

a third testament

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A modern pilgrim explores the
spiritual wanderings of Augustine,
Blake, Pascal, Tolstoy, Bonhoeffer,
Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky

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introduction

No, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage...
And take upon's the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies.

King Lear

It often happens that the reason for doing something only emerges clearly after it has been done, conscious intent and all the various practicalities which go therewith being but the tip of an iceberg of unconscious intent. In any case, as has often been pointed out, time itself is a continuum, and not divisible into past, present and future tenses. Thus, it was only after the completion of the series of television programs whose scripts are here collected, when I was asked to explain why I had chosen Saint Augustine, Blaise Pascal, William Blake, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to be their subjects, that I fully grasped the theme to which they all belonged. Previously, I had seen them singly and separately as seven characters in search of God, and as such of great interest, and a formative influence in my own thinking and questing.

Considering them as a group, it became clear to me that, although they were all quintessentially men of their time, they had a special role in common, which was none other than to relate their time to eternity. This has to be done every so often; otherwise, when the lure of self-sufficiency proves too strong, or despair too overwhelming, we forget that

men need to be called back to God to rediscover humility and with it, hope. In the case of the Old Testament Jews, it was the prophets who thus called them back to God—and when were there more powerful and poetic voices than theirs? Then came the New Testament, which is concerned with how God, through the Incarnation, became His own prophet. Nor was even that the end of prophets and testaments. Between the fantasies of the ego and the truth of love, between the darkness of the will and the light of the imagination, there will always be the need for a bridge and a prophetic voice calling on us to cross it. This is what my seven seekers after God were destined to provide, each in his own way and in relation to his own time.

So I came to see them as God's spies, posted in actual or potential enemy-occupied territory, the enemy being, of course, in this particular case, the Devil. As it happens I was myself involved in espionage operations in the Second World War, when I served with MI6, the wartime version of the British Secret Service, or SIS. We had, for instance, what were known as stay-behind agents in German-occupied France, who were required to lie low until circumstances arose in which they could make themselves useful by collecting and transmitting intelligence, or organizing sabotage. While they were waiting to be activated, it was essential that they should make themselves inconspicuous by merging into the social and political scene, and, in their opinions and attitudes, echoing the current consensus. Thus, it would be appropriate for a stay-behind agent posted in, say, Vichy France, to be ostensibly Pétainist in politics, Catholic in religion, and bourgeois in way of life, eschewing any association with resistance organizations and, equally, the more fervid pro-Nazi ones. By this means he might hope to establish himself as a loyal supporter of Marshal Pétain, and so, when the time came, be the better placed to act effectively on behalf of the belligerent Gaullists and their Anglo-American allies.

Those who direct our intelligence services are not blessed with the insights and vision of God—though they are sometimes prone to suppose so. Nor are our human calamities in God’s eyes what they seem to be in ours. There is no imagery that can convey even the similitude of God, let alone forecast His purposes; to know Him at all we are beholden to the great mercy of the Incarnation. Even so, in considering the place of a Saint Augustine in history, it is possible to see his role as that of a stay-behind agent posted by a celestial spymaster in a collapsing Roman Empire with a brief to promote the Church’s survival as custodian of the Christian revelation. Certainly, no one could have been better qualified for such a role than the famous Bishop of Hippo, ardent, as he was, for Roman civilization as only a North African could be, and ardent for Catholic orthodoxy as only a convert and sometime Manichean heretic could be.* His worldly credentials were impeccable—a highly successful professorship of rhetoric at Milan University, which in his regenerate days he called his Chair of Lies, friends and acquaintances in the highest circles and occasional speech-writing jobs for the Emperor himself. As for his *pièces justificatives*, as the French police call supporting documents, who could ask for anything better than his *Confessions*, the first great autobiography and still reckoned among the greatest, and his *City of God*, which laid down the guidelines for Christians, first to survive, and then to set about building a new great civilization to be known as Christendom?

