

## *The Abbé Grégoire and the Atlantic Republic of Letters*

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**I**N 1806 THE FRENCH revolutionary and priest Henri Grégoire wrote to his American friends Ruth and Joel Barlow, who had formerly lived in Paris, of his eternal friendship for them: 'Friendship traverses the seas and we are often in spirit in Washington City. Oh, if you only knew how many times and with what tender emotion we speak of you and Mr. Barlow! Why are you so far away? Will the heavens allow us to see you again?'<sup>1</sup>

Little did he guess that within a few years, a poem would tear his friendship with the Barlows apart. In 1807 Barlow published his opus *The Columbiad*, and Grégoire was stunned by its contents. The poem's republicanism did not offend Grégoire, one of the earliest French revolutionaries to support eliminating the monarchy. Nor did its abolitionist message, since opposition to slavery had long united the two men. Nor was Grégoire bothered in the least by the poem's vision of an America on the rise, ready to overtake Europe. On the contrary, by the early nineteenth century, Grégoire was dismayed by the fate of republicanism in Europe and pinned many of his hopes for the future of humanity on the New World. One passage in the poem, however—in which

1. Grégoire to Ruth Barlow, August 17, 1806, Barlow Papers, bMS AM 1448, Houghton Library, Harvard University, fol. 605. Cited by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

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Barlow attacked the Catholic Church—sparked a rift that would never heal.

Atlantic friendships were particularly important for Grégoire in the early nineteenth century because of his disillusionment with a France returned to monarchy. A Catholic priest and active Jacobin, Grégoire had been elated by the progress of the French Revolution; he saw its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity as identical to those of the Gospels. Radical dechristianization ultimately disillusioned him, however—and the ascent of Napoleon and the return of the Bourbons would further cement his frustration with his homeland. Unlike the majority of other former revolutionaries, who abandoned their republican hopes, Grégoire passionately retained his. He hoped, however, for the emergence of a more moderate, and religiously and racially plural, republicanism, which could blossom in the New World and then be reimported to Europe.

To Grégoire, the Americas represented a world of uncorrupted possibilities. He particularly admired the United States, which had sparked the modern republican trend, and Haiti, where people of African descent had overthrown slavery. He also supported would-be republicans in Latin America. He knew, however, that a new republic was a shaky proposition; many revolutions had crumbled, turning back to monarchy or toward military dictators. For Grégoire, Americans' ability to avoid these pitfalls would be crucial to the future of republicanism worldwide. As a veteran of the French Revolution's failure, Grégoire felt he had valuable lessons to impart. From the late 1790s until his death in 1831, he corresponded with a varied set of New World residents, from North American and Haitian statesmen to Mexican priests. He also established personal relationships with New World republicans who visited him in Paris.

Grégoire was thus an important focal point in an Atlantic republican republic of letters, even without leaving Europe. This network blossomed in the early nineteenth century, as republicans around the Atlantic eagerly sought relationships with one another. Nevertheless, the Atlantic republic of letters was fragile and sometimes contentious. In practical terms, transoceanic correspondence



was threatened by the Napoleonic Wars, and letter-writers could go years without knowing whether a correspondent was irate over something they had written, or whether letters were simply not getting through. More importantly, views of republicanism around the Atlantic were not always the same, and Grégoire would discover that New World republicans were not always as eager to correspond with him as he was with them. His disagreements with them often centered on two topics: slavery and religion. His dealings with Thomas Jefferson—and his disagreement with Joel Barlow over the *Columbiad*—would be emblematic of his admiration for and frustration with American republicans. Similarly, the rise and fall of his relations with Haitian leaders reveal the tensions inherent in Atlantic relationships in which each party had separate needs and interests.

Grégoire monitored republican movements in Latin America with a great deal of interest. He had personal relationships with figures in Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, and Brazil, and was excited about the progress of Latin American colonies toward independence. As an 1823 review he wrote in the *Revue encyclopédique* indicates, Grégoire very much supported the efforts of Simon Bolívar to break free of Spain and create an independent Gran Colombia. As he argued passionately in the review, Spain should have ‘recognized the independence of its American colonies, which have an imprescriptible right to this independence, having reached, so to speak, their political puberty.’ He argued that those in Europe must not ignore others half a world away: ‘all peoples must, more than ever, recognize that solidarity requires them to make a sweet exchange of affection with each other, to extend fraternal helping hands to one another.’<sup>2</sup>

2. [Grégoire], ‘Notice critique sur l’ouvrage: La Bibliotheca columbiana,’ *Revue encyclopédique* 18 (avril 1823): 107–8. For additional discussion of and references on Grégoire’s interest in Latin America and the Americas in general, see Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), esp. ch. 7 from which some of the material in this essay is drawn (permission granted by the Regents of the University of California/University of California Press).

