



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Conscience and Conversion: Religious Liberty in Post-Revolutionary France

Institution: University of Notre Dame

Project Director: Thomas Kselman

Grant Program: Fellowships

“Conversion and Liberty in Post-Revolutionary France”

I seek a fellowship from the NEH to help fund a sabbatical year that will allow me to finish the research and compose a draft of a book on conversion and religious liberty in nineteenth-century France. In the wake of the French Revolution religious liberty was enshrined in Article Five of the French Charter of 1814, a right that the restored Bourbon monarchs felt obliged to honor, even while they embraced an alliance of throne and altar. But the meaning of religious liberty was ambiguous, for it referred both to the rights of religious communities to worship openly and to the rights of individuals to cross religious boundaries, a tension that can be seen both in the language of the Charter, and in Article Ten of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This second and individualistic understanding of religious liberty was imperfectly grasped in a Europe that had been shaped by the treaty of Westphalia (1648), which assumed religious homogeneity within states as the operative principle. Through a study of conversions in France in the first half of the nineteenth century, I hope to trace this emerging sense of individual religious liberty, approached through a number of dramatic decisions to choose a new religious identity, and set this against the older understanding of liberty as a communal right. My goal is to write a book on this topic that will interest not only historians of France, but also a general audience concerned with the problem of religious liberty in the modern world.

This project derives from research I have done over the past few years on Jewish-Catholic relations, approached through case studies of converts. I now want to look at conversions more broadly, moving beyond the relationship between Catholicism and Judaism to study choices that individuals made about Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and secularism. My work on Jewish converts suggests that confusion and anxiety accompanied decisions to cross religious boundaries, both for the individual, but also for his or her family and community. The different ways in which people chose religious identities, and the varied responses to their conversions, reveal the important role that religion could play in the definitions of self and community that were being reworked in a period that provided a much greater range of religious choice. Theological issues mattered in these decisions, but doctrinal commitments, belief, and disbelief took on meaning only in social contexts. Converts are particularly fascinating because they allow us to observe the intricate connections between religious choices and social attachments, and how these were shifting in this period. The individuals of my study are from an intellectual elite, but their extensive and articulate reflection on religious choices illuminates an important dimension of French social and cultural history, and their ability to attract considerable public attention suggests that their concerns resonated broadly within France. My book will be organized around a number of stories, contextualizing and comparing them, to see how the French struggled to reconcile freedom of conscience with family and community solidarity.

For the sake of intellectual and narrative coherence my cases will be centered in Paris, but will allow me to make references to general developments in France and Europe as a whole. The Jewish converts in my study include: David Drach (1791-1868), the son-in-law of the Grand Rabbi in Paris in the 1820s; Théodore (1802-1884) and Alphonse Ratisbonne (1814-1884), whose Congregation of Our Lady of Sion provoked controversy in the 1840s for its aggressive proselytism among Paris Jews; and Francis Libermann (1802-1852), the son of a

prominent rabbi in Alsace, and the founder of the Spiritan fathers who devoted themselves to work with freed slaves starting in the 1840s. Although there has been some valuable work done on Jewish converts, scholars have frequently looked at this issue from a narrow perspective, interested in the extent to which apostates posed a threat to the Jewish community. In my study, I will place the Jewish converts in a broader context that includes others who were exploring the borderlands between religions, and between belief and unbelief. I will relate them as well to a cultural context in which Jews and Jewish conversion drew considerable interest. Versions of the “wandering Jew” proliferated in this period, and the most frequently performed opera in the nineteenth century, Fromental Halévy’s *La Juive*, which premiered in 1835, concludes with the tragic decision of a father and daughter to die rather than convert.

As a second focus, I will work on the circle that gathered in the salon of Madame Swetchine (1782-1857), a Russian aristocrat who converted to Catholicism under the influence of Joseph de Maistre, and lived in Paris from the 1820s to the 1850s. Her salon attracted prominent French Catholic intellectuals, including Montalembert, and Lacordaire, as well as others with complicated and shifting religious identities, such as Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), who agonized about his disbelief, and Ivan Gagarin (1814-1882), a prominent Russian Orthodox diplomat who eventually converted to Catholicism and joined the Jesuits. Gagarin sought to create a union between Catholicism and Orthodoxy that would preserve the integrity of the two traditions, a program that he pursued through the journal *Etudes*, which he founded in 1859.

