

Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon

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Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon

- Marie Bouvier de la Motte

- Guyon

(commonly known

as

Madame

Guyon)

(April

13,

1648

Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon

Born 13 April 1684

Montargis, in the Orléanais

Died 9 June 1717

Blois



- June 9, 1717) was a French mystic and one of the key advocates of Quietism. Quietism was considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, and she was imprisoned from 1695 to

1703 after publishing a book on it *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*.

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Early life and first marriage

Guyon's was the daughter of Claude Bouvier, a procurator of the tribunal of Montargis. She was of a sensitive and delicate constitution, she was sickly in her childhood and her education was much neglected. Incessantly going and coming between her home and the convent, and passing from one school to another, she changed her place of abode nine times in ten years. Her parents, who were very religious people, gave her an especially pious

training; while she received and retained profound impressions from her reading of the works of St. Francis de Sales, and her intercourse with certain nuns, her teachers. At one period she desired to become a nun, as one of her elder sisters had, but this desire did not last long. When scarcely 16 years of age, she accepted the hand of a wealthy gentleman of Montargis, Jacques Guyon, twenty-two years older than herself. After twelve years of a union in which she gave more devotion than it yielded her happiness, Madame Guyon lost in succession two of her children and her husband. Thus, at 28 she was left a widow with three young children.

Already during her marriage, Guyon was introduced to mysticism by Père Lacombe, a Barnabite. It was under his direction she passed through a series of interior experiences which are described in her autobiography.

Post Marriage Life

After her husband's death, Madame Guyon felt herself drawn to Geneva. She left her children and repaired to Annecy, to Thonon, where she was to find Père Lacombe (July, 1681) and again place

herself under his direction. She began to disseminate her mystical ideas, but, in consequence of the effects they produced, the Bishop of Geneva, M. D'Aranthon d'Alex, who had at first viewed her coming with satisfaction, asked her to leave his diocese, and at the same time expelled Père Lacombe, who betook himself to the Bishop of Vercelli.

Madame Guyon followed her director to Turin, then returned to France and stayed at Grenoble, where she published the "Moyen court" (January, 1685) and spread her doctrine. But here, too, the Bishop of Grenoble, Cardinal Le Camus, was perturbed by the opposition which she aroused. At his request she left the city; she rejoined Père Lacombe at Vercelli and a year later they went back to Paris (July, 1686). Forthwith Madame Guyon set about to gain adherents for her mystical theories. But the moment was ill-chosen. Louis XIV, who had recently been exerting himself to have the Quietism of Molinos condemned at Rome, was by no means pleased to see gaining ground, even in his own capital, a form of mysticism, which, to him, resembled that of Molinos in many of its aspects. By his order Père Lacombe was shut up in the Bastille, and afterwards in the castles of Oloron and of Lourdes.

The arrest of Madame Guyon, delayed by illness, followed shortly (29 January 1688); brought about, she claimed, by her own brother, Père de La Motte, a Barnabite.

She was not set at liberty until seven months later, after she had placed in the hands of the theologians, who had examined her book, a retraction of the propositions which it contained. Some days later (October, 1688) she met, at Beyne, in the Duchess de Béthune-Charrost's country house, the Abbé de Fénelon, who was to be the most famous of her disciples. She won him by her piety and her understanding of the paths of spirituality. Between them there was established a union of piety and of friendship into which no element ever insinuated itself that could possibly be taken to resemble carnal love, even unconscious. Through Fénelon the influence of Madame Guyon penetrated, or was increased in, religious circles powerful at court--among the Beauvilliers, the Chevreuses, the Montemarts--who were under his spiritual direction. Madame de Maintenon, and through her, the young ladies of Saint-Cyr, were soon gained over to the new mysticism. This was the height of Madame Guyon's fortune, most of all when Fénelon was appointed (18 August 1688) tutor to the Duke of Burgundy,

the king's grandson. Before long, however, the Bishop of Chartres, in whose diocese Saint-Cyr happened to be, took alarm at the spiritual ideas which were spreading there. Warned by him, Madame de Maintenon sought the advice of persons whose piety and prudence recommended them to her, and these advisers were unanimous in their reprobation of Madame Guyon's ideas. Madame Guyon then asked for an examination of her conduct and her writings by civil and ecclesiastical judges. The king consented that her writings should be submitted to the judgment of Bossuet, of the Bishop of Châlons (afterwards Archbishop of Paris and Cardinal de Noailles), and of M. Tronson, superior of the Society of Saint-Sulpice.