Grégoire also kept an eye on the status of Catholicism in Latin America, monitoring writings in Mexico for example, to see if conservative or Gallican (republican-leaning) Catholics would predominate. He was particularly worried about the 'masses of obscene and impious books' being sent to Mexico by other Frenchmen, which 'can only corrupt minds and hearts.' In addition, he tried to remain up-to-date on the status of indigenous peoples in Spanish America. He blasted Spain for not letting Amerindians 'develop their natural talents' and denounced Spanish missionaries for not permitting the ordination of indigenous priests.<sup>3</sup>

Most importantly, Grégoire monitored the progress of the abolitionist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean and hoped that countries in these regions would soon 'occupy themselves seriously with freeing the slaves.' He tracked the attempts of the newly established republic of Colombia to abolish slavery and approved of them heartily as a way of heading off violence: 'the measures taken by the republic of Colombia are very wise. Justice and prudence dictated them. May Heaven grant that the same will happen elsewhere, in order to avoid the deplorable catastrophes which, sooner or later, will arise from prolonging the tyranny against Africans.'<sup>4</sup>

Grégoire's interest in Latin America was reciprocated, and he had a steady stream of visitors. For example, when Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, a central figure in the Mexican independence movement, escaped Spanish imprisonment in 1801, he fled to France, where Grégoire welcomed him and became his 'French mentor.' Other founders of Mexico invoked Grégoire's work as they sought to reconcile the competing claims of church and state.<sup>5</sup>

3. [Grégoire], 'Notice critique sur l'ouvrage: La Bibliotheca columbiana,' 108; and Grégoire to [Trognon], September 30, 1825, Bibliothèque Abbé-Grégoire, Blois, France, ms. 870.

4. Grégoire to Verplanck, May 17, 1823, New-York Historical Society, Gulian Verplanck Papers, Box #4, Folder G, fol. 69, p. 2; see also Grégoire to Thomas Clarkson, May 13, 1823, Clarkson Papers, CN 103, Henry Huntington Library.

5. D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492-1867* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 585-90; and letters



Grégoire's writings could spark controversy, though, among Latin American writers. His *Apologie de Barthélemy de Las-Casas*—on the famous sixteenth-century defender of Amerindians—was one of his most divisive works. Las Casas had been tarnished by accusations that he had sparked the launch of the African slave trade by urging that African labor replace that of Amerindians. Grégoire vigorously contested this charge, insisting that the Spanish priest was one of the few Catholic heroes of the antislavery movement. Many Latin American intellectuals shared Grégoire's admiration of Las Casas and were sympathetic to the abbé's effort to rehabilitate him. Others, however, took offense at Grégoire's impugning of certain Spanish historians while trying to defend Las Casas, who, they argued, had indeed supported African slavery. Several pamphlets appeared in Spanish criticizing or defending Grégoire's *Apologie*.<sup>6</sup> News of his activities and writings also appeared frequently in Latin American newspapers.<sup>7</sup>

Grégoire's interest in the United States was even greater. He corresponded eagerly with Americans to find out more about their republic and to offer his advice. As a founding member of France's *Institut national*, he hoped to revive the Old Regime tradition of correspondence between intellectuals and institutions in different countries. One of his most sustained relationships was

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between Servando and Grégoire, in Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ('Ars.') Ms. 6339, fol. 26–33, and *Escritos inéditos de fray Servando Teresa de Mier*, eds. J. M. Miquel i Vergés and Hugo Díaz-Thomé (México: El Colegio de México-Centro de estudios históricos, 1944), 507–12.

6. See *Colección de las Obras del venerable obispo de Chiapa, don Bartolomé de Las Casas, Defensor de la libertad de los Americanos*. . . , ed. Juan Antonio Llorente (Paris: En casa de Rosa, 1822); and Bernard Plongeron, 'Apologie de Barthélémy de Las Casas, Evêque de Chiapas, par le Citoyen Grégoire,' in *Grégoire et la cause des noirs (1789–1831), combats et projets*, ed. Yves Benot and Marcel Dorigny (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer/APECE, 2000), 37–50. Recent research has revealed that Grégoire's efforts were somewhat misguided, as Las Casas did support the enslavement of Africans early in his life and only renounced it later. See Laurie Barbara Gunst, 'Bartolomé de las Casas and the Question of Negro Slavery in the Early Spanish Indies' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1982); and Henry Raup Wagner and Helen Rand Parish, *The Life and Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967), 246, and *passim*.

