

# Guizot Prize - Institut de France 2016

## Acceptance speech by Alain Besançon

The pride and happiness that I felt when awarded the Prix Guizot exceeded my expectations. I hope to explain why.

First, I have always had an intense admiration for François Guizot. Our textbooks spoke rather badly of him because as a minister he wanted France to be peaceful and wealthy, which seemed to be a turn away from *glory* that had been so important to us. As a writer, his style is not always Ciceronian and his history of the English Revolution, which contains in palimpsest a reflection on the French Revolution, is animated by a tragic spirit and Shakespearian poetry. Finally, as a historian, he paralleled Michelet, like Racine with Corneille, Voltaire with Rousseau. And lastly, I almost neglected to mention, as the reconvenor of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences.

I have been received, full of veneration, at Val Richer, which is indeed the most charming of country houses, and that continues to be the faithful and true mirror of its first master. I even looked at the bust of the Princess de Lieven, wondering if Guizot had understood that she was the sister of Count Benckendorff, the head of secret police of Tsar Nicholas I. This tenuous link leads me to Russia.

It was to Russia that chance and Providence took me at the end of my studies. I hope I was a not so unworthy student of my teachers, Marc Raeff of Columbia and Martin Malia of Berkeley. But starting with my first book, *Le Tsarevitch Immolé* published 50 years ago, an instinct had made me place a perspective at its center about which neither Raeff nor Malia had taught me, the religious perspective. The first part of this book is entitled: “The Relationship to God” and continues on “Mother Earth and Mother of God”, “Pantocrator and the Humiliated Christ”, etc. I was trying to show that the structure of this relationship was paralleled in the political structure of this country and was illustrated in its literature.

Circumstances, in addition to chance and Providence, made me move on from the Russian enigma towards the enigma of Leninism which is linked to it. At that time, we did not really know what it was. And indeed, one cannot consider this question in depth without

being caught up in metaphysics.

Leninism is a doctrine. “The opium of the intellectuals” as Raymond Aron called it as well as “a secular religion”. Absolute and definitive science, said the Leninists. Neither a religion nor a science in my opinion, but a bizarre formation, *ideology*, where religious elements destroy the scientific project, and where elements of false science mask the background of religiosity. As it is, this strange formation took possession of Russia and part of the world for 70 years. It has done material damage, and even more so, moral damage, of which we are only starting to take stock and which goes beyond the imagination. How many corpses, and how many souls have been lost! If we look at it from a certain angle, one's vision is lost in the abyss of iniquity, which only a few artists have managed to probe, among which are two Russians, Dostoyevsky, and Vladimir Solovyov. They met the demon before he was set loose, which led them both to religion and metaphysics.

The doctrine was no longer believed by around 1960, but remained in compulsory use until 1990. It was no longer an outward sign of power and was reduced to a simple language. In 1990, it was swept away and replaced in one fell swoop by the orthodox Christian religion. Since the 16th century, Russian orthodoxy has had a dual existence. On the one hand, it is a perfectly legitimate version of universal Christianity. On the other hand, it is a sectarian justification of Russian nationalism and the state. Under this second form, it maintains a stubborn hatred of Christianity in its Catholic and Protestant versions, and, it must be said, against all of the West. Note that this sudden shift has led hundreds of thousands of propagandists, journalists, and professors to change jobs, which they have done without any intellectual resistance. In parallel, several thousand churches have been built or rebuilt. The Russian population was imagined to be orthodox in its entirety, although the actual practice is no more widespread than Catholic practice in today's France. This change came very easily. It was carried out by the same state that had imposed Marxism Leninism. This time, instead of the background religiosity being masked by pseudo-rational ideology, the ideology of the unchanged Russian state is masked by pseudo-religion. It is amusing to see that Russian tropism, which in France is traditionally rather strong, had success under its first form on the left, whereas today it is the right that takes the new form seriously with just as much enthusiasm and blindness. For me, there has been no reason to abandon my intuitions of yesteryear. I have recently written a short book—*Sainte Russie* to explain why Russia is the only nation among all the nations of Europe that has called itself “holy”, and why it is no more holy than the others, and what advantage the country has gained from this appellation.

But finally, Russia is not alone on earth. Because of Russia, I learned about theology, a science that is little cultivated in academia. I believe, however, that theology is an auxiliary science of history, and is really indispensable. By retracing a simple theological path, that of the prohibition or permission [to reproduce] the image of God, I have been able to find in the hidden maze of art history from Plato to Malevich, a logical and clear trajectory (see *Image Interdite*).

I also wanted to take a friendly tour of American Protestantism. I had lived in this country, which as we know, is one of the most religious on earth. In the smallest town there are dozens of charming, wooden churches, often in the Palladian style. Each belongs to one of 250 denominations, persuasions, churches, or services, resulting from the indefinite fission of Protestantism. Whether one is Baptist, Wesleyan, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, or Evangelical, one is nevertheless truly and fundamentally Protestant, of a sincere piety, inseparable from American patriotism. My French colleagues tended to look at the subtle points of doctrine—for which the Europeans had massively killed one another—like whims as foreign to us as the Tupi or Guarani myths analyzed by Levi-Strauss. I tried to show that these whims had a rational meaning.