After a certain number of secret conferences held at Issy, where Tronson was detained by a sickness, the commissioners presented in thirty-four articles the principles of Catholic teaching as to spirituality and the interior life (four of these articles were suggested by Fénelon, who in February had been nominated to the Archbishopric of Cambrai). But the Archbishop of Paris, who had been excluded from the conferences at Issy, anticipated their results by condemning the published works of Madame Guyon (10 October 1694). She, fearing

another arrest, took refuge for some months at Meaux, with the permission of Bossuet, then bishop of that see. After placing in his hands her signed submission to the thirty-four articles of Issy, she returned secretly to Paris, where the police, however, arrested her (24 December 1695) and imprisoned her, first at Vincennes, then in a convent at Vaugirard, and then in the Bastille, where she again signed (23 August 1696) a retraction of her theories and an undertaking to refrain from further spreading them. From that time she took no part, personally, in public discussions, but the controversy about her ideas only grew all the more heated between Bossuet and Fénelon.

Madame Guyon remained imprisoned in the Bastille until 21 March 1703, when she went, after more than seven years of captivity, to live with her son in a village in the Diocese of Blois. There she passed some fifteen years in silence and isolation, spending her time writing poetry.

She was still venerated by the Beauvilliers, the Chevreuses, and Fénelon, who never failed to communicate with her whenever safe and discreet intermediaries were to be found.

Mysticism

Guyon believed that we should pray all the time, whatever one was doing to be also spending time with God. "Prayer is the key of perfection and of sovereign happiness ; it is the efficacious means of getting rid of all vices and of acquiring all virtues ; for the way to become perfect is to live in the presence of God. He tells us this Himself: 'Walk before me, and be thou perfect' (Gen. xvii. i). Prayer alone can bring you into His presence, and keep you there continually."^[1]

As she wrote in one of her poems:

“ There was a period when I chose
A time and place for prayer ;
At morning dawn or evening close,
My feet would wander there :—

But now I seek that constant
prayer,
In inward stillness known,
And thus my spirit every where
Can dwell with God alone. ”

First she attained a lively sentiment of the presence of God, perceived as a tangible reality. Prayer becomes easy to her; in it she is vouchsafed a savour of God which detaches her from creatures. This is what she calls "the union of the powers". She remains in this state for eight years; it is succeeded by another state in which she loses the sense of God's graces and favours, she has no taste for anything spiritual, is powerless to act, and afraid of her own baseness. This was the state of "mystical death" in which she remained for seven years; from this crisis she passes, as it were re-awakened and transformed, into the state of resurrection and new life. Whereas in the first of the three states she possessed God, in this last state she is possessed by Him; then God was united to the powers of her soul, but now He is united to its substance; it is He who acts in her; she becomes like an automaton in His hands; she writes remarkable things without preparation and without reflection. Her own activity disappears, to be replaced by the action of God which moves her, and she now enters into the "apostolic state". This apostolate she is to exercise not in preaching the Gospel, but in spreading the mystical life, the theory of which she presents in the "Moyen court et facile de faire oraison" (Short and Easy Method

of Prayer), a work inspired mostly by her own experiences. In this work she distinguishes three kinds of prayer. The first is meditation properly so-called, the second is "the prayer of simplicity", which consists in keeping oneself in a state of recollection and silence in the presence of God; in the third, which is active contemplation, the soul, conscious that God is taking possession of it, leaves Him to act and remains in repose, abandoning itself to the Divine effluence which fills it -- powerless to ask anything for itself, since it has renounced all its own interests. This last state is pure love.

She also wrote "Torrents spirituels", and some commentaries on books of the Bible.