7. This fact was reported to me during the conference by Mariselle Meléndez and Elise Bartosik-Velez. These newspapers included the *El censor de la revolución*, *El pacificador del Perú*, and the *Gaceta del gobierno del Perú*.

with the American Philosophical Society (APS) in Philadelphia, the preeminent American intellectual institution. Grégoire was gravely concerned that Americans avoid a repeat of the Terror, and the books he sent reflect his beliefs about how republican governments could remain stable, such as by enforcing meritocracy and remaining vigilant against would-be monarchists.<sup>8</sup>

Grégoire was particularly interested in religious diversity in the New World; despite being a Catholic priest, he had been famed during the French Revolution for his defense of persecuted religious minorities like Jews. In addition to sending the APS and other American intellectuals some of his writings on Jews, he sought information from Americans about the integration of different religious and racial groups in their republic.<sup>9</sup>

Even as he hoped that the United States would be tolerant of people of all religions, Grégoire nevertheless saw Catholicism as the one true faith, and he hoped for universal conversion. His interest in Jews in the United States thus related to this goal. He corresponded with Hannah Adams and other American Christians who desired to convert the Jews, sharing information on the progress of this project in their respective countries. He also wanted to make sure Amerindians would be brought into the American polity and the church. He even tried to proselytize American Protestants, telling Adams of his hope that she and others would soon return to the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

8. Information about Grégoire's gifts comes from the American Philosophical Society's Association File Card Catalog in its Philadelphia library and the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*.

9. *Observations nouvelles sur les juifs . . . d'Allemagne* (Pam. v. 43, no. 11, APS) and *Observations nouvelles sur les juifs . . . d'Amsterdam* (Pam. v. 43, no. 12, APS, donated on February 5, 1808; and 'Articles recommandés à la bienveillance de Mr. Michaux . . . [From Mon. Le Sénateur Grégoire . . . to his friend B. Vaughan],' APS, Benjamin Vaughan Papers, B V46p.

10. Hannah Adams, *The History of the Jews from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Boston: John Eliot, 1812), 2: 152; Grégoire, 'Articles recommandés à la bienveillance de Mr. Michaux,' Bibliothèque de la Société de Port-Royal, Collection Grégoire, Rév. 147/20; and Grégoire to Adams, January 19, 1811, Thomas and Hannah Adams Papers (Mss. 665), unnumbered fols., New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS). See also Grégoire's discussions of American Protestants in *Histoire des sectes religieuses* (1st. ed.; Paris: Potey, 1810), lxxiii-lxxiv, and *passim*.



Because of his religious convictions, Grégoire looked to American Catholics as natural allies. He was particularly keen to correspond with John Carroll, the archbishop of Baltimore and leader of the Catholic Church in America. Carroll, after all, was a bishop living in a republic and had been known in the 1780s as an enlightened republican Catholic who wanted the American church to be independent of Rome. Like other Americans who became more conservative following the French Revolution, however, Carroll by the late 1790s had become a Federalist and a more traditional supporter of the Pope. To the older Carroll, Grégoire's support for the French Revolution was suspect; Carroll's few letters to the French priest expressed his firm disapproval of the latter's ideas. Grégoire thus found himself unable to build a solid relationship with the leading American Catholic.<sup>11</sup>

Grégoire's inability to connect with American Catholics compounded two other frustrations he encountered in dealing with the United States. First, he felt that American ideals held great promise but were not always implemented. For instance, he prized the American policy of separating church and state, but was disturbed to learn that a Jew serving as American consul in Tunis had his position revoked by President James Monroe because of his religion.<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, Grégoire was disgusted by the American accommodation with slavery. He considered it a scandal that the young republic not only had not abolished, but had in fact enshrined, slavery into its constitution through the three-fifths compromise. He therefore tried to convince American leaders of

11. See Jacques M. Gres-Gayer, 'Four Letters from Henri Grégoire to John Carroll, 1809-1814,' *Catholic Historical Review* 79 (1993): 681-703 (originals in the Archdiocese of Baltimore Archives); and Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 101-24. Carroll did, however, praise Grégoire's criticism of Barlow's *Columbiad*.

