Grégoire and the Egalitarian Movement

Ruth F. Necheles

In 1787, at the outset of Henri-Baptiste Grégoire's political career, the word "equality" had little practical meaning because prerevolutionary European society consisted of numerous classes, each possessing its separate rights, privileges, and disadvantages. But some groups—Jews, Africans, and American Indians, for example—were less equal than others. Justifying discrimination on cultural grounds, eighteenth-century men defined their civilization in religious rather than strictly ethnic terms, claiming that pure Christianity surpassed any other moral system. Such people as Jews, who later would be discriminated against on racial grounds, were granted the same status as their Christian counterparts if they were willing to join the dominant faith. Prejudice based on the Jews' supposed racial characteristics developed only in those regions where a significant number converted to Christianity.

Europeans who ventured outside their continent confronted an entirely new problem, and they responded by developing racist attitudes. Although Negro and Indian cultural inferiority appeared obvious, the colonists were uncertain about the mixed offspring produced by intercourse with African slaves. The several European nations assigned different roles to the mulattoes; King Louis XIV's Code Noir, for example, treated them as native Frenchmen. But the planters in the colonies steadfastly refused their children the same opportunity to assimilate that was offered to the Jews at home, and throughout the eighteenth century placed increasing restrictions on the mulattoes.
Without the Revolution, discrimination against Jews and mulattoes might have remained unquestioned for several more decades. But the opening of the Estates General in May 1789 made their status a national issue because, of all native-born Frenchmen, only Jews and mulattoes were denied representation in the assembly. On the surface, the mulatto and Jewish questions seemed dissimilar. In the one case discrimination rested on ancient religious antipathies, reinforced by the unpopular economic role played by the northeastern Jews. In the other, discrimination against mulattoes appeared essential in order to preserve a racially defined caste system. But the connection between the two cases was obvious to the spokesman for France's egalitarian movement, the radical Abbé Grégoire.

As an eighteenth-century cleric, Grégoire had been trained in Enlightenment as well as in Roman Catholic ideology. Combining the two traditions, he hoped to pave the way for a universal society of men, all of whom would believe in a reformed, revitalized Christianity, share the same rights and duties, and be divided for convenience's sake into self-contained national states. Realizing that this goal was utopian, he worked to create in France the foundations upon which this social order might eventually spread to other nations. As far as he was concerned, the Revolution had to reform the Roman Catholic church and enact a code of civil and social rights that would apply to all residents of the French empire.

Racial equality was never more than one aspect of Grégoire's program, and at first he discarded arguments concerning racial inequality as outdated. "I swear," he wrote in December 1789, "that I am a bit ashamed to fight such an objection at the end of the eighteenth century." Although he refrained from discussing anti-Semitism as a racial issue, the religious and political assumptions underlying his early arguments for Jewish emancipation served as a foundation for his subsequent anti-racist campaign, and they merit some attention here.

God, according to Grégoire, created all men free and equal. Even if the Jewish people had earned God's disfavor for the crime of deicide, vengeance belonged to God alone; He had not delegated its exercise to secular rulers. Indeed, Grégoire assumed that God eventually intended to save the Jews by permitting them to become Christians.

Grégoire believed that the Jews in northeastern France were not yet ready to accept Christianity because the conditions under which most of them lived during the eighteenth century rendered them incapable of making any reasonable decisions. Probably they would accept Roman Catholicism only in order to escape the tyrannical laws that condemned them to a life of poverty. Once Jews were freely admitted into French society, given a rational education, and permitted to attain a decent standard of living, Grégoire assumed they would readily recognize the truths embodied in Christianity.

Grégoire had secular as well as religious reasons for wishing to free the Jews. According to the economic ideas of his day, the northeastern Jews' concentration on money-lending and peddling caused serious hardships to their Christian countrymen. Ignoring the numerous restrictions which so channeled the Jews' activities, anti-Semitic writers accused them of deliberately impoverishing the peasants. Grégoire blamed the Christians, however. "Look at our work," he admonished his readers. "In [the Jews'] place we would have been the same—perhaps worse," and he advised the anti-Semites, "let he who among you is without sin cast the first stone.

Jews were not innately wicked, Grégoire asserted. Relegating that concept "to the class of absurd and desolate hypotheses," he believed that man's character was "in large part" formed by circumstances. With typical Enlightenment optimism, he insisted that such people as Jews, who displayed antisocial qualities, might be redeemed by changing their environment. "Virtue and talents," he claimed, "are the normal fruit of liberty." Thus integration was the best solution to the Jewish problem, and he urged their immediate dispersal throughout the French countryside.

