

Blaise Pascal: Gadfly of the Jesuits

Charles St-Onge, January 17, 2002

Blaise Pascal, 17th Century philosopher, mathematician, and committed lay theologian, is the author of several biting and critical letters regarding the Society of Jesus known as *The Provincials*.¹ These letters, the first of which are written by a Parisian to a country friend – anywhere outside of Paris being considered “the provinces”, hence the title – are chiefly offensive, attacking the Jesuits doctrine of “probable opinions” as well as casting aspersions on their purposes as a religious group. The letters are still considered to be classics of the French language, with one commentator stating:

“The lucidity with which he demonizes the mechanisms of highly technical disciplines which are not strictly speaking in his area of competence, joined with the highest skill in sharing his beliefs with the reader makes of him, without contest, the first of the great journalists.”²

It is important to note that, in these letters, Pascal is not setting himself up as a Protestant. His expressed wish is to remain faithful to the Roman Catholic Church and its head, the Pope. He does not, for example, attack the authority of the Church as contained in her counsels and teachings. His formal principle is not “sola scriptura”. In his imaginary dialog with a Jesuit priest, Pascal’s investigative priest says, “I believed that I shouldn’t take as a rule anything but Scripture and the Tradition of the Church, but not your casuists.”^{a, 3} This was also the position of the Jansenists, of whom Pascal was one.⁴ Although Pascal does appeal to Scripture on many occasions, he also appeals to St. Augustine, St. Basil the Great, and St. Chrysostom, as well as the Councils, notably the Council of Trent. Pascal also takes pains to demonstrate that he, too, denies the “heresies” of Luther and of Calvin. He denies Calvin’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper, on limited atonement, and on irresistible grace vociferously in his 16th and 17th letter, denying that any Jansenist would hold to such heretical beliefs. He also denies Luther’s justification by grace through faith alone, calling it “impiety”⁵. He appeals to his own behavior for support of the catholicity of his faith:

“When have I missed Mass and the work of every good parish Christian? When have I made any move toward union with heretics, or toward schism with the Church? Which Council have I contradicted? Which bull of the Pope have I violated? ...By the grace of God, I am attached on earth to none but the only Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, in which I want to live and die, in communion with the Pope its sovereign ruler, outside of which I am utterly persuaded there is absolutely no salvation.”⁶

What Pascal is attacking is the excesses of the Jesuits with regard to morality, which he believes have led them into false doctrine concerning the need for grace, and also demonstrates that their own political aims as a Society supercede the aims of the Church. In the first four letters he attacks their doctrine of *equivocation*, whereby they are permitted to use a term with one meaning publicly and another amongst themselves. “It is permitted to use ambiguous terms, by letting them heard in a sense that one does not at all intend.”⁷ He gives for example the term “pouvoir prochain”, which might be translated “personal power”. The Jesuits understood this term as meaning that Christian could do good in the sight of God without grace; the Dominicans that, with God’s grace, Christians had the personal power to do good. In this way, the Jesuits co-opted the natural allies of the Jansenists on the subject of grace, the Dominicans, to serve their own purposes.

^a All translations from the French are the author’s.

In the latter letters, Pascal expands on the Jesuit doctrine of *probabilism*. Pascal focuses specifically on the excesses of the doctrine, including such statements that killing to defend one's honor is not to be viewed as a mortal or venial sin. Pascal criticizes this understanding with his usual ascorbic wit: "This is certainly everything one could hope for to protect one's honor; but life is left awfully exposed if, for a misspoken word or an inappropriate gesture, we can kill anyone in good conscience."⁸ But Pascal does not see the Jesuits' lax morals as the most important point, but uses them to show deeper problems with the Society of Jesus' goals. The Jesuits' doctrine of probabilism is an effect of their abhorrence of the doctrine, held by the Jansenists, of efficacious grace:

"Go then, I pray you, to see these good Fathers, and I am assured that you will easily see in their letting go of their morals the cause of their doctrine concerning grace. You will there see Christian virtues so unknown, and so lacking in the love that is in the soul and life...that you will no longer find it strange that they hold that all men always have enough grace to live in piety, in the manner that they understand it."⁹