When Augustine came to die, the barbarians were already at the gates of Hippo, and were pillaging and burning the city while his body lay in his basilica awaiting burial. His services on behalf of his Church, however, by no means ended with his life, but continued through the succeeding Dark and Middle Ages, defining and strengthening the faith

*Manicheism, to which Augustine adhered for some nine years before his conversion, was based on the notion of an eternal conflict between light and darkness. Its followers were expected to practice extreme asceticism.

he had so cherished, thereby facilitating its movement westward to leave in its train great cathedrals like Chartres to mark its progress.

If St. Augustine appeared today, and had as little authority as his defenders, he would achieve nothing. God guided His Church well by sending him earlier, and investing him with the proper degree of authority.

Thus wrote Blaise Pascal some ten centuries after Augustine's death. By that time new dangers were threatening. The great torrent of creativity released by Christianity now looked as if it were overflowing its banks, sweeping aside the dikes and dams designed to hold it back. In place of the Cloud of Unknowing between God and us, a Cloud of Knowing was gathering; now, the threat was of light, not darkness—a dazzling, blinding light. This time God's finger pointed inexorably at Pascal himself. He it was who would be required to counteract a two-fold attack: on the one hand, a clamor for self-indulgence, freedom from all restraint, license to, in his own words, "lick the earth"; and, on the other, the first crazy rumblings of godless men of science, so blown up with pride in their own achievements and the staggering potentialities thereby opened up, that they were beginning to think they were gods themselves, capable of shaping their own destiny and creating a kingdom of heaven on earth.

Pascal's credentials as God's spy in these particular circumstances were no less impeccable than Augustine's had been in the situation created by the fall of Rome. Ostensibly, he was supremely a man of his time; by virtue of his mathematical and scientific attainments in the same class as a Newton, as a thinker on equal terms with a Descartes, and as a polemicist and stylist equipped to aim effective barbs at a Montaigne. As a Jansenist* sympathizer, Pascal was deep in the controversies raised by the Reformation, and came within an ace of being excommunicated—something,

*Jansenism, a heresy derived from the Augustinianism of Cornelius Jansen, in Pascal's time Bishop of Ypres. It holds that grace is irresistible, and has therefore been regarded as deterministic and in line with Calvinism. Its followers, who included the religious of Port Royal, among them Pascal's sister Jacqueline, practiced extreme asceticism.

incidentally, liable to happen to God's spies at all times, whether at the hands of the Inquisition, political police, or, the latest variant, the Media Pundits. His *Lettres provinciales*, venomously attacking the time-serving Jesuits, were by universal consent a masterpiece of demolition and irony, and all in all there seemed every reason for regarding him as an outstanding and characteristic product of the Renaissance and a harbinger of the Enlightenment to come.

Yet all this amounted only to what Pascal called "distractions," intended, as he put it, "to amuse us and bring us imperceptibly to death." The divine briefing had already taken place, and he knew just what he had to do, which was no less than to use every scrap of knowledge he had acquired, his scientific explorations and experimentations, all the gifts of the intellect and the imagination God had endowed him with, to produce his great masterpiece, his superb apologia for the Christian faith itself, posthumously named his *Pensées*. Furthermore, by a signal grace, due to his early death at thirty-nine, this splendid exercise in faith at its most durable and thought at its most perceptive, was left behind him in the form of notes on scraps of paper rather than the long, conscientiously worked over, and possibly tedious, treatise he had envisaged.

The notes, revealing, as they do, the working of his brilliant mind, have been uniquely effective in their impact; personnel bombs exploding unpredictably instead of with a single devastating blast. Furthermore, the impossible task of putting the notes together in the order Pascal may be presumed to have intended has kept scholars busy who might otherwise have turned their attention to form-criticism and reinterpreting, rather than just rearranging, what Pascal wrote. If only some similarly blameless exercise had occupied contemporary biblical scholarship, especially New Testament commentators, the Bultmanns and Kungs and Robinsons, what a blessed deliverance that would have been! It

was surely significant that Pascal's worldly achievements should have included inventing the computer, which has become twentieth century man's topmost graven image, before which he readily prostrates himself, and whose cryptic utterances he receives like Delphic oracles. Pascal's services as God's spy were correspondingly illustrious—no less than the exposition and celebration of the true Christian faith in words so luminous that they have continued to shine with their own inner light ever since, like an El Greco portrait.