Grégoire's prerevolutionary recommendations for Jewish reform required rigorous supervision over their daily lives. Along with other revolutionaries, he thought that people might have to
be forced to be free. But, he cautioned, "national character cannot be changed like a military uniform."13 As the Revolution progressed, he became less interested in imposing reforms on the Jews and instead asserted their right to develop their own institutions. He encouraged his Jewish friends to modify their ritual so that they might mingle with Christians, and he wholeheartedly approved the assimilationist program devised by the 1806 sanhedrin.14

Just as Grégoire at first had failed to recommend complete liberation for the Jews, so for several years he hesitated to advocate black emancipation. As late as 1791 he reportedly said that immediate abolition would have the same effect as "kicking a pregnant woman to make her give birth sooner."15 Since the Negro slaves had been excluded from the civilizing influence of French Christian culture, they would not know what to do with their freedom, and they would have to undergo a transitional period of improved treatment and education before slavery could be abolished.

Yet Grégoire could see no such practical reasons for denying freedom to West Indian mulattoes. Since the planters justified disenfranchising their children on racial grounds, their anti-mulatto polemics forced Grégoire to recognize racism as a current issue. Nonetheless, he refused to regard it as a universal phenomenon, and throughout the Revolution he casually dismissed it as the product of pride and greed.16 "Justice, good sense, and policy,"17 he insisted, required mulatto enfranchisement because, he added, "national security is based on justice, the striving of all spirits toward the same goal, and the unity of [all] interests."18

Failing to respond systematically to the planters’ arguments, during the first years of the Revolution Grégoire discussed only incidental aspects of racism. For example, he denied that racial mixture produced an inferior population and favored intermarriage because he thought it would create a stronger nation. Regarding the mulattoes as a stabilizing element in colonial society, he urged the planters to marry their black concubines.19 He certainly did not believe that the mulattoes would necessarily ally with their African relatives against their white fathers.

In part at least as a result of Grégoire’s propaganda and political maneuvers, mulattoes achieved civil equality in 1791. Although he steadfastly denied that slavery could be justified on racial grounds, he paid little attention to the blacks until 1793, when he suddenly denounced "the nobility of the skin" and asked the National Convention to apply "the principles of equality to our brothers in the colonies, who do not differ from us in any way besides color."20 Still, he neglected to explain how the intervening two years had prepared the blacks for liberation.21

When the National Convention formally abolished slavery in February 1794, Grégoire’s egalitarian activities took on a new form. Now for the first time he seriously confronted the problems involved in creating an egalitarian colonial society. His ideas concerning economics were—to be charitable—anachronistic, and he wisely avoided such questions. Instead, he helped to found the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies. But he took only a minor part in this society’s proceedings because he realized that its goal—to investigate the economic, medical, and scientific problems peculiar to the colonies—lay beyond his talents.22

Moral and educational questions were Grégoire’s forte, and he hoped to reconstruct West Indian religious and academic institutions shattered by five years of civil war. Convinced that political reforms were useless unless Christianity helped to mold a virtuous citizenry, he was particularly anxious to create a revolutionary or so-called Constitutional church for the colonies.

Grégoire expected a revitalized church to play a significant role in all aspects of colonial life. According to him, republican priests would carry out the plans devised by the Société des Amis des Noirs. They would establish schools for illiterate blacks, where they would teach the rights and obligations of French citizens as well as the traditional subjects.23 He also assumed that his priests would provide the colonies with medical care and charity.

Grégoire could not send a sufficient number of priests to the West Indies because many French parishes had fallen vacant during the preceding five years, and the metropolitan church could spare only a few clerics. Nonetheless, he developed a long range plan for providing the colonies with a ministry by creating a Constitutional hierarchy for the Caribbean.24

According to Grégoire, Constitutional bishops would perform several functions, the most important of which would be to prepare
and ordain a black and mulatto ministry. In Grégoire's mind, nothing would so strikingly demonstrate the equality of all men before God as black priests performing the sacraments. Ultimately, he assumed, this black ministry would become autonomous, and he dreamed of the day when a bishop of African descent would preside over the West Indian church.

