



# Faith Has Its Reasons: The Life of Blaise Pascal

By Nicos Kaloyirou

Blaise Pascal was born in 1623 at Clermont – Ferrand, Auvergne, in France. He was home-schooled by his father Etienne, a lawyer who was also an able mathematician and physicist and a friend of the philosopher Rene Descartes. The son became a mathematician and philosopher, a precocious inventor with a passion for physics and geometry.

At age eleven, Pascal wrote a short treatise on the sounds of vibrating bodies. Before the age of 16, he composed an essay on conic sections. When Descartes was shown the manuscript he refused to acknowledge Pascal as the author of it and thought that Pascal's father had written it.

In 1641, at age 18, Pascal invented what became the prototype to the modern calculator and computer, an adding machine consisting of a series of dials and toothed wheels which was able to perform simple arithmetical calculations. When he turned to geometry and algebra, he came up with an addition pyramid called 'Pascal's triangle'. Each number on the pyramid equals the sum of the two numbers above it. Each sequence on the triangle goes on infinitely and corresponds to what is called 'the coefficient of a binomial expansion' which is represented by the form  $(x + y)^n$ . The numbers of diagonals on Pascal's triangle add to the Fibonacci series: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, and so on.

In the Fibonacci sequence, any given number is approximately 1.618 times the preceding number. Each number is also 0.618 of the number to the right of it. This 'golden ratio' is found in living things where it describes everything from the geometry of biological tissues to the fractal leaf veins of plants which are designed for a maximum sunlit area and photosynthetic rate (*Sci Rep* 8, 13859, 2018).

Pascal applied mathematics to solve one of the questions of human existence. According to Pascal's argument, because we cannot be sure that God exists, we should live our lives and wager on the assumption that he does; if this is proven to be wrong we have lost nothing; if it is proven to be right and we remained unbelievers, then the consequences are horrific: eternal damnation.

However, truth cannot be reduced to a mere calculation. 'Pascal's Wager' as it is known, is not an argument for proving God's existence. It is more like an insurance policy for a selfish agnostic or a 'rich young ruler' who is destined to die but wants to safeguard his/her own future.

In 1647, Pascal's nervous system was permanently damaged when he suffered a paralytic attack which meant that he could not move his body without crutches. About this time, Pascal's father Etienne, who was a devout Christian, suffered a serious injury and had come under the influence of a Jansenist physician who helped to heal him.

The Jansenists believed that the true doctrine of grace could be found only in the writings of Augustine: If we are saved, it is because God is working within us, drawing humanity into himself by "delicate cords" of love that cannot be broken.

Pascal, who had also experienced some temporary relief from his sickness, immersed himself in the *Essays of Montaigne* which deeply influenced his life and probably caused him to steer away from his Christian faith, into scepticism and doubt. Very soon after, he was involved in an accident whilst riding in a carriage with some of his rich friends. The horses bolted and the carriage was left hanging over a bridge above the frozen surface of the

river Seine. Pascal passed out due to the shock of the whole event.

In 1654 Pascal underwent his 'night of fire', and surrendered his life to the Lord Jesus Christ:

*Feu. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. Thy God shall be my God...*

This profound experience gave him a fresh realization of the wonders of his grace. The God that Pascal had encountered in this vision was not the God of the theologians and scholars but the personal God of the Bible. He recorded the words of his powerful testimony and commitment on a piece of paper which he had sewn into the lining of his coat and kept close to his heart until death.

Pascal became a member of the Jansenist community at Port Royal. In his *Provincial Letters*, Pascal defended the Jansenists against the Jesuits. He returned to Paris in 1656 and lived there until his death in 1662. In 1657 there occurred a miraculous healing of the fistula in his niece's eye. After this incident Pascal decided to write a defence of the Christian faith. He started to jot down some thoughts about Christianity which he classified under headings. His intention was to give them a more logical form and to craft an apologia for Christian belief. In 1658 his infirmities returned and he was not able to finish his most celebrated work.

The central theme of the *Pensées*, is the wretched and sinful nature of human life. Pascal's argument forms the essence of Augustine's theology: of humanity's alienation from God

through Adam's transgression (an historical event) and humanity's reconciliation through Jesus Christ, the second Adam, who is qualified by his incarnation to act as mediator and great high priest.

Illimitable Godhood is garbed in a compound of mysteries – Christ is both man and God. God limits his own power and chooses the vestments of human weakness. In Christ's body, the material image is buried and its fallenness transfigured (by resurrection). So we bear a spark of fiery glory and are not consumed.

In the *Pensées* Pascal says that "it is the heart which experiences God" yet "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know". Faith is beyond reason, yet is in harmony with it. He dissected human behaviour and engaged in detailed psychoanalysis:

*It is the nature of self-esteem and of the human self to love only oneself and to consider oneself alone...he conceives a mortal hatred of the truth which brings him down to earth and convinces him of his faults. He would like to be able to annihilate it, and, not being able to destroy it in himself, he destroys it in the minds of other people. That is to say, he concentrates all his efforts on concealing his faults both from others and from himself, and cannot stand being made to see them or their being seen by other people.*

Men of such incisive spiritual insight are rare indeed.

*Nicos Kaloyirou is a lawyer in Adelaide.*