I must finally speak of the book which the illustrious jury of the Prix Guizot has kindly awarded, *Problèmes Religieux Contemporains* (Contemporary Religious Problems). The title is clear and without malice.

We talk a lot about the crisis of the Church. It is a common theme upon which I do not dwell. I am, like everyone else, sensitive to contemporary concerns and I do not know how things will turn out. On the dome of St. Peter is written “Non praevalent” (The gates of hell shall not prevail) and one can only hope.

The church has faced two very different challenges for a century.

The challenge of Leninist communism came first. It has been a temptation for the Church because the communist programme and Catholic ideals appear to overlap. This is false, however, but it had to be shown to be false. In 1937, Pope Pius XI published two encyclicals one week apart, one condemning Bolshevik communism and the other Nazi racism. It must be rejoiced that Pius XI condemned them together while many of his contemporaries either turned to communism by the justified hatred of Nazism, or agreed with Nazism through an equally justified hatred of communism.

More than 50 years went by between 1937 and 1990. Can we say that the remarkable intellectual effort of *Divini Redemptoris* has continued? That is not certain. Pius XI had a clear view of communism. He thought it was a danger that threatened the whole universe. Nazism, which he considered utterly horrible, was an accident, limited to the German world. But during the war, when Nazism led to unimaginable horrors and the USSR faced Germany as part of the Great Alliance, this unsettled his political views and he could not but make some faux pas. In 1945, he took up his political role once again more coherently. He welcomed democracy, supported European construction, and relied on Truman America. Against infiltration attempts, the Holy See responded with disciplinary measures rather than a new effort of reflection. Upon his death, the pontiff successors attempted a radically different approach from that of 1937, which “dialogue” sums up adequately. Unfortunately, this *ostpolitik* produced little. The papacy has been reproached for its alleged four-year silence on Nazism. The silence on communism was more complete and more systematic and it lasted 17 years, from the opening of Vatican II, until the official fall of the Leninist regime. We cannot yet take stock of all of the consequences.

The other challenge is that of the extension of Islam. I analyzed the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate*. The question of the Jews had long occupied the council and had reached a satisfactory conclusion. At that moment the Muslim authorities had said: And what about us? Then, as in symmetry of the deliberation on the Jews, the conciliar fathers hastened to add an addendum on Islam. This insufficiently deliberated addendum, in my opinion, has unfortunately linked the successor pontiffs, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and the present Pope. New explanations will be required by events.

Why did the Holy See, faced with these two great challenges, fail to find answers beyond those produced by the civil authorities of democratic countries? At this point, I arrive at the central thesis of my book. My diagnosis is that the main cause of these failures has been a lack of understanding of reality. And if there was such a lack, it is because the Church of Rome has slowly abandoned the ministry of intelligence which had been entrusted to her since her origins. I look at certain stages of this abandonment. The excess then the abandonment of ecclesiastical censures. The institution of the *Index*, which lasted almost four centuries and penalized the intellectual education of young clerics. Centralization for the benefit of the Roman siege, which continued imperturbably for several centuries, withdrawing from the supremacy over societies only by tightening its domination over the world of clerics. In this way, the Catholic world has become locked in upon itself and has

become an unfavourable environment for intellectual life.

This cannot last forever. By fully accepting religious liberty at the last Council, the Church deprived itself of the means of force which it had used and sometimes abused, all the more completely since these means of force and control had already been removed one by one by history. We must hope that the life of intelligence will return and that we will look with increased confidence at *Non praevalerunt* written on the dome of St. Peter.

It would be very improper to end this speech with a sermon. I am not qualified for that. But as a historian, and moreover, as holder of the Prix Guizot, I have the duty of pronouncing an exhortation on the centrality of religious reflection in the intellectual life of the historian. I have predecessors. Auguste Comte, observing that modern society needed a spiritual principle, made up a complete religion modelled on his childhood catechism. Max Weber, with genius and more common sense, gave religion the status of a system of understanding the world in organic relation to the structure of a society such as with Calvinism and capitalism. I wanted to imitate Calvin by trying to understand Orthodox and Bolshevik Russia through the religious structures of this country, taking them sometimes at face value sometimes as background influences. I can again cite great examples, Voltaire, Gibbon, Fustel de Coulanges, Renan, Toynbee, and, above all, François Guizot, who never separated his work as a historian from his Christian meditations.

Our “laïcité à la française”, the long legacy of Marxism or “soft Marxism”, has led to a certain abandonment of theological culture by French historians. They have locked deep within themselves whatever theological culture they previously had. Yet how can we not remember historians of our time, Henri Irénée Marrou, Alphonse Dupront, Pierre Chaunu, Gershom Scholem among many others, and the benefit they derived from their religious culture and how it enriched and sometimes transfigured their most successful works.

I will quote Bossuet in conclusion:

“As religion and political government are the two bases on which all human affairs are conducted, looking at what is present there and discovering by this means all the order and all the rest, is to understand in one's thoughts all that is great among men and to hold, so to speak, the thread of all the affairs of the universe.”