I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities
of Europe
And there behold the Loom of Locke,
whose Woof rages dire,
Wash'd by the Water-wheels of Newton:
black the cloth
In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation:
cruel Works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without
wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other, not as
those in Eden, which,
Wheel within Wheel, in freedom revolve in
harmony & peace.

These lines from William Blake's *Jerusalem* were written about a century and a half after the *Pensées*, and in Blake's inimitable way convey a sense similar to Pascal's that knowledge is but a vast cul-de-sac, and the technology derived from it a dread servitude—cogs tyrannic moving by compulsion instead of revolving in harmony and in peace as in Eden. No two human beings could have been more different in their backgrounds and pursuits, in their social position and upbringing, and in the times in which they lived, than Blake and Pascal. Yet they stood side by side in their common awareness of the enormous dangers arising

from man's venturing into the Cloud of Knowing. Pascal reached the conclusion that the only serious quest here on earth was for God, and that the way to Him was chartered in the Old Testament, sign-posted in the New, and illumined by faith. Blake likewise was insistent that only the imagination was capable of grasping what life was about, and he never tired of belaboring the ideologues of the age, like Rousseau and Voltaire and Newton, or of pouring scorn on the contemporary wisdom—for instance, Locke on *Human Understanding* and Bacon on the *Advancement of Learning*.

Only God would have dared to recruit so strange, inspired and erratic a person as Blake to sit out on His behalf the tumultuous years and aftermath of the French Revolution and its literary and artistic equivalent, the romantic movement. Among many of his contemporaries he passed for being mad, and in his ways and statements was so incalculable and eccentric as to be what, in human terms, is called a security risk. God, however, sees further in selecting His stay-behind agents than mortal spymasters do, and knew that His arch advocate of exuberance and excess would make of Jesus' gospel of love and self-abnegation a bright rainbow shining across a stormy sky, keeping alive the hope of deliverance from dark satanic mills of every variety, and all their lies and pollution.

Like Pascal, Blake was a man of his time; temperamentally a revolutionary himself, who rejoiced when the Revolution happened, wore the red cap of the Liberty Boys in the streets of London until the Reign of Terror led him to lay it aside, and frequented the table of Joseph Johnson, the publisher, where he met such revolutionary luminaries as William Godwin and Tom Paine, not to mention Joseph Priestly, the discoverer of oxygen, whom he immortalized as Inflammable Gas the Wind-Finder. He also had a passing relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft, known as the hyena in petticoats, who fulfilled his notion of Fearful Symmetry by becoming the wife Godwin deserved, and producing in their daughter Mary, the wife Shelley deserved.

A Third Testament

Blake also belonged temperamentally to the romantic movement. Indeed, he may be said to have ushered it in with his glowing verses and paintings, which owed nothing to any fashion or school, and which many consider, as I do, to be its finest product. These writings and pictures remain in all their beauty and spiritual awareness to offset the tawdry offerings of later romantic artists and poets, all moving towards total mindlessness and incoherence—a Devil’s Logos whereby the Word became flesh to dwell among us, graceless and full of lies.

Over in Denmark, of all places, another prophetic voice was to be raised—Søren Kierkegaard’s—to echo, and project still further into the future, Pascal’s and Blake’s. Kierkegaard knew and admired Pascal’s writings, but though his life overlapped with Blake’s (he was fourteen when Blake died), it is extremely improbable that he ever heard tell of him. What he and Blake had in common was a detestation of the sort of materialist-collectivist society they saw coming to pass around them, and an uncanny awareness of the sinister potentialities of science. They were even alike in their oddity, which set them apart from their contemporaries; in their resolute determination to go their own way without making concessions to the collectivity. Seeing them in terms of their predecessors, the Hebrew prophets, Blake was Isaiah and Kierkegaard, Amos; both their voices being raised in warning against the wrath to come if men decided to dispense with God and establish His Kingdom here on earth, with appropriate laws and morality and ecclesiastical establishments.