Death and Memory

Her writings began to be published in The Netherlands in 1704, and brought her new admirers. Englishmen and Germans--among them Wettstein and Lord Forbes--visited her at Blois. Through them Madame Guyon's doctrines became known among Protestants and in that soil took vigorous root. But she did not live to see this unlooked for diffusion of her writings. She died at

Blois, at the age of 68, protesting in her will that she died submissive to the Catholic Church, from which she had never had any intention of separating herself. Her doctrines, like her life, have nevertheless given rise to the widest divergences of opinion. Her published works (the "Moyen court" and the "Règles des associées à l'Enfance de Jésus") having been placed on the Index in 1688, and Fénelon's "Maximes des saints" branded with the condemnation of both the pope and the bishops of France, the Church has thus plainly reprobated Madame Guyon's doctrines, a reprobation which the extravagance of her language would in itself sufficiently justify.

Her strange conduct brought upon her severe censures, in which she could see only manifestations of spite. Evidently, she too often fell short of due reserve and prudence; but after all that can be said in this sense, it must be acknowledged that her morality appears to have given no grounds for serious reproach. Bossuet, who was never indulgent in her regard, could say before the full assembly of the French clergy: "As to the abominations which have been held to be the result of her principles, there was never any question of the horror she testified for them." It is remarkable, too, that her disciples at the Court of

Louis XIV were always persons of great piety and of exemplary life.

On the other hand, Madame Guyon's warmest partisans after her death were to be found among the Protestants. It was a Dutch Protestant, the pastor Poiret, who began the publication of her works; a Vaudois pietist pastor, Duthoit-Mambrini, continued it. Her autobiography was translated into English and German, and her ideas, long since forgotten in France, have for generations been read in Germany, Switzerland, England, and America.

Johannes Kelpius wrote a tract on "inner prayer" that is based almost completely on the ideas of Madame Guyon. Kelpius emigrated from German lands with about 20 others in 1694 and lived as a hermit along the Wissahickon Creek in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This tract has been newly translated by Kirby Don Richards, Ph.D.

See also

- List of Christian mystics
- Christian mysticism
- Quietism

Works

French

- *Vie de Madame Guyon, écrite par elle-même* [Life of Madame Guyon, Written by Herself] (3 vols, Paris, 1791) a compilation made from various fragments
- Complete edition of Madame Guyon's works, including the autobiography and five volumes of letters, in twenty volumes (1767-1791)
- The most important works are published separately, *Opuscules spirituels* [Spiritual Opuscules] (2 vols, Paris, 1790)

English

- *Jeanne Guyon: An Autobiography*, Whitaker House, 1997 edition: ISBN 0-88368-402-0, online versions
- *Experiencing God Through Prayer*, Whitaker House, 2005, ISBN 0-88368-179-X, online versions
- *Song of the Bride*, Whitaker House, 2002, ISBN 0-88368-682-1 allegory of Christian relation to Christ in Song of Solomon, online

versions

- *Experiencing Union with God Through Inner Prayer & the Way and Rescues of Union with God*, Bridge-Logos Publishers, 2002, ISBN 0-88270-873-2
- *Intimacy With Christ*, Seedsowers, 1989, ISBN 0-940232-36-7
- *Final Steps in Christian Maturity*, Seedsowers, 1985, ISBN 0-940232-22-7
- *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*, Seedsowers, 1981, ISBN 0-940232-00-6
- *Spiritual Progress*[1]

References

This article incorporates text from the Catholic Encyclopedia (1913), a publication now in the public domain.

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- Louis Guerrier, *Madame Guyon, sa vie, sa doctrine, et son influence*, (Paris dissertation, 1881), reviewed by Brunetière, *Nouvelles Études critiques* [New Critical Studies], vol. ii.
- Henri Delacroix, *Études sur le mysticisme*

- [Studies on Mysticism] (Paris, 1908).
- Kelpius, Johannes, and Richards, Kirby, Ph.D. *A Method of Prayer. A Mystical Pamphlet from Colonial America*. Philadelphia: Schuylkill Wordsmiths, 2006. (A new translation of Kelpius's pamphlet, with informative background materials and the original German. Available at Amazon.com.)
 - Coslet, Dorothy *Madame Jeanne Guyon: Child of Another World*, Christian Literature Crusade, 1984, ISBN 0-875081-44-4

External links

- Guyon's poetry (translated into English by William Cowper)
- Biography from *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1914)
- Biography with links to works online
- Guyon's continuing influence
- *Spiritual Progress* including works of Francois Fenelon and Guyon's "Method of Prayer" and "On The Way to God" in English translation (1853) from "Opuscules spirituels"

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