



PROFILES IN FAITH

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

by Graham Tomlin

Author, Principal of St. Paul's Theological Centre,
and Lecturer at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University



One late summer's day in 1647, René Descartes, one of the fathers of modern thought and author of the best-known sound-bite in the history of western philosophy, "I think, therefore I am," paid a visit to a young, rather sickly twenty-four year old, recently arrived in Paris with his sister. He, like Descartes, was a mathematician, a philosopher of sorts, and a genius. His name was Blaise Pascal. Although at this time they were on fairly good terms, within a few years they were set on almost diametrically opposite paths, Descartes confident that the future lay with human reason, and its ability to explain and understand everything that matters, Pascal convinced that human rationality was fatally flawed by the Fall, and that the truth lay in historic Christianity. Much of what they said that day remains unrecorded, but the meeting perhaps symbolizes the meeting of an older Christianity with a new enlightened modern age, confident in human abilities, thinking it had little need now of those old ways.

Blaise Pascal never saw his 40th birthday. He was an anguished, illness-ridden, often lonely man, who was at the cutting edge of contemporary scientific experimentation and felt keenly the intellectual ferment of his day. One November night in 1654, he experienced a profound encounter with God, which turned a distant and arid faith into a gripping sense of mission and devotion. He died eight years later in voluntary poverty, leaving behind scattered papers which were probably intended as a grand Apology for Christianity, conceived very much with people like Descartes in mind. These were subsequently gathered together and published by his friends as the famous *Pensées*: "Thoughts on Religion and various other subjects."

T.S. Eliot once wrote: "I can think of no Christian writer... more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and

who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being." If we live in a culture that profoundly doubts God, yet which at the same time craves satisfaction, then perhaps Pascal is just the kind of guide we need.

Throughout the *Pensées*, we can see Pascal countering two opposing attitudes, very familiar to his contemporaries, and also very familiar today, a fact which makes him such a fascinating figure for us.

War on Two Fronts

On the one hand, he was conscious of those who, like Descartes, were supremely and increasingly confident in the power of human reason and its ability to deliver sure, unequivocal certainty. On the other, a vigorous body of opinion in 17th century France was distinctly cynical and skeptical about knowing anything for sure. Taking their cue from the great 16th century moralist Montaigne, whose great question was "What can I know?", these "Pyrrhonists" tended to be laid-back and ironic: if we can know nothing, what is there left but to enjoy life while you can? Poised between Descartes' certainty and Montaigne's skepticism, Pascal's self-imposed task was to persuade his contemporaries on both sides that traditional orthodox Christianity was a better bet than either.

Perhaps all of this has a contemporary ring for us. New Age anti-rationalism and the laid-back postmodern suspicion of Truth and authority are both heirs of the skeptic Montaigne. On the other hand, there are still old-fashioned rationalists around who believe that science can lead us to infallible knowledge, that human reason and logic can uncover absolute Truth. Neither have much room for the Christian God. Can Pascal help us as we face challenges similar to his?

Some Christians in Pascal's day bought Descartes' line. They saw no problem for Christianity if human reason was the ultimate test of Truth, because the Faith could be proved to be reasonable and true. So, a

good many works of apologetics appeared in 17th century France, all trying to show evidence from nature or miracles which proved the existence of God, or logical arguments designed to demonstrate the rationality of Christianity, so that anyone who read them would be compelled to believe. Pascal thought these pretty much a waste of time.

For starters, he pointed out that human reason is not actually as reliable as Descartes thought it was. Imagination, for example, is far more persuasive: "Put the world's greatest philosopher on a plank that is wider than need be; if there is a precipice below, although his reason may convince him that he is safe, his imagination will prevail!" If we really want something to be true, we can persuade ourselves that it is, even if it doesn't quite seem to fit. When an annoying fly is buzzing around our ears, the ability to think rationally and coolly somehow vanishes. Reason is easily upset. Furthermore, Pascal admitted, when you look closely at the world, it doesn't prove God's existence at all. God does not show himself at every corner; in fact, at times he seems distinctly shy and hard to find. The world does not shout out obvious compelling proofs for God's existence, and if we're honest even Christianity itself doesn't always seem to make good rational sense.

Is this then because it isn't true? Is it because God isn't there? Is skeptical agnosticism the only answer? Well, no, says Pascal. There is still enough to make us think again. We do sometimes experience a hunger inside, an "infinite abyss" which can only be filled by God, yearning for meaning, transcendence. Until then we remain restless. We do have experiences, and see evidence, such as fulfilled prophecies and order in the world, that suggests there just might be a God, that it may be true after all. Not enough to convince, but not enough to silence the voice of faith either. In fact, Pascal is so sure that everyone has a niggling sense of the possibility that God might exist that if skeptics disbelieve in God, he disbelieves in skeptics: "I maintain that a perfectly genuine skeptic has never existed." The world is so confusing and ambiguous, that neither the rationalist nor the skeptic can fully explain it all.

The Hidden God

Pascal's answer to this problem can be summed up in one simple sentence from the *Pensées*: "What can be seen on earth indicates neither the total absence, nor the manifest presence of divinity, but the presence of a Hidden God." For Pascal, God deliberately hides himself in the world: we see glimpses of him, but then we're not sure whether we can trust the evidence of our eyes. But the inevitable question comes: Why on earth should God do this?

