

GOD PERCEIVED BY THE HEART : BLAISE PASCAL, 1623-1662

At 1.00 a.m. on the morning of the 19th of August 1662, Blaise Pascal died in the home of his sister Gilberte Périer. During the preparations for his funeral, his family discovered a piece of parchment sewn into his clothes, on which he had recorded an experience of which he had never spoken, but which had given meaning and purpose to his whole life. It had occurred eight years earlier, and had lasted some two hours. He had always been a believing Christian; but his experience on that night of the 23rd of November 1654 brought about a total and decisive conversion, and that date is known to Pascal scholars as his 'nuit de feu', or night of fire.

Let me read you a little of this brief document, known as the *Mémorial*. It consists of fragmentary notes, jotted down by Pascal at the time and copied later onto his piece of parchment.

Fire

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob' [Exodus III,6], not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, emotion, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

...

The world forgotten, and everything except God.

...

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. (913)

In his own day he was best known as a mathematician and experimental scientist, and I shall be looking briefly at this side of him later in this lecture. However, since it is about his religious thought that I am speaking to you tonight, I propose now to concentrate on his best known theological works, the *Lettres Provinciales* (or *Provincial Letters*) and the *Pensées* (or *Thoughts*). The first is a polemical work dealing with religious controversies which did not outlive the seventeenth century, and the second, a collection containing the notes which Pascal had made for an *Apology for the Christian Religion* which he did not live to write, as well as notes intended for other writings. Let us now, then, look briefly at the background to his religious development and beliefs.

The France in which he lived was the France of Louis XIV, which was an absolute monarchy. Its social structure was based on the existence of three orders: the aristocracy, the clergy, and the 'tiers état', or third estate, which in practice consisted of financiers and professional men. It was a France in which the Catholic Church had great power and influence; but the Church itself was involved in controversy. I am undoubtedly over-simplifying what was happening at the time, but put very briefly this was the period of the Counter-Reformation, when the Catholic Church was fighting back against the Protestant Reformation. There were those who believed and taught that this could best be

achieved by regular use of the sacraments and obedience to the Catholic hierarchy, and did not exclude participation in the more worldly pleasures of the Court. Others took a more austere view, believing that only divine grace and a less permissive morality could save the faithful. Generally speaking, the King and the aristocracy took the first view; and the highly educated and intellectual tiers état the second.

Blaise Pascal belonged to the tiers état: born on the 19th of June 1623, he was the son of Étienne Pascal, a lawyer. He had two sisters, Gilberte and Jacqueline. His mother died when he was only three, and his father supervised his education. Blaise proved very early to have unusual ability, particularly in mathematics, and was publishing ground-breaking work in that field when he was still in his teens.

In 1646 his father injured his leg, and was treated by two brothers who were members of the Jansenist movement, which was probably the supreme example of the more austere view I have described. Jansenism was strongly influenced by St. Augustine; it repudiated free will, accepted predestination, and taught that divine grace rather than good works was the key to salvation. It emphasized the corruption of man, his wretchedness without divine grace, and the importance of a deeper personal prayer life, as well as of practical works of charity; these were seen not as a means of salvation in themselves, but as the fruit and the proof of grace. The Jansenist brothers who treated Étienne Pascal stayed with the family for three months, during which they converted the whole family to their own religious views.

In due course Étienne Pascal recovered, and the family continued to live much as before, except that Jacqueline developed a desire to become a nun at the abbey at Port Royal, which was deeply influenced by Jansenist doctrine, and whose Mother Superior, Mère Angélique, was a sister of Antoine Arnauld, one of the leaders of the movement. Her father opposed this aim, but in 1652, after his death, she was able to fulfil it. Blaise continued his mathematical and scientific work, but also began to produce some occasional writings supporting his Jansenist friends in a controversy with the Jesuits over the nature of grace, and this was the state of affairs until his 'night of fire' in November 1654.

This controversy was one of the most famous results of the split I have mentioned in religious thought. Briefly, the Jesuits were very active in court circles, and took the more worldly view. They accused the Jansenists of heresy, and induced Pope Innocent X to condemn certain Jansenist views in 1653. This was the situation when Pascal, at the request of his Jansenist friends, began to write the *Provincial Letters*, in which he defended Arnauld and the Jansenist position against their Jesuit critics. In them Pascal attacked the Jesuits for misinterpreting and misquoting the Jansenist texts which they accused of being heretical, so that what Pope Innocent had condemned was not true Jansenist doctrine, but a misrepresentation of it. He backed up his attacks both by extremely accurate textual criticism, and by inspired

satire, and the letters were so devastating, and so great a literary success, that for his own safety he had to have them published pseudonymously outside France. He accused the Jesuits of moral laxity and cynicism, and proved the accuracy of his accusations by quoting from their own writings. In particular, he objected to the fact that the Jesuits leaned over backwards to make the Christian faith they preached as easy and undemanding as possible for those who followed them, so as to dispense their penitents from 'the awkward necessity of loving God'. For the modern reader, the importance of the *Provinciales* lies less in the details of their subject than in the *nature* of the reasons for Pascal's objection to the Jesuit approach. He opposed both the intellectual dishonesty of their distortion of Jansenist doctrine and the cynicism which caused them to put worldly interests above the love of God. The *Letters* also played an important part in the history of French literature, as they represented a great step forward in the use of French prose. Let me give you one example: in this passage he is replying to a Jesuit accusation that his attacks on the Jesuits prove him to be lacking in brotherly love, and offending against morality.