12. Grégoire, *Discours sur la liberté des cultes* (n. p.: 1794), 7; Richard H. Popkin, 'An Aspect of the Problem of Religious Freedom in the French and American Revolutions,' *Freedom. Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 50 (1976): 146-61; Grégoire, *De la liberté de conscience et de culte à Haïti* (Paris: Baudouin Frères, 1824), 16; and R. Popkin, 'Mordecai Noah, The Abbé Grégoire and the Paris Sanhedrin,' *Modern Judaism* 2 (1982): 132.

the brutality of slavery, sending antislavery works to the APS and corresponding with American abolitionist societies.<sup>13</sup>

Grégoire's most important effort to influence American opinion on this subject was his 1808 book *De la littérature des nègres*. Grégoire had been incensed by Thomas Jefferson's comments in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that blacks were naturally incapable of the same intellectual achievements as whites. Though Grégoire praised the Virginian in the preface for his work against the slave trade, later in the work he attacked Jefferson's view that blacks were by nature intellectually inferior. Grégoire countered the idea of separate origins of the races with the argument that all human beings belonged to a single species. Only historical events—particularly the brutality of slavery, he insisted—had degraded blacks: 'What sentiments of dignity, of self-respect, can possibly exist in beings treated like beasts. . .? What can become of individuals degraded below the level of brutes. . .?'<sup>14</sup>

In his text, Grégoire rebuked Jefferson by name numerous times. Arguing that whites who claimed superiority were guided by self-interest, he noted, 'It is maddening to find the same prejudice in a man whose name is ordinarily pronounced among us only with . . . a well-deserved respect: Jefferson.' After giving many details of the talents of people of African descent, Grégoire added in exasperation, 'These details make clear . . . what one must think when . . . Jefferson tells us that they have never erected a civilized society.' 'The more imposing and respectable the authority of Jefferson,' he declared, 'the more essential it is to combat his judgment.'<sup>15</sup>

Grégoire's abolitionist efforts attracted much positive attention in the United States. The New-York Historical Society offered

13. Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Committee of Correspondence letter book, 1794-1809, 71-73, 78-80, 83-85, 87-89, AmS 081, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and Grégoire to Verplanck, May 17, 1823.

14. Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres* (Paris: Maradan, 1808), 14, 44-45, 35.

15. Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres* 36, 150, 255-56, 260.



him honorary membership, praising him as 'the friend of the oppressed.'<sup>16</sup> The Library Company of Philadelphia purchased a number of his writings in French,<sup>17</sup> and several of his works were translated into English.<sup>18</sup> American travelers to Europe were also anxious to meet the famous French republican priest. These included the Reverend William Ellery Channing, a leading American Unitarian and abolitionist, and future Harvard professor George Ticknor.<sup>19</sup>

Other Americans viewed the notorious Frenchman with suspicion, however. After the passing of the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts and then the XYZ Affair, it was risky for an immigrant to be identified with French radicals. In 1798 Benjamin Vaughan, an English-born republican living in Maine, narrowly escaped prosecution under the Alien and Sedition Acts when a confiscated letter was published revealing his close friendship with French revolutionaries such as Grégoire. It even proved dangerous to spend time with the abbé in Paris, as Ticknor discovered when the French police began to harass and follow him on account of his visiting Grégoire and other republicans.<sup>20</sup>

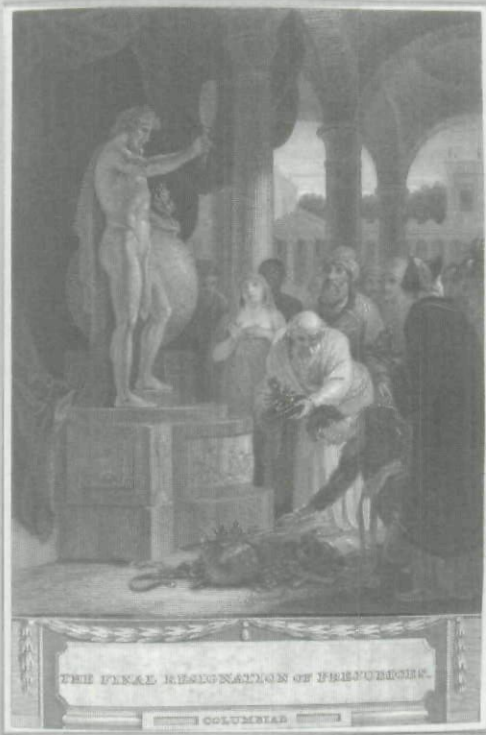
16. Gulian C. Verplanck, *An Anniversary Discourse, Delivered Before the New-York Historical Society, December 7, 1818* (New York: James Eastburn & Co., 1818), 15.