Pascal's answer is very important. God is not the kind of being who stands at the end of an argument, who can be ticked off as something known, understood, and then ignored, the "god of the philosophers." Nor does he want to be. He is instead an intensely passionate God, who, when he comes into relationship with people, "unites himself with them in the depths of their soul...and makes them incapable of having any other end but him." You either have this kind of intimate personal encounter with God, or you don't have him at all. He hides himself in creation, and reveals himself in humble, hidden form in a man who goes to a cross, so that those who are idly curious, who don't really want this kind of relationship with God and are only playing theological games, will not find him. Yet those who hunger for him deep within themselves, who are desperate to know him, they and they alone will find what they are looking for.

The famous argument of "the Wager" is probably designed not to prove God's existence, but to show that our passions rule our souls, rather than our minds. Pascal's point is that to be rational, a betting man would always bet on God, given the smallness of the stake and the potentially huge amount to be won. Yet the fact that the cool, skeptical gamblers of his acquaintance do not bet on God shows that they are not rational when it comes to faith—they follow their passions and desires instead, that don't want to believe in God and would rather he did not exist.

Pascal's sophisticated, urbane Parisian contemporaries, who feigned an interest in truth yet, like Montaigne, were skeptical about ever finding it, could not be persuaded by mere arguments. There are enough distractions and diversions around to stop them ever thinking seriously about God. So, for Pascal, presenting an unbeliever with a list of proofs for Christianity or evidence for faith is probably a waste of breath. If someone basically doesn't want to believe, no amount of proof can ever convince her. God will always remain hidden, and she will always find reasons not to believe. The crucial and primary factor in persuading someone to believe, suggests Pascal, is not to present evidence, but first to awaken a desire for God in them. In other words, when commending Christianity to people, "make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is." Such proofs as there are for Christianity can convince those who hope it is true, but will never convince those who don't.

Pascal for Today?

So what does this have to say to us, faced by our 21st century versions of rationalism and skepticism? Pascal would probably think that many of our assumptions about persuading others to be Christian start in the

wrong place. We can very often feel that in order to persuade anyone else to become a Christian, they need to know how to answer lots of complicated apologetic questions such as “Why does God allow suffering?” and “Don’t other religions also lead to God?” Now these are important questions, not least for Christians to work out: after all, they do puzzle us sometimes too, not just our non-Christian friends. The problem is that even if these convince rationalists, Pascal suspects we’ve probably convinced them about the wrong God. It is like getting on a train, finally arriving at the destination, only to find it’s the wrong place. Neither is such rationalist argumentation much use for skeptics, who aren’t that impressed by rational, logical arguments anyway.

The problem is, these approaches assume that everyone out there is dying to hear what we have to say, and if we just shout a bit louder, or explain a bit more articulately, then they’ll understand and believe. The truth is that it doesn’t work like that in the 21st century any more than it did in the 17th. Pascal’s point is that before we ever get to the stage of explaining or convincing, there needs to emerge in people the desire, the hunger to ask the question, to discover more, to find God. Now Pascal, like the great St. Augustine before him, whom Pascal closely followed, was fully aware that only God does that. Only God can touch the heart and make it long for himself, yet he also knew that God often uses people like himself and ourselves to awaken that desire in people.

So the first stage in my approach to my non-Christian friends is not to think, “How can I persuade them that it’s true?”, but to ask, “How can I make them want to know more?” This might involve questions of personal lifestyle: “How different are my values, my home, and my behavior from those of my neighbors and friends who are not Christians? Is there anything there which might make them want to know more, to desire what I have?” It also involves frank and honest questioning of church lifestyle: “Is our church just another little club for like-minded people who enjoy singing, emotional trips, and funny clothes? Or is there anything in the life or worship of our church that would make an outsider looking in want to have what we have?” An evangelistic lifestyle then becomes one which simply makes other people think; it stirs a faint echo of desire to discover what it is that makes the difference.

A while ago, a friend who had just come to a personal faith in Christ described what had happened: “I

guess it has moved from here (pointing to his head) to here” (pointing one foot lower). For Pascal, “it is the heart that perceives God, and not the reason.” He would suggest we address the heart first, before the head, tackling the deeper reasons why many people do not want to believe, rather than kicking off with cool rational arguments. If Pascal was right, we cannot divorce ethics from evangelism: our thinking about evangelism needs to start with questions about how we live, rather than what we say.

It’s easy to mistake this point for pure pragmatism, as if evangelism is a sales pitch that needs to create a market before we sell our product. Pascal reminds us that creating a desire for God is the starting point for evangelism for soundly theological reasons. It is because the God of the Bible can only be known by those who are prepared for the costly and demanding business of a genuine and honest relationship with him. If you’re not prepared for that, you’ll never know him. And neither will anyone else.

Reading

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The Revd. Dr. Graham Tomlin is principal of St. Paul’s Theological Centre, based at Holy Trinity Brompton in London. He is also an associate lecturer at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, lecturing on the “Provocative Church” and issues around fresh expressions of church and how they engage the non-Christian world. He has been for several years a member of the Theology Faculty of Oxford University. He studied English and subsequently Theology at Oxford University, was curate of a church in Exeter, and Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford. He is the author of numerous articles and several books, including *The Power of the*

Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal (Paternoster 1999), *The Provocative Church* (SPCK 2002), *Luther and his World* (Lion 2002), *The Responsive Church* (IVP 2005), and *Spiritual Fitness: Christian Character in a Consumer Culture* (Continuum 2006). He is married with two children, and is an avid follower of various kinds of sport, especially football.

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