Come now, Fathers, are you to be allowed to say that 'one may kill to avoid being slapped or insulted', and is nobody to be allowed to refute publicly a public error of such importance? Are you to be free to say that 'a judge may in conscience retain what he has received for committing an injustice', while no one is free to challenge you? Are you to print, with a privilege and the approval of your doctors, that 'one can be saved without ever having loved God', and then muzzle those who defend the truth of the faith by telling them that it is an offence against brotherly love to attack you and an offence against Christian morality to laugh at your precepts? I rather doubt, Fathers, whether you could get anyone to believe this.

The *Letters* may deal with a controversy which is of interest now only to historians, but they are still a joy to read, and their brilliant success in making a somewhat obscure topic not only intelligible but compulsive to the non-specialist reader has never been surpassed.

From the time of his 'night of fire' until his death in 1662, Pascal's priorities changed. He never became one of the select and intellectually brilliant group of Jansenist leaders who were known as the 'messieurs de Port Royal'; he was not fully committed to every aspect of Jansenist doctrine – he did not, for example, deny the existence of free will; but he believed that the first priority of every good Christian was to use all his gifts and faculties to grow in faith, and to live in such a way as to open his heart to the grace of God. It is to this last period of his life that his most famous work, the *Pensées*, belongs, and it is on them that I propose to concentrate for the remainder of this lecture.

When Pascal died in 1662, after a long and debilitating illness, he had been working for about four years on his *Apology for the Christian*

Religion. The purpose of the work was to show that ‘Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the centre towards which all things tend ... The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses; he is a God who makes them inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who fills it with humility, joy, confidence and love.’ (449) The work was, however, still very much in the form of fragmentary notes, which were found after his death gathered up into bundles. Twenty-eight of these had been sorted out for use in specific chapters of the *Apology*; the remainder had not been sorted out by Pascal, and contained, as well as material for the *Apology*, drafts of text in the *Provinciales* and in other works. All of this material, plus a number of other fragments, such as the *Mémorial*, was gathered together after his death under the title *Pensées*; there are in all almost a thousand fragments.

The distinguished Pascal scholar Alban Krailsheimer explains the continuing popularity of the *Pensées* partly by the very fact that they are so fragmentary: ‘this is often felt to be an attraction, which offers memorable aphorisms untrammelled by any context’. It is, of course, perfectly possible to read them in this way, and to pick out those fragments which particularly appeal to you. Some are brief and cryptic, others are fully developed and written with great eloquence. And there are two disadvantages to reading the *Pensées* as one would read a completed work, from beginning to end. One is that, as I have already explained, they contain much material which was never intended to go into the *Apology*. The other stems from the fact that Pascal was writing in the seventeenth century, at a time when Biblical scholarship was much less developed than it is now. Pascal and his contemporaries accepted as literally true the chronology of the Old Testament; and there is a sizeable chunk of the material he had sorted into his 28 subject headings which deals with the Biblical prophecies of the coming of Christ and other Biblical ‘proofs’ in a manner which would probably be accepted now only by the American ‘Bible belt’. However, much of Pascal’s argument is based on his understanding of man’s condition, which he defines concisely as ‘inconstancy, boredom, anxiety’ (24), and this is why the *Pensées* is not just a collection of memorable aphorisms, but a work which shows clearly the relevance of the Christian faith to human needs and aspirations.

There are two concepts which are fundamental to his understanding of man and of the Christian faith. One, which has already been mentioned, is the Augustinian belief in the corruption of man, and his wretchedness without the help of divine grace. The other, which plays a major part in all his work, is the concept of the three orders. Let me briefly define these two lines of argument, and then come back to Pascal’s use of them.

To deal first with the concept of human wretchedness, Pascal believed that man had fallen from his original state of bliss. 'Man does not know the place he should occupy ... he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness.' (400) The creator of the universe must remain a hidden God, a *Deus absconditus*, for finite creatures, but in God made man the model is plain to follow for all who are not blinded by self-love and self-interest.

