Félicité de Lamennais and the Jews: Evolutions in Ambivalence

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The historiography of anti-Semitism in France follows a well-worn path. Historians of this sentiment have tended to focus on prominent events where it has been illustrated most spectacularly. Thus, where the nineteenth century is concerned, Napoleon's "Infamous Decree" of 1808 and the Dreyfus Affair have received very thorough coverage. The first half of the nineteenth century – particularly the period of the Restoration, from 1815 to 1830 – contains no such dramatic event and has therefore received little attention. This period has come to be understood as a "between time," an era of "highly unusual tranquillity" for the Jews of France. But did anti-Semitism truly lie dormant during this period only to re-emerge, reinvigorated and refashioned, at the end of the century? I do not believe that incidents during this era where French non-Jews expressed hatred or disdain toward their Jewish fellow-citizens should be viewed as random or parenthetical, as incidental to the greater story.

In this article, I suggest that we might understand postrevolutionary sentiments toward Jews differently by examining the life and the writings of one man.


Félicité de Lamennais was one of the nineteenth century's most influential Catholic intellectuals. He was a Breton, born at St. Malo in 1782 in, of all places, the rue des Juifs. Mostly self-taught, he came late to ordination, although he had entered the priesthood by 1817 when the first volume of his four-volume work *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (*Essay on indifference as regards religion*) appeared. It was a rapid success, selling forty thousand copies in a few years. A competitor noted that it would "wake the dead."

In these four volumes, Lamennais worked for the re-acceptance of Catholic truth in French intellectual life. He was confident that this could be achieved, and the France in which he lived can only have contributed to his sense that his desires would easily translate into reality. After all, it was 1817; France was ruled by a Bourbon, a Most Christian King, who had reinstated Catholicism as the religion of the state. The noble and explicitly counter-revolutionary episcopacy that led the church was aided by ultraroyalist nobles who were inclined to see a direct connection between monarchy and religion. Unsurprisingly, these Catholics saw the Restoration as their opportunity to remake the church's close relationship with royalty and once again to anoint the Bourbon kings as leaders of the Christian world. In their eyes, the Restoration was the moment for the church to return to a romanticized and mythological France, harmoniously ruled over by a trinity of (Bourbon) king, church, and nobility.

Lamennais' writings reflect this confidence in the sense that he expressed what might be described as a Catholic nationalism. As far as he was concerned, Catholicism was not merely the state religion. It was the state, and this meant that there was no room for the Jew or Judaism. Like his contemporary Louis de Bonald, Lamennais saw tolerance as dangerous; it invited relativism and thus challenged the supremacy of Christianity. Lamennais argued that religion was a type of society, and in every fully formed society there had always been – and could only be – one

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dominant religion. Two religions could not exist side by side any more than could two societies. It followed then that it was not enough, if one wished to be a member of a society, simply to obey the same political and civil laws. The Jews, as Lamennais saw them, "in society only with themselves," were a "striking" example of this failure.

Was Félicité de Lamennais an anti-Semite? I am not certain that this is the best way to understand his writings. Quite apart from the risk of anachronism that such a reading presents or the debate we could embark on over what should qualify as anti-Semitism, it also invites us to deny the complexity in French writing on Jews. Anti-Semitism has not traveled through time with its own momentum and a life of its own, divorced from those who have chosen to use Jews to think. Rather than label a figure such as Lamennais as an anti-Semite, it is much more useful to examine not the sentiment but the man: what was his belief system; what was its context and how did these inform his thinking? What do his writings on Jews tell us about how he was negotiating his own place in the changing world of early nineteenth-century France? Work has been done to this end, in particular with regard to Voltaire, who for decades now has sent historians of anti-Semitism into a flurry. Was he an anti-Semite? And if he was, how do we explain his writings that seem to speak positively of Jews? Rather than slot Voltaire into the anti-or philo-category, the trend in recent scholarship seeks to take him as a whole and think about his attitude to Jews in terms of a fundamental ambivalence.

I want to bring this idea to bear on the understudied early nineteenth century – understudied, that is, from the point of view

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4 Félicité de Lamennais, *Essai sur l’indifférence en matière de religion*, vol. 3, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1980), 2:48. Lamennais as anti-Semite has been the subject of previous scholarly research. See, for example, J. Hours, "Un précurseur oublié de l’antisémitisme français, le Vicomte de Bonald," *Cahiers sioniens* 4 (1950): 165-70; and Arnold Ages, "Lamennais and the Jews," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 63 (1972): 158-70. These works tend to examine the writings of Lamennais somewhat divorced from the context of his life.

