

Bossuet – Artist, Intellectual and Man of Politics

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Bossuet – Artist, Intellectual and Man of Politics

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Table of Content

Preface	7
Hans-Christian Günther	
Remarks on Bossuet	9
Bossuet's place in European intellectual history	9
Bossuet as a political thinker	21
Bossuet and the mirror of princes literature	27
Bossuet's political thought and its background	33
Bossuet's political thought in its contemporary and modern context	45
Paul Richard Blum	
Piety of Soul and Body – Philosophy of Mind in Bossuet's Spirituality	51
Discover yourself	53
Sensation and passion	59
Understanding and discernment	63
Body and soul	69
A Jesuit Commentary on Aristotle's Theory of Senses	76
Conclusion	78
Register	85

Preface

This volume unites two papers by Paul Richard Blum and Hans-Christian Günther given at an international conference in Strasbourg in 2015. We hope that published together in this volume they can serve a useful purpose by introducing a non specialist readership to a great figure of European culture and intellectual history.

April 2019

Paul Richard Blum/ Hans-Christian Günther

Remarks on Bossuet

Hans-Christian Günther

I

Bossuet's place in European intellectual history

Bossuet was probably one of the most influential figures of his time, both politically and intellectually, and this combination alone makes him at least a rare phenomenon, not only in his own time. Above all, he exercised his influence from a high position in the nation which in his epoch clearly dominated Europe both culturally and politically. Still, he is certainly not among the most well-known people of European history, be it political or intellectual history. I am afraid that outside France he is hardly known at all and how much he is present in France herself outside a strictly specialized scholarly milieu I dare to doubt.

Of course, he is not the only one who suffered this fate. It frequently happens that huge successes in the lifetime of a great man obscure his image in later generations. Still, I think in Bossuet's case there are reasons which can be pinned down and

which tell us a good deal about his specific place in European history and that of his epoch as well.

Let us begin with the latter aspect. The French 17th century marks, in my opinion, an important turning point in European history. It is the century which saw – for various reasons I cannot discuss here – the triumph of the counterreformation. I would provocatively put it like this: the 17th century was the last moment in European history when Catholicism made a leading contribution to European culture. From the so-called Enlightenment onward Catholicism degenerated into one single battle of retreat or – as it is today – an ever less significant footnote of history. Why is this so? And what does it imply about the character of this time that Catholicism could return triumphantly although it had long become obsolete through the reformation?

First of all, the French 17th century shares Bossuet's fate of being widely absent from modern European awareness as a cultural entity in its own right. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that it is dominated for us by such an eminent figure as Descartes, who is considered to be one of the most up-to-date thinkers in the history of thought up to the present day. But his, in a way, unique greatness has only contributed to pushing other intellectual figures, even Pascal and Leibniz, somehow into the

background, not to speak of thinkers like Fénelon and the man to whom this volume is dedicated, Bossuet.

Moreover, the lack of proper appreciation of the French 17th century extends to its enormous literary and musical contribution as well: Couperin, to name only the greatest musician of the time, a first rate composer and possibly the only one who can compare in elegance and perfection to Mozart, is markedly absent from modern concert life, despite the fact that he was or is championed even on the modern piano by pianists as great as Marcelle Meyer, Georges Cziffra and today Grigory Sokolov. The Shakespeare-enthusiasm of the 18th century almost eliminated French classical theatre from European literary awareness, even though Racine is the only poet – if any – who deserves to be ranked with the great Attic dramatists.