Let us now turn briefly to the concept of the three orders. Pascal, a French mathematician living in the 17th century, was undoubtedly familiar with it in other contexts, but the use he made of it was very much his own. As I have said, France's social structure was founded on three orders; and in mathematics too we find a similar concept, of which Pascal the mathematician would be fully aware. As Krailsheimer comments:

Just as lines, squares and cubes cannot be added together as being of different orders, so in the realm of human knowledge that which is proper to the body (the senses), to the mind (reason), and to the heart are of different orders, and must be carefully distinguished. The heart, in Pascal's scheme, is the appropriate channel for intuitive knowledge, for apprehending pre-rational principles and assenting to supra-rational propositions, as well as for emotional and aesthetic experiences. For Pascal, a physical phenomenon is properly examined by physical means, that is the evidence of the senses, reading what the instruments actually record. Once the facts have been established, it is, of course, for reason to analyse and codify them, just as it is right for reason to formulate hypotheses for the senses to test experimentally. In neither case can the heart play a decisive role.

For the moment, let us return to the theme of human wretchedness. Pascal was convinced that man, before his fall, had known true happiness, 'of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace; this he tries in vain to fill with everything around him ... though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object, in other words, by God himself.' (148)

The only answer to the weakness and fallibility of man is a penitent return to God:

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe! ... Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man, hear from your master your true condition, which is unknown to you.

Listen to God. (131)

Let us now turn to the doctrine of the three orders. As I have already said, this runs through the whole of the *Pensées*, and I find it a most satisfying and valuable insight into the way in which the whole believer can and should be involved in his or her faith in God.

The following quotation is part of a fragment which contains the most developed statement of Pascal's doctrine of the three orders.

The infinite distance between body and mind symbolizes the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for charity is supernatural. ...

Great geniuses have their power, their splendour, their greatness, their victory and their lustre, and do not need carnal greatness, which has no relevance for them. They are recognized not with the eyes but with the mind, and that is enough.

Saints have their power, their splendour, their greatness, their victory and their lustre, and do not need either carnal or intellectual greatness, which has no relevance for them, for it neither adds nor takes away anything. They are recognized by God and the angels, and not by bodies or by curious minds. God is enough for them. ...

All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms are not worth the least of minds, for it knows them all and itself too, while bodies know nothing. ...

**Out of all bodies together we could not succeed in creating one little thought. It is impossible, and of a different order. Out of all bodies and minds we could not extract one impulse of true charity. It is impossible, and of a different, supernatural order.
(308)**

Pascal's view of the first and second of these three orders has much in common. He sees in both of them both a negative and a positive side. The term 'body', for him, represents carnality and materialism, which he saw as the enemies of charity, or divine love. Those who devote their whole minds and lives to purely sensual or material aims or to worldly success belong, for Pascal, to the order of the body. However, there is another and more positive aspect to this order. Pascal used the words 'machine' and 'automaton' on various occasions to describe the body, which in this context he saw as an instrument. He took the very practical view that we cannot, every day and in every circumstance, work intellectually through the reasons why we should pray, or believe in God, but we can use our body to acquire the habit of prayer.

We must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us. We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit. With no violence, art or argument it makes us believe things, and so inclines all our faculties to this belief that our soul falls naturally into it. We must therefore make both parts of ourselves believe: the mind by reasons, which need to be seen only once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit. (821)

The same negative and positive aspects appear in his treatment of the mind, or human reason. We have already seen, in the fragment which describes the relationship of the three orders to each other, that Pascal speaks of the distance 'between mind and charity'. While it is true that 'all bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms are not worth the least of minds', it is equally true that 'all bodies together and all minds together and all their products are not worth the least impulse of charity'. Here is a clear definition of the different spheres and responsibilities of the mind and the heart:

We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all knowledge. For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its arguments. Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced (110)

And, while recognizing the limitations of reason, Pascal also acknowledged and respected its importance. One of the most famous fragments of the *Pensées* expresses this memorably:

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this.

Thus all our dignity consists in thought. (200)

What may strike you as paradoxical in his emphasis on the limitations of reason is that the whole idea of an *Apology for the Christian Religion*

depends on it. It is by the use of logic that Pascal hopes to persuade his readers to start practising a faith which they may not yet possess, which only the grace of God can bestow, and which in the last analysis will supersede reason.

It is probably unnecessary to say much more about the third and highest order, the heart, as Pascal's understanding of its rôle has emerged clearly from what has already been said. For him, the heart was the seat of intuitive knowledge: 'principles are felt, propositions proved'. That intuitive knowledge was as valid in its own sphere as knowledge based on reason in its sphere, so that 'the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing; we know this in countless ways.' (423) It is the heart, not the reason, which is capable of true wisdom and of selfless love, as Pascal emphasized in the fragment I have already quoted: 'All bodies together and all minds together and all their products are not worth the least impulse of charity. This is of an infinitely superior order.' Above all, it is the heart which receives divine grace. In Pascal's own splendid definition, 'It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason (424)'.