17. The Library Company owned Grégoire's *Lettre aux philantropes sur les malheurs, les droits et les réclamations des gens de couleur de Saint-Domingue . . .* (Paris: Belin, 1790), and a 1791 English translation of Grégoire's 1789 *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des juifs* [*An essay on the physical, moral, and political reformation of the Jews* (London: Forster, 1791)] by the time it printed its 1807 catalogue. It is not known when its two French copies of *De la littérature* were purchased.

18. *Critical Observations on the Poem of Mr. Joel Barlow, 'The Columbiad'* (Washington City: Printed by Roger Chew Weightman, 1809); *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes . . .*, D. B. Warden, trans. (Brooklyn: Printed by Thomas Kirk, 1810); and *Report on the Means of Compleating and Distributing the National Library . . .* (Philadelphia: Market Street, 1794).

19. Channing to Vaughan, May 13, 1822, Benjamin Vaughan Papers, B V46p, APS; and [George Ticknor], *Life, Letters, and Journals*, 2 vols. (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1876), 1: 130.

20. [John Hurford Stone], *Copies of Original Letters Recently Written by Persons in Paris to Dr. Priestley in America . . .* (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, 1798), 19; and Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, 1: 142-43. On Grégoire and Vaughan, see Craig C. Murray, *Benjamin Vaughan (1751-1835): The Life of an Anglo-American Intellectual* (New York: Arno Press, 1982), 276-77, 343, 362 n35, 388, 417, and passim; and *Mémoires de l'abbé Grégoire*, ed. J. M. Leniaud and preface by J. N. Jeanneney (Paris: Editions de Santé, 1989), 66-67.



'The final resignation of prejudices.' This engraving by Goulding appeared in Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad: A Poem* (Philadelphia: C. Conrad and Co., 1807), 380.



Moreover, to Grégoire's consternation, the republican network often seemed fragile. By 1805, he was regularly complaining to Barlow that the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was ignoring him and that he had not heard anything from them in two years.<sup>21</sup> A few years later, he was distraught when he did not hear from Hannah Adams for fifteen months, despite sending her several letters and several of his writings.<sup>22</sup>

Jefferson, meanwhile, seemed unpersuaded about Grégoire's arguments on the unity of the human species. In a well-known letter to the French prelate, Jefferson politely thanked him for *De la littérature des nègres*, and swore that he had been impressed by it. He pledged that his mind was still open on the subject of blacks' natural intelligence: 'no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allowed to them [blacks] by nature.' Furthermore, he insisted, his doubts about their abilities had nothing to do with their rights. In a lesser-known letter to their mutual friend Barlow, written later that year, however, Jefferson showed a different face. He depicted Grégoire as simple-minded, and commented that he had given the Frenchman a 'soft answer.' Jefferson accused Grégoire of naïveté and implied that whatever those chronicled in *De la littérature* had achieved, it was only because they had some white blood.<sup>23</sup>

21. Grégoire to Joel Barlow, December 21, 1805, June 3, 1806, and September 1, 1806, and to Ruth Barlow, August 17, 1806, fol. 603-6, Barlow Papers, Houghton Library. It is not known why the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) stopped writing to Grégoire, although it possibly related to the Haitian Revolution in 1804; most Americans, including members of the PAS, were horrified by Haitian violence and fearful of its potentially contagious effects on American slaves. See Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 26; and Sepinwall, 'La révolution haïtienne et les États-Unis: Étude historiographique,' 1802: *Rétablissement de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises: Aux origines de Haïti*, ed. Y. Benot and M. Dorigny (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003), 387-401.

22. Grégoire to Adams, December 4, 1811, Adams Papers, NEHGS.

23. Jefferson to Grégoire, February 25, 1809; and Jefferson to Barlow, October 8, 1809, in Paul L. Ford, ed., *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1892-99), 9: 246, 261.

Fractures could develop even in Grégoire's relationships with more committed New World abolitionists. His friendship with Barlow reveals the explosive potential of theological differences in the Atlantic republican world. Their relationship had begun when the American poet arrived in Paris with other foreign republicans and had deepened when Barlow accompanied Grégoire on an official voyage to the Savoy region.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1790s, Grégoire, his 'adopted mother' Mme. Dubois, and the Barlows had a common circle of friends and spent vacations in the same spa town.