Of all God’s spies, a motley enough crew anyway, Kierkegaard is surely one of the weirdest. Interminably wandering about the streets of Copenhagen, one trouser leg shorter than the other, he had the people in the cafés nudging one another and exchanging significant nods and winks as he passed by. How could he possibly have understood in advance, as he did, the great hoax of universal-suffrage democracy, so that

in Westminster or on Capitol Hill it is his sharp sayings that come to mind rather than Jefferson's, Bagehot's, or Bryce's ponderously structured ones? How could his impish mind have reached out, as it did, into the newsrooms, the radio and television studios, the communications satellites keeping the *muzak* and *newzak* going round the world and round the clock? How to have foreseen so clearly those voices canting slogans in unison, on campuses, in Red Square, wherever uniformity was masquerading as unanimity? Or, take this: "A passionate, tumultuous age will overthrow everything, pull everything down; but a revolutionary age that is at the same time reflective and passionless leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance." What a perfect description of the revolutionary happenings now, which take place silently, invisibly, with the media lulling everyone to sleep, until the people awaken—if they ever do—to find that the Honorable and Right Honorable Members going in and out of the Aye and No lobbies are ghosts voting for and against nothing; that the vested priests at the high altar are praying to no one about nothing, and dispensing wine and wafers lifeless as stale yeast; that the currency notes being printed at the Mint have lost their value before they come off the presses, as the words dispatched to the composing room have lost their meaning before they are printed. In such circumstances, what is the need for a revolution? It would be like blitzing Pompei—something that actually happened in the Italian campaign in the Second World War, though nobody noticed. Such insights are not of this world; at the non-stop treason trial which is history, Kierkegaard stands convicted of working as an undercover agent for God.

Dostoevsky, notoriously a Slavophile, Christian, monarchist, and inveterate anti-Marxist, falls perfectly into the category of God's Spies; he foresaw with uncanny clarity how the terrible pride and dynamism of godless men seeking to construct an earthly paradise would infal-

libly prove destructive to themselves, their fellow human beings, and ultimately to what we still call Christendom.

When I was first in Russia, in 1932, Dostoevsky was still anathema because of his essentially religious view of life, as expressed in *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and because of his detestation of revolutionaries and their ideologies, especially Marxism, as expressed in *The Devils*. His grave in St. Petersburg, when I visited it, was neglected and difficult to find, and his books, though not specifically banned, were unobtainable. In any case, Lenin had savagely attacked Dostoevsky and his writings, which at that time precluded any attempt to re-establish his reputation. Especially offensive in the climate of the Soviet regime was the famous speech he delivered in 1880, the year before he died, on the occasion of the unveiling of the Pushkin statue in Moscow. In the speech, Dostoevsky lambasted the revolutionary and nihilistic views which, he claimed, came into Russia from the West. He spoke in exalted mystical terms of Russia's great destiny to unite mankind in a brotherhood based on Christian love as the antidote to power rather than on power as the antidote to the inequality, the injustice, the oppression under which the poor everywhere labored.

At the time the speech was rapturously received. Bringing it into my commentary necessitated quoting words from it which, uttered in Russian and by a Soviet citizen, would lead straight to the Gulag Archipelago. Equipped with a radio mic, and speaking these words as I walked along a crowded Moscow street, gave me a kind of ecstasy such as I have rarely experienced. None of the passersby heard what I was saying or would have understood it if they had; in their eyes I was just a foreigner for some reason given to muttering to himself. Yet nonetheless, as I conjured up in my mind the extraordinary response to Dostoevsky's words when he spoke them, somehow I knew without any shadow of doubt that his vision of Christ's gospel of love triumphing over Marx's gospel of power was certain, ultimately, to be fulfilled.

We filmed the Dostoevsky program in Russia just when the tide had turned, and he had become acceptable. In preparation for the celebration of the centenary of his death, a large edition of his collected works had been published and proved enormously popular. It was fascinating to observe how Dostoevsky's books, products of a mind diametrically opposed to everything the Soviet regime stood for, could, by virtue of an amazing exercise in ideological gymnastics, be molded into seeming compatible with the current Party Line—rather like discovering in Gandhi's life and writings another Genghis Khan, or in Mussolini a reincarnation of St. Francis of Assisi.