Let me, at this point, look at Pascal from a different angle. As I have already mentioned, it was as a scientist and mathematician that Pascal was best known in his own day. More surprisingly, after three and a half centuries his is still a name to conjure with in these fields. In a work on *The rise of scientific Europe [from] 1500 [to] 1800* published by the Open University, there is a chapter by Noel Coley on French science in the 17th century which considers, among others, the work of Gassendi, Descartes, Mersenne and Pascal. Discussing Pascal's experiments on the vacuum, Coley points out that his results 'showed that the experimental method could be used not only to demonstrate specific points, but also to lead on to more general conclusions ... Pascal's physical experiments are important not only for their specific results, but for their contribution to the development of the scientific method.' Coley asserts that 'Pascal ... might justifiably be considered a universal genius. His literary and theological works are as highly esteemed in their fields as are his contributions to mathematics, philosophy, and experimental science.'

Coley is discussing Pascal in the context of the development of scientific method, but not the relationship between his scientific and his religious thought. Last summer, I met in Iona Professor Stephen Muggleton, who is an expert on bioinformatics. In the course of a discussion with him one evening, he threw what was for me a new light on Pascal's work. I had always thought of his scientific work as being essentially distinct from his religious writings; but Professor Muggleton, after seeing my draft of this lecture, commented that in the passages I had quoted, all of them on religious faith, 'Pascal uses the following variety of mathematical notions to which he made direct and in many cases major contributions': probability (in the "wager"); mathematical

logic (proofs, reason, "first principles"); dimension ("lines, squares and cubes"); and infinity. On the subject of the three orders, Professor Muggleton 'was fascinated by ... Pascal's use of notions from mathematics to cross boundaries between the three orders: body, mind and heart', and told me that 'in modern times Artificial Intelligence has started to provide us with a mathematically-oriented theory of mind based on many of the elements which interested Pascal'. In other words, Pascal did not see faith as being distinct from science; the two were integrated in his thinking.

This congregation contains many people whose intellectual attainments are outstanding, and those of us who are not professors of divinity may sometimes feel at a slight disadvantage. One of the reasons why I find Pascal very comforting is that he, an intellectual whose achievements in mathematics and science are still seen as significant three and a half centuries after his death, made it clear that, in matters of faith, the intellect can go so far and no further. There is a celebrated passage in the *Pensées*, usually called 'Pascal's wager', in which he points out that, if God exists, we have nothing to lose in obeying his commandments and following him, but everything to lose by living without him:

You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will ... Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist. That being so, even though there were an infinite number of chances, of which only one were in your favour, you would still be right to wager; but here there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won. (418)

Reason, then, persuades us to practise our faith, and live according to the example and teachings of Jesus; in doing so, we acquire habits which can only be beneficial in this life, as well as preparing us for the next. In acquiring the habit of prayer, in using our mind to think about and meditate on Jesus, we open our minds and hearts to the grace of God.

Pascal in the *Pensées* was not writing for philosophers or theologians. He wrote for members of the social world in which he had grown up; his theological and intellectual background was very different from ours, but his aim, which was to convince the general reader not only of the truth of the Christian faith, but of our need of it, is still relevant today. As Krailsheimer says in the introduction to his translation, 'when insecurity and anxiety neuroses, arrogant intellectualism and unthinking materialism, selfishness and aggression have faded from the background of daily living, Pascal may have fewer readers. In the meantime the *Pensées* will attract and even inspire countless men and women seeking to escape from a condition of "inconstancy, boredom, anxiety" of which they are only too well aware.'

I started this lecture by quoting some of the *Mémorial* in which Pascal recorded his ‘night of fire’. He wrote another meditation, this one on the agony in the garden, in which we find a moving expression of his deep personal devotion:

Jesus is alone on earth, not merely with no-one to feel and share his agony, but with no-one even to know of it. Heaven and he are the only ones to know.

Jesus is in a garden, not of delight, like the first Adam, who there fell and took with him all mankind, but of agony, where he saved himself and all mankind.

He suffers this anguish and abandonment in the horror of the night.

I believe that this is the only occasion on which Jesus ever complained. But then he complained as though he could no longer contain his overflowing grief: ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.’

Jesus seeks companionship and solace from men. It seems to me that this is unique in his whole life, but he finds none, for his disciples are asleep. (*Mystère de Jésus*, 919)

I would like to end with what may well be his clearest expression of his own faith:

Thus I stretch out my arms to my Saviour ... By his grace I peaceably await death, in the hope of being eternally united to him, and meanwhile I live joyfully, whether in the blessings which he is pleased to bestow on me or in the afflictions ... he taught me how to endure by his example. (793)

Thank you all for your patience.

(4,762 words)

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