

## University of Geneva

### INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM

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## **Madame Guyon (1648-1717). Mysticism and politics at the Court of Versailles**

(On the occasion of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death)

Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte (1648-1717), better known as Madame Guyon, remains to this day one of the most singular figures in the history of religion. As a woman, as a lay person, as a writer and a mystic who lived during the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King of France, this “illustrious unknown” - as Louis Cognet called her in *Crépuscule des mystiques* (1958) – demonstrated a remarkable and unprecedented intellectual independence for her time, passionately claiming freedom of expression at various levels, both in her literary and spiritual life, as well as in her public and social, even “political” life.

On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the death of Madame Guyon, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Geneva and its research institute (IRSE) wishes to organize an international symposium bringing together historians, theologians, literary scholars and philosophers. It aims to raise the question of the mystical work of this sometimes confusing figure of the French *Grand Siècle* and to debate the social and political implications of her opinions and actions, which go beyond the theological framework of the quarrel over Quietism. More specifically, we would like to have the doctrine of Madame Guyon interact with the spiritual, political and cultural context of the *Ancien Régime*. This approach could help us better understand the circularity between action and prayer, social life and mystical life at the heart of this woman's journey, who was also a public figure arousing both distrust and admiration, notably at the Court of Versailles.

Three approaches will be taken into account in order to highlight the originality of Madame Guyon's work and to raise questions about the spiritual, ethical and political stakes of her thoughts:

### **1. Active Living and Contemplative Life**

Engaged in a personal spiritual approach, independent of any religious order, Madame Guyon is perceived as being subversive in a context (the *Ancien Régime*) where social and gender roles were fixed. But how is one to interpret her wandering apostolate and her role as “directing Lady”, as one of her judges, Louis Tronson, maliciously called her during the quarrel over “pure love”? How can a modern-day reader apprehend her invitation to an “active or very active passivity” rooted in faith? Through such dialectics between activity and passivity, fed by preaching and by the very act of writing,

could it be that there is more than just the spiritual subject that is being constructed, but also a political and social subject in the making, or even a new feminine identity?

## 2. Politics, ethics and mysticism under Louis XIV

Introduced to Versailles in 1689 thanks to Madame de Maintenon, Madame Guyon gathered around her a group of dissenting aristocrats (among whom were the Duke and the Duchess of Beauvillier, the Duc de Chevreuse, the Princesse d'Harcourt), and creates the Secret Brotherhood of the Michelins, a utopian political and religious movement which is thinking of establishing a “Reign of pure love” through the accession to the throne of the young Duke of Burgundy, grandson of Louis XIV and to whom Fenelon was the private tutor. In what consisted the political Guyonian project? Was it only a dream, a utopia devoid of any realism, even delirious? Or, on the contrary, could the mystical opinions of Madame Guyon have a subversive side able to challenge the notions of State and of Society, in a time of royal absolutism, as well as the relationship between Church and State? But above all, what was the real reason (political, theological and theoretical) this woman was perceived as dangerous, to the point of being expelled from the Court in 1693 and plunged in the midst of a violent quarrel around Quietism, before being imprisoned for several years first at Vincennes, then at the Bastille?

## 3. Reception and Influence of Madame Guyon's Work

Released in 1703, Madame Guyon died in 1717, after devoting the last years of her life to training disciples from different countries and backgrounds, including many Scots, Dutch and Swiss of Protestant origins who met in the house of Blois, where she had been placed under house arrest. Guyonian spirituality has had a profound underground influence on very heterogeneous circles, which were not only Catholic but also Protestant, as witnessed by such figures as John Wesley, leader of the Methodist Church, the Lutheran Friedrich von Fleischbein, as well as on German pietist literature. It is to the Calvinist theologian Pierre Poiret and the Lausanne pastor Dutoit-Membrini that we owe the publication, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, of the works of a woman who can rightly be regarded as a true precursor of spiritual ecumenism.

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By organising this international colloquium on the occasion of the third centenary of the death of Madame Guyon, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Geneva and its research institute (IRSE) invite us to explore new avenues of thought around the life works of this emblematic figure of the religious thought of the Modern Age, whose influence proved to be long-lasting in both Catholic and Protestant circles.

*Mariel Mazzocco et Ghislain Waterlot*