When the Barlows returned to the United States after Napoleon came to power, Grégoire and Mme. Dubois were crushed. 'No matter what physical distance the seas place between you and us,' he assured them in 1805, 'our inviolable attachment . . . will accompany you across the Atlantic.' 'Our friends, along with Mme. Dubois and I, will never forget you. Our friendship would be as strong in fifty years as today if we remained on this earth.' Grégoire's relationship with Barlow was built not only on personal compatibility, but also on common political attachments, such as to republicanism and abolitionism. Because of their long history, Grégoire had long awaited the *Columbiad*, hoping it could fuel antislavery sentiment in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The friendship would ultimately shatter, however, over religious matters. When Barlow's *Columbiad* finally appeared in France, Grégoire was shocked to discover sentiments in it that he felt were anti-Christian. He was particularly shocked by an engraving that depicted the stamping out of prejudice by showing an image of the crushed remnants of a cross and crown, and by the closing passage of the poem. It included the lines,

'Beneath the footstool all destructive things,  
The mask of priesthood and the mace of kings,

24. *Mémoires de l'abbé Grégoire*, 95.

25. Grégoire to Joel and Ruth Barlow, December 21, 1805; Grégoire to J. Barlow, June 3, 1806; and Grégoire to J. Barlow, Oct. 26 [1807], Barlow Papers, fols. 602-4, Houghton Library.



Lie trampled in the dust; for here at last  
Fraud, folly, error all their emblems cast. . .  
Swords, sceptres, mitres, crowns and globes and stars  
Codes of false fame and stimulants to wars  
Sink in the settling mass; since guile began,  
These are the agents of the woes of man.<sup>26</sup>

In March 1809, Grégoire published an open letter to his friend, entitled *Observations critiques sur le poème de M. Joël Barlow* . . . . He began these *Observations* gently, noting that there were many aspects of the work which had pleased him, such as its illustrating advances in American print technology.<sup>27</sup> Grégoire quickly moved, however, to a bitter condemnation of the poem's religious content. He focused his anger on 'certain verses and an engraving which bears the following inscription: *Final destruction of prejudices*. . . . Prejudices! No one more than I, perhaps, wishes for their destruction. But to what are you referring with this ambiguous term? . . . The symbols of the Catholic ministry and . . . the cross of Jesus-Christ! What?! Is that what you call *prejudices*?<sup>28</sup> Barlow tried to mend fences by sending Grégoire a letter in which he argued that his friend had misinterpreted the poem. 'I am pained to tears,' he wrote, 'and my heart bleeds, to learn . . . that my poem wounded your religious principles. . . . Nothing was further from my heart. . . .'<sup>29</sup>

26. Barlow, *The Columbiad* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809), 340 (Book 10, lines 599–610), <http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/cgi/sgml/moa-idx?notisid=APT9199>, accessed June 2006.

27. Grégoire, *Observations critiques sur le poème de M. Joël Barlow, The Colombiad* (Paris: Maradan, 1809), 3; translated into English as *Critical Observations on the Poem of Mr. Joel Barlow, The Columbiad*.

28. Grégoire, *Observations critiques*, 4. In fact, the poem was received less enthusiastically than Grégoire imagined. See James Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey: The Life of Joel Barlow* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1958), esp. 266–71; and John Bidwell, 'The Publication of Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad*,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 93 (1984): 337–80.

29. Barlow to Grégoire, March 15, 1809, in Archives nationales, Paris, 510 AP 2, dossier "A-B."

Once Grégoire's letter began to be reprinted widely in American newspapers, though, Barlow worried that the critique was damaging his public standing. Indeed, one scholar has argued that, although Barlow was a deist, he feared that his political views would be ignored if his full opposition to Christianity was made public. He therefore published a separate open response to Grégoire in September 1809. He swore there that the infamous engraving was inserted into his book without his permission. Moreover, he claimed, his poem was hardly deist, but reflected 'the genuine principles . . . of the christian system, as inculcated in the gospels. . . .' He insisted that any religious differences between him and his friend were only on the surface.<sup>30</sup> Despite proclaiming their fundamental agreement, however, Barlow suggested several key differences between him and Grégoire. Chief among them was that Grégoire, he felt, confused the core values of Christianity and its outward symbols, viewing an attack on the physical emblems of the Catholic Church as an assault on the Gospels themselves.<sup>31</sup>

Barlow was particularly concerned about his reputation and the damage caused by the controversy because Grégoire's letter was circulated more widely than his own response. As one friend wrote Barlow from Vermont: 'The Bishop's letter has been read and applauded thro[ughout] this part of the country. Yours has not been published in the papers . . .'<sup>32</sup>

Grégoire was in fact dismayed when he learned that newspapers were portraying his friend as an atheist, which he knew him not to be. In a personal letter responding to Barlow's open one,

30. Barlow, *Letter to Henry Gregoire . . . in Reply to His Letter on The Columbiad* (Washington: Roger Chew Weightman, 1809), 4-8.

