

Pascal's God

Modern Christian apologetics can be traced back to Pascal. Like Descartes, from whom he is otherwise so different, Pascal took seriously the new world view opened up by navigators like Columbus, astronomers like Copernicus, and the incomparable underminer of old certainties, Montaigne. For his part, Pascal sought to reinvent not philosophy, like Descartes, but rather Christianity itself, by scrutinising the human condition candidly and showing it to be most persuasively accounted for by Christian revelation.

Does he succeed? Or does he demonstrate rather that in his beginning is his end? Are his arguments for God convincing, or does he simply glamorise human anguish? Does he make the reality of God a palpable experience, or is his defence of Christianity finally, though unforgettably, 'only' a moving evocation of humanity's invincible solitude and transience?

One writer who appears to favour the latter evaluation is Borges. In an essay on Pascal he argues:

Pascal, they tell us, found God, but the way he expressed that blissful reality is less eloquent than the way he expressed the experience of solitude. In this he was incomparable. . .

. . . Pascal affirms that nature (space) is 'an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'. . . . The metaphor Pascal uses to define space is employed by his predecessors¹ to define the deity. Pascal is moved not by the greatness of the Creator, but by the greatness of Creation.

. . . What matters to him is not so much God as the refutation of those who deny him.²

In a further short essay, entitled 'Pascal's Sphere', we read:

In that dispirited century, the absolute space which inspired the hexameters of Lucretius, the absolute space which had been a liberation for Bruno, was for Pascal a labyrinth and an abyss. Pascal loathed the universe and would have liked to adore God, but God, for him, was less real than the universe he loathed.³

¹ For example, by Empedocles in the 5th century BC: 'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere' (J.M. and M.J. Cohen, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, Harmondsworth, 1993, 159). [My note.]

² J.L. Borges, 'Pascal' in *Otras Inquisiciones* (Madrid, 1976), 100f.

³ *Otras Inquisiciones*, 16.

Pascal's application to the universe of a metaphor reserved traditionally to God might entitle him to be regarded as an early, albeit involuntary, seculariser of Christianity, while his anguished, even despairing, vision of the universe may be an unexpected echo of the ancient gnostic myth of the evil demiurge who created this world: two reasons why it is risky to have Pascal as a theological ally. Borges' assumption, on the other hand, that to find God is bliss, places him, curiously enough, on the side of the angels.