The case of Tolstoy in my little galaxy of God's spies is particularly interesting, if only because he is still, as it were, *en poste*, so that his performance is open to scrutiny by a discerning eye. This was very obvious while we were filming the program on Tolstoy in Russia at places associated with him—his Moscow home, his country estate Yasnaya Polyana, near Tula, and the obscure little railway station at Astapova where he died. In some degree I had been prepared for the experience when I interviewed for BBC television a Russian writer named Anatoly Kuznetsov who had defected and sought asylum in England. In talking with him, I became aware that his way of looking at life had distinct Christian undertones. When I mentioned this, he told me that soon after he was born his Ukrainian grandmother had arranged for him to be secretly baptized. Even so, I put it to him, he could scarcely have had a Christian upbringing under the militantly godless Soviet regime. What about the Gospels, for instance? They, surely, were unavailable. Yes, he said, that was so, and then went on to deliver himself of a memorable remark—namely, that Stalin had made a very great mistake in not banning the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

I saw the point, of course, and continued to marvel at the extraordinary chance—if chance it was—whereby the works of the two greatest

Christian writers of modern times should have continued to circulate in the world's first avowedly atheistic state. After all, between them they cover the whole ground, from Tolstoy's splendidly lucid commentaries on the New Testament, his account of his conversion in his *Confession*, as well as his short stories, each one a parable of consummate artistry, to Dostoevsky's devastatingly penetrating exposition of sin and suffering and redemption. Supposing one were asked to name the two books best calculated to give an unbeliever today a clear notion of what Christianity is about, could one hope to do better than *Resurrection* and *The Brothers Karamazov*? Kuznetsov was undoubtedly correct in his supposition that by allowing the circulation of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's works, Stalin unwittingly counteracted in the most effective way possible all the efforts of the Soviet propaganda machine, with its anti-God museums and equivalent publications and exhortations and scientific mumbo-jumbo, to extirpate the practice, and even the memory, of the Christian religion among the Russian people.

Holding forth in front of a camera is not an activity that in the ordinary way I find particularly congenial, but somehow, in the light of the thoughts my conversation with Kuznetsov had conjured up, I found our filming expedition to the Soviet Union in search of Tolstoy quite entrancing. This was especially true of the days we spent at Yasnaya Polyana, which, in the perfect autumn weather, seemed an enchanted place. Standing by Tolstoy's grave, looking over the ravine where as a child he had believed the green stick was hidden which had carved on it the secret of everlasting happiness, and speaking there of the beautiful way he had written about the New Testament, in shining words, so clear and telling that they might have been specially intended for minds otherwise uninformed or deliberately closed-up on the subject; speaking, too, of his inveterate distrust of power and of those who exercised it, however seemingly well-disposed their intentions, I felt uplifted, my-

self. My audience, it is true, was only a gaping camera, with, gathered round it, our own *équipe*, along with some Russians attached to us for one purpose and another, but I seemed to catch a glimpse of another presence, lurking among the silver birches he had planted a century before, bearded, high-booted and belted, in his familiar peasant's blouse. Could it be...was it possible that he was favoring me with a distinctively mischievous wink?

Immediately following our filming by Tolstoy's grave, I was due to be interviewed myself by the local Tula television station. My interviewer, an agreeable individual in leather trousers, was already standing by, and told me that he proposed to put to me only one question—Why did I admire Tolstoy?—which seemed fair enough. While I was walking up and down thinking of what I should say, the Russian who was to act as interpreter fell into step beside me, and, in a soft persuasive voice, with, as it seemed to me, undertones of ridicule, remarked that Tolstoy had been a great pacifist, had he not? I agreed that he had, though without adding that thereby he had earned the unbounded contempt of Lenin. In that case, the interpreter went on, it would be greatly appreciated if I were to point out that Mr. Brezhnev's policy of *détente* might be regarded as the fulfillment of Tolstoy's pacifism.