Grégoire sent only one bishop and a few missionaries to Saint-Domingue before Napoleon reimposed slavery in 1802. Thus his ambitious religious program came no closer to realization than did the various schemes for economic reform devised by the Société des Amis des Noirs. But although military conditions and governmental apathy prevented him from implementing his plans, Grégoire did recognize and try to resolve problems that most eighteenth-century egalitarians ignored.

Excluded from political influence by Napoleon's increasingly authoritarian government, Grégoire turned to a serious examination of Negro problems. Still confused about the causes of racism, after 1802 he at least recognized their significance. Some of his other attitudes had also been modified by his revolutionary experiences. For example, he reassessed the relationship between innate talents and environment, attributing to genetics a larger role than he had previously. Still, he thought that inherited characteristics would only emerge under favorable circumstances, and he compared the environment to a block of steel against which the flintstone strikes, releasing the spark of genius.

Genius was the subject of one of Grégoire's most influential books, his Littérature des Nègres, which he published in 1808. Taking as his theme the assertion that Negroes were as capable as whites of producing civilized works, he asked why they had failed to do so. He approached this question in several ways, but his theoretical argument is the most interesting.

By 1808 Grégoire had sufficient leisure to read a considerable amount of pseudo-scientific racial literature, but the biologists' definition of and criteria for racial distinctions did not convince him. "How can they agree with regard to the consequences when they disagree concerning the anatomical facts which ought to serve as their basis?" he queried.

Still Grégoire confused race, species, and nation. He accepted the vague concept "national character," which he defined as "those diversities hereditarily transmitted, ... which are the effect of climate, of education, of dietetic regimes, or of habit ..." According to him, nature (in the eighteenth-century sense of a vague, impersonal force) had created a continuum of characteristics which led to infinite variations rather than to two or three clearly distinct racial patterns. Indeed, he insisted, all but one contemporary scientist found "in the human race, the unity of the primitive type." Thus, he concluded, "notwithstanding the different shades of the colour of the skin ... the organization is the same; [and the various races] constitute under a different coloured skin, our identical species."

Since Africans and Europeans shared the same physiological features, racial differences could not explain their divergent cultures. Grégoire had always believed the physical and social environment to be the determining factor for developing civilization, which he defined as the ability to create mechanical arts and crafts as well as complex political structures and fine arts. Using travelers' reports, he proved to his own satisfaction that interior Africa had cities, organized governments, sophisticated diplomatic relations, moral religions, and so forth. That the Africans had not progressed further could be attributed to an overly favorable climate which made survival too simple and did not stimulate them to invent advanced technology. "Nature," he commented, "is there prodigal of her riches."

By the eighteenth century, numerous Africans had been transported to the more challenging environment of the new world, where, willingly or not, they were encouraged by example and forced by hardship to adopt European culture and technology. Slavery, which placed the black "in the scale of beings between man and the brute," hindered rather than assisted assimilation, and Grégoire could find no justification for continuing this immoral institution. Indeed, at the end of his Littérature des Nègres he predicted that technological developments soon would make slavery obsolete.

The assumption upon which Grégoire's work rested—that men could be improved through proper educational, social, and religious
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institutions—was essentially optimistic. But by 1808 he took an increasingly pessimistic view of European society. Once he had served as spokesman for French revolutionary nationalism; but now that France had submitted to an emperor, he could no longer believe in her destiny to reform the world. Regarding France as too corrupt to govern colonies, and recognizing that various nationalities had the right to develop their own culture and institutions, he expected the new world to create a way of life that would correct the ills of the old.

Grégoire searched among the several candidates for the utopia of the Western Hemisphere. He was most interested in Haiti, where blacks not only had succeeded in gaining their freedom, but in 1804 had won independence from European domination. Although they still had many readjustments to make, Grégoire thought that “a good education, good laws, a free regime, and above all, religious principles” would make of the former slaves “men whom perhaps the masters would be unworthy of serving.” The Haitian republic,” he wrote, “by the mere fact of its existence, perhaps will have a great influence on the destiny of Africans in the New World.” If blacks were to prove their abilities anywhere, this would be the place.

Between the declaration of Haitian independence and the collapse of the Napoleonic empire in 1814, Grégoire could do nothing for Haiti. When peace finally came, the island again faced the serious tasks of rebuilding its economic, educational, and political institutions, even while it fended off the French landowners’ attempts to reconquer the lost colony. Although concerned about the planters’ influence under the restored monarchy, Grégoire regarded racial prejudice as the greater threat to Haitian independence.