31. Barlow, *Letter to Henry Gregoire*, 6, 9-10.

32. Stephen Jacob to Barlow, Windsor, Vermont, December 7, 1809; see also William Little to Barlow, Boston, October 12, 1809; Henry Dearborn to Barlow, Boston, January 22, 1810; Jonathan Law to Barlow, Hartford, October 14, 1809; and T. Law to Barlow, Philadelphia, October 16, 1809, respectively M995, M1001, M970, M998 and M999, Pequot Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; and *Correspondence, Critical and Literary, on the Subject of The Columbiad, an American Epic Poem of Joel Barlow, Esq.* (Ballston Spa, N.Y.: Brown and Miller, 1810), 2.



he continued to call the American 'my dear friend' and acknowledged the latter's regret about the notorious engraving: 'I am more persuaded than ever that you did not intend the least offense to your Catholic brother.' He did not, however, retreat from his attack on the poem's religious content. Pointedly, he countered Barlow's critique of Catholicism with one of Protestantism: Grégoire called the latter dangerous precisely because it 'authoriz[es] each individual to interpret the Bible as he pleases.'<sup>33</sup>

Because of their past closeness, Grégoire and Barlow made great efforts to work through this disagreement; new evidence shows that they were still on speaking terms in late 1811.<sup>34</sup> Yet the *Columbiad* had opened a deep rift between them, and their friendship was never again the same. As deeply as they shared a commitment to republicanism and antislavery, Grégoire and Barlow could not agree on theological matters. Grégoire saw the ideal republic as Catholic, while his American friend found Catholic iconography and 'idol-worship' to be inimical to free thought.

The controversy had a chilling effect in the short term on Grégoire's American relationships. Though some Federalists praised his critique of Barlow, he shared little in common otherwise with these men, who tended towards staunch anti-Jacobinism. Though Republicans' views of the French Revolution were more positive, Grégoire's *Observations* ended up distancing him from many of them. Men like Jefferson commiserated with Barlow, and said the abbé 'did not deserve' Barlow's apologetic response.<sup>35</sup> The controversy thus isolated the French priest from his most natural American allies.

Religion and slavery therefore divided Grégoire from many North Americans. Most American republicans did not see the abolition of slavery as essential to their republic; while French republicans had decreed the abolition of slavery only two years after proclaiming a republic, it took more than seventy years for

33. Grégoire to Barlow, [1810], M 981, Pequot Papers, Beinecke Library.

34. See Grégoire to H. Adams, December 4, 1811, in Adams Papers, NEHGS.

35. Jefferson to Barlow, October 8, 1809, in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 9: 261.

the American republic to outlaw slavery.<sup>36</sup> Most Americans also did not share his religious beliefs, while those closest to him in matters of faith, like Bishop Carroll, viewed his Jacobinism with suspicion.

One might have expected Grégoire to have more in common with Latin American republicans, since the majority of them were Catholics and many of them were Gallican sympathizers. Nevertheless, even as religion and politics united him with Latin American republicans, attitudes toward slavery often did not.

#### *The Colonial Laboratory in Haiti*

The white republics of the United States and Latin America were not the only hopes for republicanism in the New World, however. The Haitian republic seemed to Grégoire the most promising site in the New World for perfecting the Revolution's legacy. Unlike peoples he viewed as 'civilized,' the Haitians represented for him a *tabula rasa*. Moreover, with its political leaders of African descent, Haiti offered living proof of Grégoire's contention that people of color had great potential if they were free. Starved for information about Haiti, Grégoire corresponded with the men and women who composed its elite. He had correspondents in both the black monarchy in the North (led by Henri Christophe [1767-1820]) and the mixed-race-led republic of the South (headed by Alexandre Pétion [1770-1818] and then Jean-Pierre Boyer [1776-1850]).

