

FOR ALAIN BESANÇON

Mr. Chancellor,
Mr. Perpetual Secretary,
Mr. President of the Association François Guizot,
My dear colleagues,
My dear colleagues of the jury,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear Alain,

Our prize is awarded today for the second time bearing the name "Prix François Guizot-Institut de France" since its renaming in 2014, and for the twelfth time if we go back to its origin in 1993. The last recipient was Jacques Julliard whom I salute. In these times of uncertainty, let us rejoice in the longevity of this prize.

Since our last meeting in this room of the Institute, Joy de Ménil has kindly joined our jury. She replaces her father Georges de Ménil, one of the founders of the prize alongside Catherine Coste and François Furet.

On behalf of the jury that I am presiding, I will try to explain why we chose to honor Alain Besançon's book: *Problèmes religieux contemporains*, published by Editions de Fallois.

Alain Besançon is a friend of many of the members of this jury, and I would add, he is like a brother to me. Admiration, more than simple friendship, guided our choice. Friendship remains one of the greatest comforts of life, and the existence of each and every one of us is embellished by our participation in the good and great occurrences in the lives of those whom we admire. When they publish a grand and good book, our gratitude is added to our admiration.

Alain Besançon is a member of the Institute. Our jury freed itself from the consideration of this status and did not make it an obstacle to its choice, if an obstacle it could be. Moreover, this prize is not a prize of the Institute itself but is hosted by the Institute, and awarded here thanks to a convention passed between the Institute, on the one hand, and the Association François Guizot and the jury, on the other. But it is endowed by the Association itself and an independent jury, whose members are seconded to this task, makes the choice.

I will add that in December 1871, the biennial prize of the Institute was awarded to Guizot who belonged to three of the Academies and that Guizot used the sum received to endow a further prize awarded on a triennial basis, the "Prix Guizot of the Academie Française" which has continued since 1875, although the endowment has been reduced to a symbolic amount.

That a prize bearing the name of Guizot be awarded to a book dealing with contemporary religious problems and their repercussions in society should appear evident. Guizot, as a historian, a philosopher of history, knew the importance of religion, especially in what he called the history of civilization, or the history of Europe. Alain Besançon echoes the phrase of Bossuet: "Religion and civil government are the two points on which human affairs are based" and Guizot emphasizes the movement that always makes religion communicate with politics and vice versa. In other words, sometimes they tend to move towards one another, reassuring each other, sometimes they separate and even contradict themselves, but religion and politics always influence and answer to each other.

Thus, in fifth-century Gaul: civil society suffered from "*decadence, languor and inertia*" whereas in the monasteries of the South of France "*everything is movement, ardour, ambition, progress.*" In the East, the monasteries aimed at a separation from civil society, at contemplation, in the West, on the contrary, social monastic life was active "*illuminating a centre of intellectual development.*" It is there "*that one meditates, that one discusses, that one teaches, it is there that new ideas arise*". And so civilization in the West would take a different path than that in the East.

Camille Jullian had said that what was new in Guizot's books about the Middle Ages was "*the preponderant place given to the Church ... someone finally understood that religious feeling was central to medieval civilization*".

Of all the historical movements of our continent, Guizot wrote in 1855: "*One principle, one idea, one sentiment, whatever one would like to call it, has been on the map for the last fifteen years in all European societies ... and presides over their development: the sentiment of the dignity and rights of every man, by his humanity alone, and the duty of extending to all men the benefits of justice, sympathy and freedom ... This is the principle and the Christian truth par excellence ... to have extended to all humanity this right to justice, to sympathy, to freedom ... The unity of God maintained among the Jews, the unity of man restored to the Christians, these bright features reveal Divine action in the life of humanity.*"

Quite the proclamation!

The least we can say is that we do not speak thus today and that religion does not appear to be the *raison d'être*, the light of the contemporary world.

An opposing trend hovers over today's Europe. The shortcomings, weaknesses and difficulties of religion in our societies encourage us to read the book of Alain Besançon and to learn, to reflect thanks to him.

I do not know of any equivalent to this book in terms of the subject it deals with and the way it is treated. Also, perhaps because of its radical novelty, it has not yet received the attention it deserves. Although it is mainly devoted to Catholicism, its author tells me that it has not been listed in the so-called clerical press.

This will come, we can just wait and also help to make it known. But may I say to its author, without reproaching him and even admiringly, that his sharpness does not facilitate benevolent comments, much less the necessary acts of contrition. Thus when he writes: "*A defect exists in the Catholic Church since the earliest times, but which seems to me to be aggravated during the last centuries, and especially of the last one, in spite of the enormous diminution of the number of the faithful, the loss of power and prestige of this Church, namely, clericalism. For the clergy to remain removed from the laity, to consider the laity as 'minors', to have nothing to say about internal affairs, to keep theological science for themselves and to not take into account what they themselves might be taught, even on this point, by their flock. This painful dissymmetry in the relationship between the cleric and the laity would probably be lessened if both had in common the condition of married men. The priest would not be able to maintain this distance, this apparent loftiness, if he had beside him a woman who would not tolerate it and would even make fun of it. This is where we again discover the question of celibacy not as single cause, but as an aggravating factor of the disease of clericalism.*"

This should not fail to irritate some readers, even at the time of marriage equality! Voltaire already expressed the same regret about Catholicism. To criticize celibacy in the name of society, he emphasized the great political and literary contribution of the sons and daughters of pastors in Protestant countries.