The Jansenists taught that grace was given only to a few, and that otherwise men were totally depraved. The Jesuits taught otherwise. But their attacks on the Jansenists, in Pascal's view, are not merely doctrinal, but political. The Jansenists and their supporters at Port-Royal were blocking the Jesuits continued rise to prominence. Pascal uses the Jesuits' own responses to his letters to demonstrate how doctrine, truth and morals are all expendable for the Jesuits in the face of their own quest for power within the Roman Church. He shows that the Jesuits use even their own authors one against the other, as the need arises, utterly forgetting the foundations of the Christian faith revealed in the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church:

"Of what use is it to now produce this quote from Vasquez against the thought of Lessius, if not to show that Lessius is a *pagan and a scoundrel*, according to Vasquez? And that's further than even I would have gone. What can one conclude, if not that Lessius *destroys the Decalog and the Gospel*? That at the last day Vasquez will condemn Lessius on this point, just as Lessius will condemn Vasquez on another; and that all your authors will rise up at the judgement one against the other to condemn each other reciprocally of their frightening excesses against the law of Jesus Christ?"¹⁰

The Jesuits used these same tactics against others as well, according to Pascal. For this reason Pascal was not alone in speaking out against the Society: other bishops had as well.¹¹ The Franciscans had also been subject to their attacks.¹² Those attacks had ceased, however, once the Jesuits realized the Franciscans had not meant to attack them. At that point, the same Franciscan writings that the Jesuits had called heretical a year earlier were suddenly found to be quite catholic. In the same way, the Jesuits would label statements as "catholic" and "heretical" as needed, and deny statements of their own authors or admit them in the same way. Pascal writes against this poignantly:

"...You authorize a rule that is *detestable* according to yourselves. But consider that, after you said that this rule was *detestable*, you denied at the same time that it was from (your) Father Bauny; and so he was innocent; and when you admitted it was from him, you held at the same time that it is okay; and so he is still innocent. So that, since the innocence of the Father is the only thing in common between these two responses, it is obvious that it is also the only thing that you are looking for; and that your goal is nothing other than the defense of your Fathers, in saying at the same time

that such a rule is not in your books, and that it is; that it is okay, and that it is not, according to your need, which changes with the hour.”¹³

Therefore Pascal can write, “What are you thinking, my Fathers, to witness in such a way publicly that you only measure the faith and virtue of men by the intention that one has for your Society?”¹⁴

What then, according to Pascal, is the intention of the Jesuits? To fill their churches by making Christianity as easy as possible. Pascal writes in the guise of a Jesuit Father:

“Men today are so corrupt that, since we can’t make them come to us, we must come to them. Otherwise they would leave us, they’ll become worse, and will be completely lost. It is to keep them that our casuists have considered the vices that one is most likely to commit in all its situations, to finally establish guidelines so soft, without hurting the truth, that only the most impossible characters couldn’t keep them and be happy. The chief plan, then, that our Society has taken for the good of religion is not to rebuke anyone, so that no one will despair.”¹⁵

Pascal’s letters are a classic presentation of the battle between Christianity as the religion of the many, versus Christianity as the religion of the few. This battle flows through the last two thousand years of the church’s history, and continues into the present day. The Jesuits clearly represent the view that God desires “all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim 2:4). Therefore one should not put obstacles in the way of believing the Gospel and being saved. Pascal represents the view of 1 Peter 2:5, that few will be saved out of the masses in perdition. Christianity is not the broad path on which many travel, but a narrow one. The Jesuits want to make Christianity palatable to the masses, so that Pascal accuses them of believing that it does not “matter that the tables of Jesus Christ are filled with abomination, as long as your churches are filled with people.”¹⁶ Pascal is not a true Protestant; he is simply one end of a continuum within the Roman church, which believes that Christianity should not be watered down for the sake of the masses, but that God should be obeyed in all things.

¹ Blaise Pascal. *Les provinciales*. (Lyons: Éditions Gallimard, 1987)

² Pascal, 18. (All translations from the French are the author’s)

³ Pascal, 91.

⁴ Justo Gonzalez. *The Story of Christianity*. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001, c.1985, 1984) 168

⁵ Pascal, 296.

⁶ Pascal, 272-273.

⁷ Pascal, 150.

⁸ Pascal, 121.

⁹ Pascal, 88.

¹⁰ Pascal, 216.

¹¹ Pascal, 237.

¹² Pascal, 238.

¹³ Pascal, 242.

¹⁴ Pascal, 239.

¹⁵ Pascal, 103.

¹⁶ Pascal, 257.