Both these cases seem to me to reveal part of the reason for this oblivion: the music of Couperin, the poetry of Racine are typically French. Neither can be appreciated without a sense of the typical Romanesque ideal of an art where form is as indispensable as content, where mere formal beauty may even substitute for great content. This is, I would say, the Roman heritage in European culture, which after the Latin classics French culture incarnates to perfection. From the second half of the 18th century onward a new artistic approach began to dominate Europe, an approach which

was both essentially German and indelibly shaped by the Enlightenment. To serve as the model of European culture, it favoured a reinterpretation of classical antiquity which put the accent ostentatiously on the grand and, in the wake of the Enlightenment, on morally edifying content. The fact that an essentially German approach came to dominate Europe and eventually displaced the French contribution to European culture in the 19th century, which in my opinion is of no lesser worth, is certainly due to the overwhelming influence of Goethe, the towering figure of European culture of all times. This was possible because Goethe had an enormous sensitivity and ability to appreciate the spirit of other cultures, even oriental ones, although he assimilated and valued them only in so far they could be integrated into his concept of man which, universal as it was, was a very specific one, as he was well aware, and which he intentionally imposed on art and thinking.

I cannot go into this further, but I would like to emphasize the following point. At the time of the Weimar classics, Germany, and along with it European culture, is characterized by a failure to appreciate properly the specifically Roman and Romanesque spirit of European culture. Nothing is more revealing of this than Hegel's almost grotesque condemnation of the Roman spirit which

– not by chance – was shaped by his interpretation of the French revolution and Napoleonic France.¹

If this loss of sensibility for form as an artistic value in its own right could push into sheer oblivion a poet as great and universal as Racine, it is little wonder that Bossuet, the only prose writer of modern Europe to reach the artistic level of Cicero or Plato, was doomed to suffer an even crueler fate, given the ever growing hostility towards rhetoric in general. But there is more to the lack of appreciation of the French spirit, which is so perfectly enshrined in 17th century France.

In order to make this clear I must first make some general remarks about the place of the 17th century in European intellectual history, which, however, will lead us right away to the heart of the question, that is Bossuet's specific significance for it. Yet at the same, this aspect allows me to come back to my previous claim that the 17th century was the last triumph of Catholicism in European culture.

The 17th century is marked by a decidedly optimistic outlook, mainly in the sense of a strong belief in the world's being an order clearly explicable and intelligible to human reason. It is marked by a combination of philosophy and natural science in

¹ See Rocco Lonzano in: Günther 2015: 281ff.

which the outlook of a triumphant science gives shape to philosophy and determines the latter's predominantly rationalist tendency. This alliance reached its apex in Newton's mechanics, and the famous epitaph by Pope describes this – as I call it – optimistic spirit of the epoch very well:

Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night:
God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was Light.

Still, this rationalistic spirit could dominate the intellectual climate so uncontestedly because it felt itself in utter harmony with religious belief. The ever more precise description of natural laws in mathematical terms seemed to confirm the notion that the world constitutes an order analogous to the creation of a rational mind. Perhaps this spirit is best expressed in Richard Bentley's lecture series 'A Refutation of Atheism', in which Bentley, a fellow and correspondent of Newton's, derides the hypothesis that the immensely complex order of the universe could have come about by chance and exposes it as a folly comparable to that of a man assuming that Vergil's 'Aeneid' could be the product of chance rather than of an ingenious human mind. And indeed, one may say that the purely mechanistic explanation of the world made the assumption of god as the ultimate placeholder in this universe an

intellectually plausible one. For the first time in the history of Christian thought, an honest and complete convergence of rationality with the Christian faith was made possible. And although this convergency was soon to be seriously challenged by Kant (not by the Enlightenment as a whole), it became obsolete once and for all only with Darwin's theory of evolution, surely the most important step towards the modern image of the world ever taken, and not by chance still not really appreciated and understood by many today.

However things may be, this harmony allowed not only for a co-existence of Christian faith and reason – so to speak for the Thomistic model –, but moreover for a full union and fusion of the two. It seems to me that this union in all its richness of intellectual possibilities is expressed most fully in the French 17th century. Thus, it is not a coincidence that France was the culturally leading country of the age.