It was difficult to keep a straight face, but out of consideration for the interpreter I contented myself with saying that Mr. Brezhnev's policy of *détente* was to do with diplomacy, a heavily-mined field into which I should not care to venture. There the matter rested, and when I came to answer the single question of why I admired Tolstoy I stuck to my three points—his greatness as a writer, his unique quality as a spokesman for Christ, and his abiding distrust of governments, whatever their complexion and ostensible objectives. No words I have ever uttered, I think, gave me more satisfaction than these, even though I felt sure they would never be transmitted. It was a kind of ecstasy to be speaking

them in those circumstances and in that place. In the event, as I anticipated, all that appeared on the television screen was some mute footage of us filming at Yasnaya Polyana, but I felt that what I had said would also linger on among the silver birch trees in some mysterious way.

In Moscow we filmed in front of the headquarters of the Soviet Writers Union. The house was the one Tolstoy had used for the residence of the Rostov family in *War and Peace*, and a large statue of him dominates the façade. Again, as at Yasnaya Polyana, I was conscious of Tolstoy's presence. Looking up at his statue—artistically, not particularly good, but still the likeness sufficed—I saw in his bronze face what the Russian writer Maxim Gorky had so well described: something everlasting, near at hand and faraway, divinely earthy and innocently old.

There remains Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, for me, does not fit into the role of God's spy as clearly and succinctly as the others, doubtless because he is the nearest to us in time. God's spies, by the nature of the case, require to be seen in a certain perspective to be fully understood and appreciated. Bonhoeffer continues to be enmeshed in the present, and so to some extent partakes of its uncertainties and equivocations. For instance, he took his great decision to join the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler even though he recognized that so doing might be a mortal sin. In other words, he considered that delivering Germany from the Nazi regime was more important even than saving his own soul. We who have seen the consequences of Germany's deliverance from Hitler may well question Bonhoeffer's decision; but he was spared any such agonizing doubts by his martyrdom just before Germany's final defeat.

It is interesting to me that in London Simone Weil, another of God's spies, working with the Gaullists and becoming increasingly doubtful about what the forthcoming *soi-disant* liberation of France was going to amount to in terms of her values, was likewise spared the unedify-

ing spectacle of Charles De Gaulle's Fifth Republic, as Bonhoeffer was that of Germany's Federal Republic. In her case, admittedly, her death in 1943 can be regarded as in some degree self-inflicted, in that its ostensible cause was her refusal to eat. The effect, however, was the same as Bonhoeffer's martyrdom—that she did not live to see the hollowness of the Allied victory she had so passionately hoped for and believed in. And how greatly she would have preferred to die like Bonhoeffer on a Nazi scaffold to dying of malnutrition in a Kent hospital!

Standing on the Berlin Wall I tried to imagine what would have been Bonhoeffer's feelings if, instead of being martyred, he had lived on into post-war divided Germany. Eastwards, I could see the familiar scene of desolation and oppression, the bedraggled houses, the empty shops, the somehow muted traffic and people in the streets; westwards, the other sort of desolation and oppression, equally familiar, the gleaming neon and glass, the exhortations to spend and to consume, the banks for churches and the erotica for dreams. The pursuit of power versus the pursuit of happiness, black-and-white television versus color, the clenched fist versus the raised phallus, guns before butter and butter before guns. And in between, the no-man's land or limbo of vigilant sentries on watch-towers, dogs and land-mines and armed patrols. Was there anything here to risk eternal damnation for, or for that matter to live for? The strip-tease joints and the garish posters announcing the mighty achievements of the triumphant German proletariat, equally fantasy. Plastic flesh and fraudulent statistics—where's the difference? Perhaps, after all, the limbo is the place, lurking among the land-mines.

Bonhoeffer's active service as God's spy ends, then, with an unanswered question. Maybe his perfect serenity as he went to his execution was partly due to the fact that now he would never have to answer it—at least not in this world. Meanwhile, we may be sure that other spies

have been briefed and posted. It would be foolish even to speculate on their identity and whereabouts. As has already been said, the first duty of a stay-behind agent is to take on the coloration of the contemporary scene. One thing is certain, though: whoever and wherever they may be, great services will be required of them and great dangers encompass them.

saint augustine

354–430 a.d.

When at the beginning of the fifth century a.d. Rome was sacked, Augustine was at the height of his fame as the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Confronted with the dissolution of the Roman Empire, like a latter-day Noah, he was constrained to construct an ark, in his case Orthodoxy, wherein his Church could survive through the dark days that lay ahead.