5 See, for example, Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.
of French attitudes towards Jews. I focus on ambivalence, a concept taken from the theories of Zygmunt Bauman. According to Bauman, we can understand the Western obsession with the Jew over the centuries if we understand that the Jew, or Judaism, has always challenged what Bauman calls "the orderly world," be this Christianity or nationalism. The Jew disturbs the boundaries of such belief systems because he cannot be described or comprehended according to them. So instead, Jews come to signify anything that challenges this order. I would like to take this idea a step further: if Jews can be understood as challenging the system, they also serve to explain it. Where are the boundaries? What constitutes unacceptability? In Restoration France, as conservative Catholics came to terms with their place in the postrevolutionary world, the Jew, who for so long constituted the site of alterity in Catholic ideology, helped them to make sense of this new world. I would like, therefore, to put ambivalence in the place of anti-Semitism and to understand Lamennais' discourses of alterity in this spirit: how did Jews help him to understand and explain the fortunes of his own streamlined ideological system in the postrevolutionary world? Sartre would say I am looking at how the Jew was used to explain experience.

In Lamennais' early writings we can see that the weight of the Catholic ideology to which he adhered gave him confidence in the place and the story of Judaism. In his Éssai sur l'indifférence, his interpretation did not diverge greatly from standard church teaching, in particular, from the ideology of supercession. Lamennais divided the story of the Jews into two epochs, before and after Jesus, with a central, pivotal section focusing on Jesus' life and death. Biblical Judaism, the precursor

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to Christianity, was imbued with God's presence. Ultimately, however, Judaism existed only to foretell and be superseded by Christianity.

The vital moment in the history of the Jewish people therefore was their rejection of Jesus as savior and their subsequent part in his death. Lamennais wrote that it was from this time that the Jews ceased to be a people. Although the crime had been committed eighteen centuries before he wrote, the Jews that Lamennais saw around him still "rebelled" against the doctrine and the laws of Jesus, and this persistent refusal meant that they suffered continued punishment. They were strangers in the heart of the French nation, isolated and followed by disdain and outrage. They waited obstinately for a messiah who had already come. Centuries of living with the enormity of their crime had left them degraded. The Jews of Restoration France would "always be foreigners, distinguishable by the mark on their foreheads, which horrifies all who see them. The mark is written by an iron hand and is more terrible than the mark of Cain: it is DEICIDE!"9

But the Restoration was hardly a straightforward return to the world of the Old Regime. Too much had occurred during the interregnum between a deposed king and a returned one for all of French society simply to take up where it had left off before 1789. The Revolution had shaken to their very foundations the three pillars of church, monarchy, and nobility that had shaped and ordered life under the Old Regime. They could no longer lay claim to automatic legitimate authority; thus they were lost to the French as points of reference. At best, they were merely points of yearning. What now constituted legitimate authority in France? Restoration governments could only respond with ambiguity. At the heart of the era was a Charter that seemingly set up the nation as a modern secular monarchy but that left the door open to varying interpretations of what Restoration France should — or could — be.

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9 Ibid., 2:44.
Ultimately, the Charter established by Louis XVIII did not echo the wishes of men such as Lamennais, because while it established Catholicism as the state religion, it also guaranteed freedom of worship for all religions. However optimistic Lamennais may have felt about his times, the fact was that Jews were now his fellow citizens. Lamennais could not bear the notion that Judaism had been placed on an equal footing before the law with Catholicism. He was clearly uncomfortable with the presence of Jews in society. Elements of anger and bewilderment crept into Lamennais' discussions of Jews despite his confidence that centuries of church teaching supported him; his distress is particularly discernible in passages in which he analyzes his own world. In a typical reference, Lamennais described in withering tones what he saw as the "touching equality that unites in the same protection the faith of the Christian who adores Jesus Christ, and the faith of the Jew who blasphemes him." \(^{10}\)

Lamennais wrote this excoriation of the Charter's freedom of worship in response to the introduction in 1825 of what was to be known as the sacrilege law by the ultra Charles X, who had succeeded his older brother Louis XVIII a year earlier. The sacrilege law made criminal offences of theft from churches and profanation of the Host, the latter defined as a crime "against God and King." Also in 1825, Charles X celebrated his ascension to the throne with an elaborate coronation evocative of the Old Regime, thus announcing his determination to resurrect this world. It appeared that the desires of the church were indeed to be realized.

