ashkenazi were more careful in their criticism as they depended on Grégoire. He was one of the few people who supported Jewish emancipation at all and, therefore, the Ashkenazim cooperated with him despite his ulterior motives of conversion. They agreed to the concept of regeneration to present themselves as able to participate in French society as equal members. Their main critique of Grégoire's ideology lay in the negative picture he painted of Judaism, which he did not take seriously.

In the general memory and less recent academic works, the image of Abbé Grégoire is idealized. He is presented as supporter, defender and even liberator of French Jews, while his actual contribution to emancipation does not justify this evaluation. More recent research on the topic, however, relativizes this image. Sepinwall, Lerner and Necheles all argue that Grégoire's support for Jewish emancipation has to be assessed more critically. It is of particular importance that also the downsides of his work and ideology are being analyzed to come to a satisfying and correct evaluation of his efforts. To conclude, the Abbé Grégoire did play an important role in the emancipation of the Jews. His practical contribution was indirect and limited, however, his ideology had lasting impact. To say that he was essential for Jewish emancipation is an exaggeration that cannot be verified based on the literature studied for this research. Furthermore, Grégoire's motives for supporting Jewish emancipation were more ambivalent than it is usually acknowledged. Ultimate conversion to the Catholic faith was an inherent part of his ideas and must not be ignored.

As no historical research can ever be conclusive, there are also some limitations of the present study that should be mentioned. First, Grégoire's ideology was not static but developed and changed during his lifetime. His changing attitude towards Jews could only be hinted at and it would be interesting to examine his ideology as a process more closely. Second, Grégoire's ideas for Church reform and the general world order he envisioned as a result could only be summarized. It is interesting to what extent the cleric Grégoire was influenced by the Enlightenment and how his idea of an enlightened religion shaped his behavior towards the oppressed groups he cared for. Third, this research only focused on Grégoire's work for one oppressed group. However, the Abbé is also known as a defender of the abolition of slavery. It would be highly interesting to critically examine his support for slaves as has been done with his support for the Jews and collate the results. A further study in this regard could help to scrutinize the results of the present study and would offer another new perspective on the dubious legacy of Grégoire that is still partly maintained today.

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