Believing that a viable state in Haiti would best refute racist arguments, Grégoire advised the government on various religious, moral, and social problems. The several epistles he wrote between 1816 and 1827 demonstrate his willingness to be flexible and his attempts to understand the difficulties of a former slave society. He knew far too little about West Indian conditions, however, and he proposed creating an anachronistic utopia made up of independent yeoman farmers.

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Toward the end of his life, Grégoire became as disillusioned with the Western Hemisphere as he was with Europe. Although the new republics had abolished the traditional aristocracy of parchments, they all, including Haiti, had retained a racial aristocracy in one guise or another.

Haiti’s caste system based on color forced Grégoire to recognize racism as a universal phenomenon, and in his last work on egalitarian questions, his Noblesse de la peau, he tried to discover the causes of and cure for this prejudice. No longer believing in man’s essential goodness, he finally realized that racism could be traced to man’s most destructive impulses. But once again he failed to pursue his more interesting points and instead indulged in a moralistic tirade against those who sought to degrade entire classes of men for their own egotistical purposes. Thus, he glossed over the role played by sexual passions, and, although he noted the connection between racism and material greed, he dismissed economic motivation as unimportant—“as if such calculations could balance justice and defec the rigor of principles . . . ,” he scoffed. He was pessimistic about the future, because, according to him, “to extirpate vanity grafted on avarice is an enterprise that far exceeds human forces.” Only religious values could combat such ingrained evils, and so far the Roman Catholic church had failed to take a stand against racism.

Grégoire’s Noblesse de la peau shows several valuable flashes of insight, which his unsystematic mind could not fully develop. Increasing ill-health as well as disillusionment with nineteenth-century society discouraged him from further pursuing his anti-racist campaign. Nonetheless, this book, along with his earlier Littérature des Nègres, raises issues that are current today.

In 1831, when Grégoire died, the major racist controversies still lay in the future. His career had spanned three eras in the history of the egalitarian movement. In his early days, although prejudice founded on religious differences had largely declined in importance, it still played a role in the revolutionary debates on enfranchising Protestants and Jews.

More important to the Revolution and the nineteenth century were the rising claims of xenophobic cultural nationalism. Not only Jews, but other ethnic groups suffered from the revolutionaries’ at-
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tempts to impose a uniform culture within the nation's boundaries. Although Grégoire remained a fervent missionary for French culture through 1802, he thought that men should first be admitted into society and then gradually be encouraged to adopt its mores. He no more believed in using violence to spread language and culture than he had advocated coercive religious proselytization.

Grégoire did not regard the third form of inequality—race—as significant until after his revolutionary career had ended. Eventually he recognized that it was potentially more dangerous because one could never become white as one could convert to Christianity or to Francophonism.

Moving through three eras as he did, Grégoire managed to escape many of the prejudices and assumptions shared by his contemporaries. But his egalitarianism was not perfect, as indeed no one's can be. Tolerant as he was in comparison with his colleagues, he nonetheless wanted to make Jews and West Indian mulattoes resemble as closely as possible Christian Frenchmen. With all his sympathy for the sufferings of Jews and blacks, he thought himself better able than they to judge which traditional religious and social institutions they should retain and which they should modify. Although he finally recognized the Jews' right to devise their own reform ritual, his cultural imperialism antagonized his friends in Haiti and contributed to his abrupt break in relations with the island in 1827.  

Grégoire's unconscious acceptance of some of the assumptions upon which racism rested was even more important than his cultural imperialism. Thus he failed to develop a clear definition of the word "race," confused the concept of "race" and "nation," and proclaimed the virtue of "racial mixture" in his writings on both Jews and mulattoes. Resting on such vague terminology, his pamphlets could not refute the equally vague and specious statements made by later biological racists.

But Grégoire was writing for a late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century audience, and his pride and ignorance as a Christian European were shared by his readers. Christian-based reasoning, as shown by the nineteenth-century American abolition controversy, was the most powerful weapon available to him. If his writings

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found only a small audience, the fault lies with the course of revolutionary and Restoration politics. Save for the first two years of the Revolution, Grégoire had no organized body behind him, and when he embarked on the most constructive phase of his program—his attempt to create a Constitutional church in the West Indies—he was a "tainted outsider" to whom neither the orthodox Roman Catholic church nor the fervently anti-Catholic officials under the Directory would listen. Lacking the kind of support provided by the successive English abolition societies, Grégoire was one voice in a wilderness of apathy, serving as a conscience for enlightened Europe, commanding the admiration and respect of many, but, unfortunately, followed by only a very few.