But this was not Lamennais' church. The sacrilege law was not limited to Catholicism, and the inclusion of Judaism and Protestantism incited Lamennais to express his outrage at the notion that it could be legally recognized, "without the least opposition," that "to steal a table, a seat, or a tablecloth from a Calvinist church, or a bible from a synagogue, constituted a veritable sacrilege; and consequently, that the objects used in

\(^{10}\) Lamennais, *Mélanges religieux et philosophiques*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 4:444. (Original emphasis).

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these different rituals are no more or less sacred than those used in Catholic ritual."\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, the overt and ostentatious way in which the determined Gallican Charles X made clear his intention to reinstate a national church in France was not good news to Lamennais, a committed ultramontane with absolute belief in the authority of the pope.

Things were only to get worse, however. In July 1830, ongoing tensions generated by what we might call Charles X's absolutism resulted in three heady days of revolution and the instatement of Louis-Philippe, the cousin of Charles X and of the beheaded Louis XVI. Louis-Philippe was a pragmatist and a materialist. Commentators of all persuasions quickly saw hopes that been raised by the overthrow of the intransigent Charles X dashed by what one outraged observer called the heartless materialism of the bourgeois who had "triumphed" in the July Revolution.\textsuperscript{12} Under the July Monarchy Catholics struggled for the freedom to establish church-run schools, and Louis Veuillot published tirades against the irreligion of the age from the helm of the Catholic newspaper, the Univers.

Writing in 1830, Lamennais characterized July Monarchy France as a world in which two camps faced one another with "mutual mistrust and interests seemingly opposed." On one side was Catholicism, representing those who "dread being stripped of what they possess and engulfed by this earth that is trembling." On the other were those who "speculate on political upheavals in order to get rich": the representatives of "anti-Christian philosophie, Protestantism, and its different sects, Judaism, Saint-Simonism, and I don't know what else."\textsuperscript{13}

Targeting *philosophie* – Enlightenment ideas – as anti-Christian placed Lamennais in a conservative tradition that dated from before the Revolution.

Lamennais was not merely a traditional conservative Catholic, however. In his eyes, Catholicism was freedom. Certainly it included the freedom of religion, particularly the freedom of the church to spread its word as it saw fit, which to Lamennais implied complete separation of church and state. For Lamennais, however, Catholic freedom also included liberalism; that is, the championing of the humble. Unlike many Catholics, Lamennais did not tremble in the face of liberalism. Rather, this enthusiast for the writings of Rousseau set out to "Catholicize" liberty.\(^\text{14}\) In 1815, at the time of the Restoration, Lamennais had written a blistering excoriation of liberalism in his *Réflexions sur l'état de l'église en France*. He exposed liberalism as nothing more than the hated Enlightenment *philosophie* in postrevolutionary costume, a force to be opposed.\(^\text{15}\) By 1830, however, Lamennais truly did "Catholicize" liberalism in that he was able to separate it from the *philosophie* with which it had once been associated. Caroline Ford sees Lamennais as the forerunner of the democratic social Catholicism of the late nineteenth century that reconciled the church with modern French society.\(^\text{16}\) Lisa Leff argues that Lamennais was an important influence on the utopian socialists of the 1840s, including Pierre Leroux, Charles Fourier, and Adolphe Toussenel, for whom Christian theology was inseparable from


\(^{15}\) Lamennais, "L'influence des doctrines philosophiques sur la société" (1815), in *Réflexions sur l'état de l'église en France pendant le dix-huitième siècle, et sur sa situation actuelle, suivies de Mélange religieux et philosophiques* (Paris, 1819), 165.

their championing of the downtrodden. Could we call him a trailblazer? In the words of one admiring biographer, he became "the father of Christian progressivism and sociology." 