The North was particularly eager to win Grégoire's allegiance. Christophe's foreign minister, the Comte de Limonade, told the abbé in 1814 that the King loved *De la littérature des nègres* and had ordered fifty copies. He called Grégoire Haiti's only European friend and called him 'a new *Las Casas*': 'You are the only European who has had the courage to say the truth without fear of attracting hate. . . . The happiest day for my sovereign would

36. After Napoleon's reimposition of slavery in France in 1802, slavery would be permanently abolished by the Second French Republic in 1848.



be the day which he could see you and press you to his heart.<sup>37</sup> De Limonade hoped Grégoire could 'raise his voice' in favor of Christophe's monarchy, but Grégoire refused even to enter into a correspondence with its leaders; disgusted with the return of monarchy to France, he hardly wanted Haiti to cap its revolution with the same.

Grégoire was delighted, however, to correspond with Boyer and other republicans in the South. He had long been a magnet for mixed-race Haitians arriving in Paris and a subject for their praise. Grégoire's portrait was purchased for Boyer's presidential palace, Haitian leaders lavished him with expensive gifts such as coffee, and Boyer reportedly invited him to be the bishop of Haiti. Grégoire was delighted to assist these southern republicans, whom he saw as progressive even though modern historians have noted that their 'republic' was largely an oligarchy and not necessarily better for ex-slaves than the northern monarchy. In his correspondence and published works, Grégoire emphasized his admiration for Haitians' hard-won independence and his profound identification with them.

Yet strains also appeared in Grégoire's relationships with Haitian leaders. At the risk of angering President Boyer, Grégoire could not restrain himself from offering advice on moral matters. Portraying himself as an older and wiser man, he appealed to Boyer not to divorce morality from politics. He insisted that 'Religion, august and holy religion . . . is the fundamental rock of all society' and that Haitian civil strife resulted from neglecting it. Grégoire called Boyer's attention to issues which concerned him that included religious intolerance, insulting treatment of the masses, and extramarital relationships (particularly daring because Boyer himself was living with someone to whom he was not married). Saddened by reports of discrimination by people of mixed race against blacks and against whites, Grégoire also urged

37. Comte de Limonade to Grégoire, June 10, 1814, Ars. Ms. 6339, fols. 44-47. For an expanded discussion of Grégoire's interactions with Haitian leaders, see Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution*, ch. 8.

Boyer to prevent the 'eruption of hate between the colors.'<sup>38</sup> Finally, he insisted on Haitian women's assuming their 'natural' civilizing roles. If they neglected to do so, he suggested, Haiti could never recover from the debilitating effects of colonialism.<sup>39</sup>

While Haitians generally cheered Grégoire's interest in them, he would eventually discover that his pupils had minds of their own. When Boyer began to receive overtures from previously hostile European governments in the mid-1820s, some Haitian leaders were quick to distance themselves from Grégoire, reportedly referring to him as a lemon whose juice had been squeezed. When representatives of Charles X came calling in Port-au-Prince, Boyer quickly removed the portrait of Grégoire that hung in the presidential palace. A toast to Grégoire at a state dinner welcoming the French was suppressed from the official government newspaper.<sup>40</sup>

Grégoire would eventually write a bitter *Epître aux Haïtiens*, which the Haitian government was charitable enough to print and distribute in 1827. He claimed that he had tried to guide them on the right moral path; likening himself to the prophet Samuel, he noted that he may not always have told them what they wanted to hear. But even as he removed himself from direct involvement in Haitian affairs, he promised he would always remember them in his prayers. 'I have ardent wishes for your spiritual happiness and your temporal prosperity,' he noted. 'But I regret not being able to raise my hopes to the level of my desires . . . . Haïtiens, adieu!'<sup>41</sup>

Grégoire would continue to monitor developments in the Americas and receive visitors from the Western hemisphere until his death in 1831. He learned, however, that Atlantic networking could have frustrations as well as joys. Some of these were practical,

38. Grégoire to Boyer, June 22, 1821, Ars. Ms. 15049/194.

39. See Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution*, 190-93.

40. See Ruth Necheles, *The Abbé Grégoire 1787-1831. The Odyssey of an Egalitarian* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), 243.

41. Grégoire, *Epître aux Haïtiens* (Port-au-Prince: L'Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1827), 14, 15.



yet the problems of the Atlantic republic of letters were deeper. Even as members thirsted for contact with like-minded thinkers abroad, they often found that their versions of republicanism had irreconcilable differences. Grégoire's experiences are a useful reminder that even as we seek Atlantic commonalities in our study of the past, we must also remember the differences that could make enemies even of the closest of friends.

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