Choosing to change or complicate a religious identity could also involve individuals in an internal and social dialogue between belief and unbelief. To consider this dimension my study will take up the lives and works of two prominent intellectuals, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892). Heine converted to Protestant Christianity while still in Germany for pragmatic reasons, but during his long career in Paris, where he moved in 1831, he wrote extensively about religion, and developed an ironic and complex religious identity that connected him to Christianity, Judaism, and Saint-Simonianism. Ernest Renan was raised in a pious Catholic milieu, but while attending Paris seminaries run by the Sulpician fathers in the 1840s moved away from Catholicism to shape an identity as a secular intellectual. Renan’s conversion can be studied through his memoirs and correspondence, which show him to have retained sympathy and respect for the religion he nonetheless abandoned. With Renan, and more generally in the project as a whole, I hope to build on the work of Jan Goldstein, and explore more fully the religious dimension of the “post-revolutionary” self of her analysis.

Finally, I will include in my study a discussion of conversion and religious liberty as they were understood by French and Vietnamese Catholics. Missionary activity revived dramatically in the early nineteenth century, when French priests, brothers, and nuns spread throughout the world, helping to construct the civilizing mission that was used to legitimize the expansion of the French empire. Working in the archives of the “Congrégation des Missions Etrangères” in Paris, I will explore how the context of religious liberty in France helped reshape the ways in which missionaries and colonized people understood conversion, and how the experience of the missionaries in turn affected ideas and attitudes in France. The priests of “missions étrangères” are a particularly interesting case, as they were the principal missionaries in Vietnam, which already had a substantial minority of Catholics, a community that experienced intermittent and violent repression during this period. I hope to find particular

individuals, perhaps a French missionary and a Vietnamese Catholic, to provide a personal focus for this part of my study that would parallel my work on the converts.

Plan for the year

If I receive support for this project, I will spend half of the year concentrating on the research that remains to be done, and the rest of the time writing a draft of the manuscript. The research will involve three months in France, working in libraries and archives in Paris and Lyon. In Paris, I plan to work in the Jesuit archives at Vanves, concentrating on Ivan Gagarin and Alphonse Ratisbonne, who initially joined the Jesuits before leaving them to help his brother Théodore with the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion. I have done some preliminary work at Vanves, enough to convince me that the archive deserves two weeks of my time. Although I have already spent considerable time in the archives of the Jewish consistory and the archdiocese of Paris, I expect to spend a week there checking references I will be using for my work on Jewish converts. I have made a preliminary visit to the archives of the *Congrégation des Missions Etrangères* on the rue du Bac, where I will spend at least three weeks working on the Vietnamese missions and missionaries.

In Lyon I will work three weeks or so in the *Bibliothèque Slave*, which houses the Gagarin papers with extensive material on the Swetchine circle. On a previous trip, I spent two weeks in Lyon working in the archives of the “*Société pour la Propagation de la Foi*,” which contain hundreds of manuscript letters from missionaries. While some of these were published in the “*Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*,” one of the most widely distributed journals in France, many were not and those which did appear were at times heavily edited. During my time in Lyon, I will work again in this archive, concentrating on the letters to the Society from Vietnam in the period 1800-1850.

For Renan and Heine I will rely on standard collected editions of their works, research I can do in the United States. Both writers were prolific and have generated a rich secondary literature. I cannot expect to master all of their work in a brief period, but I will be focusing on their conversions, and on the writings that reflect most directly their religious identity. After three months of work on Heine and Renan I hope to have enough material for chapters on their cases.

Significance

The book I intend to write will touch on a number of topics that are at the heart of humanistic endeavor, and have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Conversion has been studied by historians of the ancient world, who increasingly emphasize the fluid borders between Christian, Jew, and pagan, and by historians and anthropologists interested in cultural exchange and transformation. Studies of the self and how ideas about individual and collective identity have changed over the centuries constitute another fascinating and developing field. Julie Kalman and Caroline Ford have written valuable essays that suggest the importance of conversion for understanding the history of France. I will make use of this scholarly literature, but am drawn to the idea of writing a book that will appeal to a general audience as well. The success of memoirs by Stephen Dubner and Lauren Winner suggest the broad interest in conversion, liberty, and religious identity, a set of problems which is also relevant given current discussions about secularism, Islam, and religious identity in France, and in the world.

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