Lamennais' position in favor of a Catholicism reconciled with liberty brought him into conflict with the Catholic hierarchy, however. After 1830, Lamennais established a paper entitled *Avenir* (Future), which took as its motto "God and Freedom" (*Dieu et la liberté*). In 1832 Pope Gregory XVI expressly condemned Lamennais' newspaper in the encyclical *Mirari vos*. In 1834, Gregory went further, rejecting Lamennais' entire philosophy and calling his latest work, *Paroles d'un croyant* (Words of a Believer), "barely considerable in terms of volume, but immense in its perversity." Paroles d'un croyant called on the oppressed everywhere to rise up against all oppressors (including the pope) in the name of Christ, friend of the humble. In 1826 Lamennais had written to defend the pope's infallibility, but the 1834 condemnation marked the beginning of the end of his involvement with the church. He was to live out his life bitter about the break and defending to the end democracy and his right to question papal authority.

What did all this mean for the role Lamennais assigned to Jews? While he continued to draw on Catholic teaching in his depictions of Jews, at the same time he was adapting the Jew's role to a changing world and his changing circumstances. Where once his writings on Jews were overwhelmingly concerned with their historical place in the world, Lamennais' anti-Jewish writings came to be situated firmly in the present. Indeed, Lamennais' views would not have looked out of place in the

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18 Cholvy and Hilaire, 1-91.
19 He was in fact to go on to work on the editorial committee of the radical republican daily *La Réforme*.
20 Quoted in Cholvy and Hilaire, 1-89.
21 This was in his 1826 work, *De la religion, considérée dans ses rapports avec l'ordre civil et politique*. 

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works of the prominent socialist writer Pierre Leroux or those of Alphonse Toussenel, he who so memorably named the Jews the "kings of the era." In fact, Lamennais was ultimately to attract homage from Leroux. Like so many others, Lamennais was outraged at the individualistic opportunism that seemed to translate so easily to capitalism under the July Monarchy, and Jews stood as the symbol of this new order.

In Lamennais' writings of the 1830s, Jews play the role of capitalists: the Jews were "a people devoured by a thirst for gold," driven by their "abject avidity." In his Gospels (1846), supposedly set in ancient times, Lamennais managed to present a very contemporary view of the Jew:

> These were Christ's great adversaries, his most ardent enemies, those who believed that in killing him, they also killed the future, those to whom Jesus declared that the blood of all the prophets, spilled since the beginning of the world, would be asked for once more, for they were of the race of murderers, and the spirit of this race was still well and truly alive in them. Immortal here below, since evil will never be entirely destroyed here, it has survived here and will continue to survive here until the end. There will always be hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees, doctors of the Law, who hold the key to knowledge and who do not enter there at all, and repel those who endeavor to enter. For that is another of their characteristics: they love the dark, they delight in it; the light would be an annoying disturbance for them, but most importantly, it would ruin their authority over the people.

In this passage we can discern a fundamental shift in his rhetoric. If in his early work, the Jews were a downtrodden, lowly people, thirty years later he depicted a nebulous, powerful, Jewish world. Jews could no longer be described in terms of their guilt and lowly status. They were now symbols or metaphors for a greater evil. Society had changed, and where once the association of Jews with money had left them on the margins of society, the

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22 Lamennais, Esquisse d'une philosophie, in Oeuvres complètes, 9:455.
23 Lamennais, Pensées diverses, in ibid., 8:466.
accumulation of wealth was now legitimate and at the core of French life. With it came the emancipated Jew. Perhaps because emancipation had brought them to the center of society, Jews now posed a direct threat to the sanctity of French life as Lamennais imagined it.

Perhaps Félicité de Lamennais was so influential because he managed to move with his times. The image of the Jew in Lamennais' writing evolved, although his dislike of Jews remained consistent. Whether traditional church ideology or Christian sociology defined Lamennais' world view, Jews represented its foremost challenge. In Lamennais' ambivalence, we find the legacy of his Catholicism combined with new ideas of what Jews represented. Where ambivalence towards Jews was concerned, the early nineteenth century was not tranquil. Shifts in anti-Jewish rhetoric began in the postrevolutionary period with figures such as Lamennais rather than at the other end of the century.\(^{25}\) What Lamennais suggests to us through his writings on Jews is that early nineteenth-century France experienced intense and ongoing competition as to how the nation should be imagined. Men such as Lamennais, who competed to impose their understanding on terms such as "nation" and "citizen," used the Jew to explain why their world was not as it should have been. While Lamennais called on the church ideology he knew so well to fashion this image of the Jew, he also adapted this tradition to a changing world. In this combination of evolution and continuity, Lamennais and his ambivalences provide a strong reflection of his era.