



# Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

Ceremony to award the insignia of  
Grand Officier de la Légion d'Honneur  
to Sir Michael Atiyah

French Residence, 12 December 2011

*Cher* Sir Michael, Lady Atiyah,  
Presidents,  
Chancellors,  
Ambassador,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great honour, Sir Michael, for me and for all of us here today to welcome you to the Ambassador's Residence, along with your family and leading figures and colleagues, to present you with the insignia of *Grand Officier de la Légion d'Honneur*. It's a rare honour. Never before – and this is my fourth posting as French Ambassador – have I had the opportunity to award such a high distinction.

But such an eminent figure, such a great scientific mind, fully deserves such recognition by France.

Today, the French Republic honours your huge achievements in the field of mathematics, which have certainly made you one of the most influential living mathematicians. It recognizes the eminent role you've played for years as researcher, academic, university chancellor, President of the Royal Society and other learned societies, and in helping to bring French and British mathematicians closer together. The influence your work has had on our mathematicians has helped raise the profile of mathematics.

*Cher* Sir Michael, you were born in April 1929 in London, in the Borough of Hampstead. Your father was from Lebanon – a country that holds a special place in my heart, because I was Ambassador there – and your mother was Scottish. It was probably they who instilled in you the tenacity that has enabled

you, throughout your long career, to resolve the most intractable mathematical problems but also to raise even more complex ones!

You developed a taste for mathematics at a very early age. Didn't your father say he knew you would become a mathematician when you started making money exchanging local and foreign currencies during trips abroad as a child?

You spent your youth in Africa – in Khartoum, then in Alexandria from 1941 to 1945 – before completing your studies in Manchester. You then entered the prestigious Trinity College, Cambridge, and six years later submitted your thesis, the starting-point for a brilliant career as a mathematician. But you also took an interest in architecture and archaeology, two fields in which you would undoubtedly have excelled just as much!

The originality of your work earned you a year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. On your return to Cambridge in 1957, you were a research fellow and then a lecturer at Pembroke College. Four years later you left Cambridge for the University of Oxford, where you became a fellow at St Catherine's College and held the chair of Savilian Professor of Geometry from 1963 to 1969. Apart from a three-year spell back in Princeton, you remained in Oxford until 1990, becoming Royal Society Research Professor; in the mid-seventies you were also President of the London Mathematical Society. You returned to Cambridge as Master of Trinity College in 1990, and in the same year became the first director of the city's Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences, which you had been instrumental in creating. In addition to these already time-consuming roles, you were President of the Royal Society from 1990 to 1995. Finally, you worked as Chancellor of the University of Leicester from 1995 to 2005, then President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 2005 to 2008.

I want to pay special tribute to your wife, Lady Atiyah, who has made the journey from Scotland with you, and whom this award also honours, because she has unwaveringly supported you throughout your long career.

After this long scientific career and these very many responsibilities, you were wise enough, at the age of nearly 80, to retire to the magnificent Scotland you so love and become Honorary Professor at the University of Edinburgh, in the School of Mathematics.

Sir Michael, you're also a great sharer and imparter of knowledge. You've collaborated with dozens of mathematicians of many nationalities, shattering the illusion of the solitary mathematician and showing that dialogue is essential to resolving the most complex problems. As you once said, "If you attack a mathematical problem directly, very often you come to a dead end, nothing you do seems to work and you feel that if only you could peer round the corner there might be an easy solution. There is nothing like having somebody else beside you, because he can usually peer round the corner."

You've trained several generations of students and researchers – in the United Kingdom of course but also many in the United States – who have developed your ideas and today form a dynamic mathematics community and hold leading positions in scientific circles the world over.

The scale of your life's work has earned you a large number of prizes. You have been awarded the three most renowned distinctions in mathematics. The first was the Fields Medal, which you received in 1966 – at the age of only 37! In 1988 you were awarded the Royal Society of London's Copley Medal, and in 2004, for your work as a whole, the Abel Prize, regarded as the "mathematician's Nobel prize". In 2010 you were the second mathematician

whom the French *Académie des Sciences* – of which you've been a member since 1978 – distinguished with its *Grande Médaille*, awarded to you in January 2010. Among other distinctions, I would highlight the Royal Society's Royal Medal in 1968, the London Mathematical Society's De Morgan Medal in 1980 and the Antonio Feltrinelli Prize from the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in 1981. You also received the King Faisal International Prize for Science in 1987. You're a foreign member of the United States National Academy of Sciences, France's *Académie des Sciences*, the German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and most of the European, not to mention the Russian, Indian and Chinese academies – all in all, about 20 academies. You've received honorary degrees from more than 30 universities.

You were knighted by the Queen in 1983.

You've also been very active in the international arena, holding the presidency of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs between 1997 and 2002 and contributing to the InterAcademy Panel on International Issues. Finally, at European level and also on a more bilateral note, I want to pay tribute to your role from the 1960s onwards in rebuilding mathematical ties between European countries, particularly via the European Mathematical Society. You were the first eminent British mathematician to acknowledge and use the new geometrical ideas developed in France by Jean Leray, Henri Cartan, Jean-Pierre Serre, Alain Connes and Alexandre Grothendieck, which led to a turning-point in algebraic geometry at global level. You also restored great vitality to cooperation between the British and French schools of differential geometry. And many people remember the care you took, when you were President of the Royal Society, to cultivate closer ties with our *Académie des Sciences*. In 1997, you were appointed president of the first evaluation committee of the *Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques*, France's most prestigious mathematical research

institution, whose Director, Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, I'm delighted to have with us today.

For all these reasons, and because of your contribution to Franco-British relations in the field of science, the Republic today honours a figure who is outstanding in the scale of his life's work and his contribution to knowledge worldwide.

*Michael Francis Atiyah, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous élevons à la dignité de Grand Officier de la Légion d'honneur./.*