Thanks largely to Augustine, the light of the New Testament did not go out with Rome's but remained amidst the debris of the fallen empire to light the way to another civilization, Christendom, whose legatees we are.

It was as though he had been specially groomed for the task. Tempered in the fires of his own sensuality, toughened by his arduous explorations of the heresies of the age, he was a master of words written and spoken, which he offered in God's service, first asking that God would give him the wherewithal to offer.

In Augustine's eyes Rome stood at the very pinnacle of history. He saw it as the secular state carried to the highest degree of perfection, providing the only tolerable framework of life for mankind. Its disappearance from the human scene, if so unthinkable a catastrophe were to happen, would leave behind not other, alternative civilizations, but

a vacuum, a darkness.

Augustine's own North Africa partook of this glory. The city of Carthage was a little Rome. The abundant harvests, the flourishing cities and ports, the entertainments and spectacles, all signified participation in the Roman Empire, which to Augustine was the whole world.

Augustine was born in the year 354, some forty years after Christianity had become the acknowledged religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. His birthplace was in a hilly district of North Africa, the Roman province then known as Numidia, in one of the many small towns which were scattered about what was then a rich and luxuriant countryside.

His father, Patricius, belonged to the middle classes and was reasonably well off except that he was a victim of the very excessive taxation which characterized those troubled years. He was a wealthy man who remained a pagan till the end of his life, when he was belatedly baptized a Christian. Augustine's mother Monica, on the other hand, was a Christian of tremendous piety. Without any question, her devotions and meditations were conducive to Augustine not fulfilling his father's purpose and becoming a successful lawyer or civil servant, but, as she hoped, dedicating his life to the service of Christ and the Church. She made him a saint and his sanctity resulted, in due course, in her being canonized.

His studies went easily. He excelled and quite soon became a teacher of rhetoric—a rather empty and pretentious discipline which in those days was very highly regarded, rather as sociology is today. Looking back on his profession, he contemptuously called it being a vendor of words. Alas, my own trade!

By the end of the fourth century the decadence which had afflicted Rome had spread to the northern African provinces, especially to the great port and metropolis of Carthage, at whose university Augustine

studied and later taught. Thence he transferred to Rome because he said he found the Carthage students too turbulent—a very contemporary touch.

To a provincial like young Augustine, the Mediterranean would have seemed like the gateway to the larger world of Rome. After all, he was a very ambitious man, and in his time, as in ours, eminence as a man of letters or as an academic could lead to positions of great power and responsibility.

Also, I think, he wanted to escape from the watchful eye of his mother, Monica, and indulge freely in what Pascal would later call “licking the earth,” and Augustine himself, after his conversion, would describe as “scratching the itching sore of lust.” So, to avoid the pain and embarrassment of saying goodbye to his mother, one night he slipped away across the sea, taking with him his mistress and their son, Adeodatus. It was on any showing a very unkind thing to do and afterwards his contrition for it was great.

In Rome he easily consorted with some of the most famous figures of the time, and was appointed to the Chair of Rhetoric in Milan. The appointment brought him into contact with the Imperial Court, and—even more important, from the point of view of his subsequent career—with the famous and saintly Bishop Ambrose. So, at the age of thirty, he had reached the summit of a career with a dazzling prospect before him. But somehow, he remained totally unsatisfied. He called his university appointment his “chair of lies,” knowing in his heart that God had some other purpose for him and that, try as he might, he would never be able to escape his true calling.

Roman games and theatre were given over to wildly expensive spectacles of violence and eroticism, like films and, increasingly, television today. To judge by the way that after his conversion Augustine never lost an opportunity of thundering against such spectacles, it is reason-

able to assume that he was by no means immune to their appeal. There is also the touching story in Augustine's autobiography, the *Confessions*, of a friend who, with great effort, had managed to break an addiction to the games, was tricked into going to them, ventured to open just one eye, and was hooked again.