This is not meant to imply that such a development could not be observed elsewhere as well, but it is in France that we find a particularly remarkable mixture of rationalism and spirituality. In the same epoch, France saw not only one of the most rationalist thinkers of all times, Descartes, but also a truly spiritual figure like François Fénelon or the mysticism of Madame Guyon. In Descartes's great antipode Pascal, it saw a blend of the sharpest

rational mind with a keen awareness both of its shortcomings and its need for spiritual complement.

This seemingly unproblematic blend of rationalism with true spirituality seems to me to be a typically French attitude. It can already be discerned in the great French reformer Calvin, whose significance is so often and unduly obscured by Luther's shadow. In a passage from his '*Institutio Religionis Christianae*', Calvin, the French humanist and rationalist, remarks that even though he could prove to everyone by reason only that the teaching of the Bible is correct, he will not do so because the divine truth of it can be only be grasped fully by the imprint of the Holy Spirit in the human heart.² This complete blend of crystal clear spiritual thought and feeling for the need of an ulterior commitment seems to me a typically French achievement, detectable until the 20th century in such eminent figures as Simone Weil and Theilhard de Chardin.

It is obvious that Descartes was the towering intellectual figure of his time, and his thought, as I have said above, is still immediately relevant to our time, which is true to some degree also of Pascal. Unfortunately, his enormous influence is at the same time responsible for the fact that all other French thinkers of

² Calvin, inst. I 7,4.

his epoch save perhaps Pascal were unduly pushed to the margins, as happened to many and to Bossuet in particular. Yet Bossuet embodies, more than anyone else, the spirit of this remarkable time of transition, which progressed from a peak marked by the fusion of Christian religiosity with reason to its ultimate dissolution in the Enlightenment.

It is certainly true that Bossuet's thought cannot compare in originality or innovative power neither with Descartes nor with Pascal. But is originality or innovativeness the sole yardstick of a thinker? Heidegger once said that only a lesser mind has all from himself, the great thinker has all from others, i.e. the tradition of thinking. Of course, the greatest thinkers like Descartes transform this heritage so as to produce something essentially different. Still, it is a remarkable intellectual achievement as well to, so to speak, epitomize in one's thought the whole spirit of the epoch, which Bossuet does in a remarkably wide-ranging way, but above all to represent the context of a man of action too, an achievement which in some respect elevates Bossuet above purely intellectual figures like Descartes or Pascal.

Bossuet exposes with rare clarity, precision and conciseness the political philosophy, the epistemology, the philosophy of history and the theology of his time. Moreover, Bossuet confronts these tasks in writings which are not

philosophical treatises addressed to a small circle of intellectuals. Rather, he develops his ideas in works aimed, so to speak, at the social and political establishment of his time: in treatises aimed at the royal successor, in sermons delivered at the royal court. His writings are intended to have a political effect on the society of his time. They were the intellectual justifications and teachings of a man who, above all, was a man of action, yet also a great intellectual.

That a statesman or politician should try to justify his political actions on a decent intellectual level is rare enough, just as the fact that he has an education worthy of note or intellectual capacity in the strict sense. Intellectuals regularly fail in politics. But occasionally, they make true statesmen. In fact, there was one such man and of the highest order in the generation before Bossuet, the man who built the political system of which Bossuet was among the prime exponents, Cardinal Richelieu. Contrary to what his great antagonist Pope Urban implied in his famous verdict on his death: “If there is a God, Richelieu will have much to answer for. If there is not, he has done very well.”, he was not at all a cynic. Richelieu was not only an enormously educated man and patron of art, he had a razor sharp mind, and his treatises show that he justified what he did on the highest intellectual level, especially in his testament. He was a man who restored or rather

put into place a new order after the greatest disaster which befell Europe after a long time, not unlike Augustus many centuries ago. And if there is an époque which can be compared in glory of political and cultural achievement to the Augustan age it is that which Richelieu initiated and of which Bossuet formed part.³ As such, it was optimistic in outlook as well as rationalist, in line with the intellectual climate marked by the reconciliation of science with religion that prevailed at the time. Just as the intellectual blend of reason and faith, rationality and spirituality which I described above, Richelieu's concept of the absolutistic state shows a perfect harmony of state reason and ethics, in which no real conflict can arise between the common good and the good of the individual in the highest sense. For obvious reasons, such an idea may be hard to swallow for us today. It is the direct opposite of the famous dictum of Iwan in Dostojewsky's 'The Brothers Karamasoff', who rejects even 'the eternal harmony if it costs the tear of a child', the very dictum, by the way, so impressively repeated by Simone Weil in the last, horror-ridden century.⁴