But on this question, Alain Besançon bows to the current position of the Catholic Magisterium. Even if it is not based on dogma, the tradition that has been established will perhaps still persist for a very long time.

Let us talk about the most essential of our reasons for the choice of this book. I can say it in two words: it is a deep and severe book. The book's depth is due to the evident intelligence and fastidious knowledge it presents. For example, in defining the orthodoxy of Judaism and that of Christianity, Besançon shows the overlapping area between Judaism, Christianity and the orthodoxy of natural religions such as those of Aristotle or Plato, while he shows that Islam is distinct since it is a frank and honest reaction to Christianity and it denies the Jews their status as chosen people.

The book's severity is seen in its presentation of justice and courage. What I mean is that this book is severe on the weaknesses of the mind, a lack of discernment, that it is without indulgence towards them, and that it takes courage to write it, as opinions, doxa—as always, but especially today—attempt to avoid anything that could upset and break the charm of universal connivance. This courage, this severity, will not lead to admiration by the prudent. And that is enough to explain both our own choice and the silence that this book otherwise received.

Because it deals with great originality with the attitude of the Catholic Church with regard to three essential points of history of the 20th century: communism, the Shoah and Islam. On these three questions, Besançon seeks to understand the excesses of discernment.

Take the case of communism that collapsed a quarter of a century ago. An appraisal of attitudes, temptations, judgments, can be drawn up calmly today.

The encyclical of Pius XI, in 1937, *Divini redemptoris*, lucidly condemned the communist system, he used the term “lie” as was later done by the most exemplary critics of communism: Souvarine, Orwell, Koestler and Solzhenitsyn. At the same time, another encyclical condemned Nazism, thus affirming the parallelism of the two totalitarian systems of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, the successor Pope, Pius XII, remained too silent during the war, for reasons that can be understood without approving them. And that was the case as of the joint invasion, by the Russian communists and the German Nazis, of a Catholic country: Poland.

Pope John XXIII went beyond silence. In 1963, in *Pacem in terris*, with “an astonishing mistake”, as Besançon writes, he admitted that Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Lithuania were, I quote, “independent political communities”; as if the end of colonial empires had spread to the whole world.

“The Church” writes our author, *“had the feeling of a living through a great thaw. She had been on guard in front of Pius XII. The ‘good pope’ John XXIII having commanded a Rest! The world of clerics wanted to stretch their legs. The Council had decided that it would be pastoral and that it would not pronounce any condemnations. The Church had a bad memory of the Syllabus, the resounding condemnations of the previous popes, as vehement as they had been in vain. Anathema sit: we no longer wanted to hear this language from another age. The council wants to show a welcoming, good-natured face and opened its arms. In democratic times it is important to be nice to each other .”*

Indeed, it was as if in the shadows there was a new religion, the great competitor of Christianity, ready to replace it, her own daughter: the democratic religion, willing to neglect the truth in the name of peace and equality.

Fortunately, John Paul II, coming from Poland and exhorting courage, an essential term, redressed the balance. He proclaimed in the name of the Church the necessary independence of nations and the no less necessary respect for human rights. Through him and through his words came the raw light of truth in the face of the empire of lies.

How can one explain these excesses, these delays, these procrastinations? Alain Besançon's answer is cruel: *“It seems that in the misfortunes of the twentieth century, the Holy See and the Church suffered from an intellectual deficit. If the Church had been more attentive, there would have been no slippage, such as those statements of some prelates*

during the war that recognized the reality of the 'racial problem' and 'the Jewish problem', and we would not have not undertaken an ostpolitik whose outcomes were so unfruitful and discouraging. The Vatican in its foreign policy does not stand out better or worse from other Western decision-making centres, with equal goodwill. But we expected more from the Holy See than civil governments. If the popes with their broad and refined culture did no better than the ministers of our democracies, it is because the Church, in all of its personnel, was suffering from a numbness of intelligence." Numbness whose ancient roots Alain Besançon is going to probe in an entire chapter, in which he shows that institutions such as censorship and the index, forms of governance favouring increased centralization, have created a climate unfavourable to intellectual life and therefore to discernment within the Church.

With regard to Western policy towards the Soviet Union, you will allow me to be less severe. This policy was defined in 1947 by President Truman and his Secretary of State General Marshall, it had previously been advocated by a clairvoyant diplomat George F. Kennan. This policy inspired the United States until 1989—until the collapse of the Soviet Union—and so it succeeded. It was necessary to wait for Thermidor to safeguard democracy in Western Europe, contain the USSR, promote economic growth in the West and the unification of Europe. Sometimes some European countries seemed to diverge from this line, in order to hold an illusory line safe from American power. This American policy, greatly benefited the Catholic Church.

In conclusion, François Guizot was said to be the most Catholic of French Protestants. May I say that Alain Besançon is the most Protestant of French Catholics? Protestant in the full sense of the term. He protests for the truth, he is indignant at a lie. He is astonished at silence. He is sad not to be debated. Why does his book find no response from the clerical world? We do not know. But would we ask the Jesuits to praise Provincials? I will not hesitate to invoke Pascal and his principle: "Let us endeavour, then, to think well; this is the principle of morality." To think is to think rigorously. Besançon strives to do so, enlightened by Saint Augustine's motto "Faith seeking understanding." Is it not the duty and the business of us all? This book shows us how.