NOTES

1. Zosa Szajkowski asserts that "had the Revolution of 1789 not come Jewish emancipation might not have been realized till a much, much later date" (Jews and the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848 [New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970], p. xviii).
2. For details on and references to Grégoire's career, see Ruth F. Necheles, The Abbé Grégoire, 1787–1831: The Odyssey of an Egalitarian (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co., [1971]).
5. Here Grégoire uses the words "race" and "nation" interchangeably (Essai, pp. 15–16).
7. Essai, pp. 130–31. He thought that the conversion of the Jews might require miraculous intervention by God (letter to Scipione d'Ricci, 18 August 1808, Florence state archives).
9. Essai, p. 71. This same sentence, variously worded, also appears on pp. 37, 43–44, 194, and 230 n.
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14. Letters to Joel Barlow, 26 October 1807 and 1 September 1808, Harvard AM 1648 (606) and (603); Grégoire, Observations nouvelles sur les Juifs, et spécialement sur ceux d'Amsterdam, et de Francfort; par M. Grégoire, ancien évêque de Blois, Sénateur, etc. (n.p., [1807]), p. 4.

15. Thomas Millet to Grégoire, open letter in Annales politiques et littéraires, 13 May 1791, p. 399.


18. Moniteur, réimpression, 16 May 1791, p. 400.

19. Mémoire, pp. 38–39, and Essay, pp. 165, 154. Judeo-Christian intermarriage was one of the few points on which Napoleon and Grégoire agreed, although for different reasons. Napoleon believed that after a few generations "Jewish blood would cease to have a particular character" (memorandum for Champagne, 29 November 1806, in Correspondance de Napoléon Ier publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III, XIII [Paris: Henri Plon, 1963], 584). See also Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860. Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises, XXVI (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Administratives et Chémins de Fer, 1887), 70 (hereafter, AP), and Grégoire, De la noblesse de la peau ou du préjugé des blancs contre la couleur des Africains et celle de leurs descendants noirs et sangs-mêlés (Paris: Baudouin Frères, 1826), p. 46.

20. AP, LXXVI, 57.

21. Journal du citoyen, 1 prairial 6 (20 May 1798), pp. 481–82, for example. Their papers are in the Bibliothèque de Port-Royal, carton TUVWXZ (hereafter BPR).


23. Jean-Antoine Maudru, Constitutional bishop of Saint-Dié, wanted to establish a seminary for the eastern departments, but his efforts failed; see Grappin to Grégoire, 12 thermidor 6 (30 July 1798), BPR, CD.


25. Winthrop Jordan discusses the failure of Anglo-American abolitionists to devise post-emancipation programs for the blacks: White over
Le Cat and the Physiology of Negroes

G. S. Rousseau

The origin of Negroes,” Ephraim Chambers wrote in the 1728 Cyclopaedia, “and the cause of that remarkable difference in complexion from the rest of mankind, has much perplexed the naturalists; nor has anything satisfactory been yet offered on that hand.” A generation later, in the 1750’s, this was still true, although Claude Nicolas Le Cat was to influence considerably the picture. It is hard to know if Chambers, no scientist or medical man, would have been at all impressed by Le Cat’s theories. But if he had heard or read them, he might have modified somewhat his statement in the Cyclopaedia.

From the vantage of the history of science, Le Cat’s entire career, quite unsurveyed, incidentally, is as exciting as that part of it represented by his contribution to the age-old debate about the color of negro skin, its origins and history, from the beginning of man to the eighteenth century. Born in 1700 and dead by 1768, Le Cat was the chief physician and surgeon of the Hôtel-Dieu, the leading hospital in Rouen, a member of many French and foreign scientific societies, and the author of over a dozen medical treatises. In 1762 he retired from his hospital post, and during his remaining seven years wrote most of the books that utilize his researches, observations, and reading of over fifty years.¹

His scientific contribution to the race argument has either been neglected or thought so insignificant until now that one looks in vain for his name in most modern reference books in the history of science and medicine as well as in encyclopaedias and dictionaries of biography. And yet, careful scrutiny of his works reveals that