Yet, for the 17th century the possibility, even necessity of this eternal harmony was an honest belief, a belief justified on the highest level by a thinker of the stature of Leibniz.

³ See Günther 2010: 171ff.

⁴ See Günther 2015: 157.

Bossuet was not a politician of the stature of Richelieu, but he was an intellectual of high rank who – as a rare exception – was also an influential politician and who saw his place in action, in serving what he could honestly believe to be the common, even the universal good. In addition to that, he was an artist, the greatest prose stylist, I dare say, of modern times: the only modern prose writer who reached the stylistic level of the greatest stylists of antiquity, Plato and Cicero. And it is not by chance that the only poet who could make a comparable claim in the field of poetry was his contemporary Racine. In a way, Bossuet compares best with Cicero precisely in the unique combination of man of action, high ranking intellectual and artist. But whereas Cicero, for all his achievements, failed as a professional politician, Bossuet succeeded. Again, as a unique blend of highest success in life, in action, thought and form, he embodies, as no one else does, the essential spirit of his epoch. And this epoch, as I would like to stress once more, constitutes the peak and the lasting heritage of the French spirit to Europe. One may say that French absolutism became obsolete relatively soon and inevitably so, but something else endured.

Richelieu introduced to politics a sense of state that never failed France until recent times; in every profound crisis the country managed to produce men who by their supreme sense of

state, of harmony between political conviction and sound pragmatism saved their country from disaster and even preserved its national dignity: Talleyrand after the Napoleonic disaster, Clemenceau in World War I and above all Charles de Gaulle, the only real statesman of the West after World War II. All these men, like Richelieu, left a legacy of pragmatism blended with a strong sense of dignity and vision, which persisted in France for a series of political leaders after De Gaulle, whatever their faults may have been. This tradition has only failed her, alas, since her last three presidents. The disastrous consequences for Europe as a whole are too obvious to be in need of being pointed out. Thus, despite the utterly changed image of the modern world, we still have to learn a lot, culturally and politically, of the spirit of which, as I hope to have made clear, Bossuet was probably the most unique and perfect combination.

II

Bossuet as a Political Thinker

I have just described Bossuet as a prime exponent of the 17th century insofar as it constitutes an epoch of transition characterized by a uniquely optimistic outlook, achieved by an

almost complete harmony between reason and religion, reason and spirituality or sentiment. As I have stressed, of this unique blend there is hardly a more eminent and universal example than Bossuet. In what follows, I shall add a few complementary remarks on Bossuet's political thought in this context. As was mentioned before, Bossuet's a contribution to political philosophy is overshadowed by that of other great thinkers not only of his own epoch but also of those preceding or immediately following the epoch he lived in. To begin with, I would like to dwell upon the notion of Bossuet's time as a time of political transition. I am not a historian, so I am not concerned with the problem of demarcation between epochs in strictly historical or social terms. But regardless of what the quality of social changes, the role of the nobility or bourgeoisie, the economical and the power changes were, of whether the 17th century should be viewed as the beginning of the modern French state or as the last phase of the feudal state, it is pretty clear that the beginning of the French centralist state is to be found in the regime based mainly on the political concepts of Richelieu. He laid the groundwork for the consolidation of a centralist administrative power and the regime he formed constitutes in a way the cradle of the modern French state on the way to which, politically, – at least in my opinion – the French revolution was rather an episode than a crucial caesura.