The pagan temples still functioned, but few attended or heeded them. The Christian churches, now under state patronage, were not strong enough to counteract, or even always to resist, the prevailing atmosphere of luxury, violence and self-indulgence. With his sensual disposition and inquiring mind, Augustine was little disposed to hold aloof, though a certain intellectual and physical fastidiousness prevented him from succumbing wholly to a way of life which would assuredly have destroyed him.

It is easier for us to get inside Augustine's unregenerate skin than perhaps it would be for any of the intervening generations. The similarity between his circumstances and ours is striking, if not to say alarming. There is the same moral vacuity, leading to the same insensate passion for new sensations and experiences; the same fatuous credulity opening the way to every kind of charlatanry and quackery from fortune telling to psychoanalysis; the same sinister combination of great wealth and pointless ostentation with appalling poverty and unheeded affliction. As Augustine wrote, "O greedy men, what will satisfy you if God Himself will not?"

We know what it is like. We also know that to a temperament as sensual and imaginative as Augustine's, sexual indulgence makes the greatest appeal precisely because it offers a kind of fraudulent ecstasy—joys that expire when the neon lights go out.

"There's nothing so powerful," he said when he was a Bishop, "in drawing the spirit of man downwards as the caresses of a woman." He was speaking from experience and I, for what it's worth, endorse his

opinion.

Augustine's *Confessions* is really the first autobiography, in the modern sense of the term. For that reason we know more about him than about any other figure in antiquity. Of course, it is not just an account of his life, it is also an account of his quest for truth. So the culminating point in it, from his point of view at any rate, is his conversion. He naturally thought, as did Saint Paul, that this conversion happened at a particular moment, but actually it was the result of a long process which had begun even before he was aware of it.

Knowing his nature, Monica had hurried after her son to Milan to watch over him, and pray for his soul's redemption. Moreover, some of the friends he had made among the amusing, the cultivated and the well-born turned out to be Christians, a fact which came as something of a surprise to Augustine, who in North Africa had associated Christianity with the poor and the lowly. In Milan a great Roman administrator, like Ambrose, might renounce his career to become a bishop, and rich heiresses dispose of all their property to the Church.

It was under Ambrose's influence that Augustine began to study the scriptures, noting particularly the spiritual meaning of Old Testament stories, which had formerly made little impression on him. This played an important part in his final deliverance from the heresy of Manicheism and his ultimate conversion.

The climax of Augustine's conversion occurred in a garden in Milan and its fulfillment in another garden in the country. I think he must have loved gardens, where for him the truth stood out most clearly. First, however, there was one episode in the process leading up to his conversion which received special mention in his *Confessions*:

My misery was complete and I remember how one day You made me realize how utterly wretched I was. I was preparing a speech in praise of the Emperor, intending that it should include a great many lies which would

certainly be applauded by an audience who knew well enough how far from the truth they were. I was greatly preoccupied by this task, my mind was feverishly busy with its harassing problems. As I walked along one of the streets of Milan, I noticed a poor beggar who must, I suppose, have had his fill of food and drink, since he was laughing and joking.

Contrasting their two conditions—his own so troubled, the beggar’s so cheerful—he cried out in desperation,

Will I never cease setting my heart on shadows and following a lie?

His anguish and contrition are all too actual to me after more than forty years in the same sort of profession.

Nonetheless Augustine’s mind continued to be occupied with thoughts of fame and success. He was planning to marry a rich woman, having callously sent away the mistress he had brought from North Africa, who had lived with him for fifteen years, and keeping their son, Adeodatus, on whom he doted. Then matters came to a head in the garden of the house where he lived. As he described it: “I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle in which I was my own contestant, until it came to its conclusion.”

In this mood he “suddenly heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl, I can’t say but again and again it repeated the refrain, “Take it and read it, take it and read it.” So, he rushed to where he had left a copy of the Gospels open at Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and read: “Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries, rather, arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ. Spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites.”

Augustine continued: “I had no wish to read more and no need to do so, for in an instant as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the dark-

ness and doubt was dispelled.”

No one must suppose that this great conversion which had befallen Augustine, this light which had shone into his life and would never again leave it, had turned him away from this world. On the contrary, it made him more conscious than ever before of its joys and beauties, more aware than ever before of the terrific privilege it was to be allowed to exist in time. There is a passage that I love in the *Confessions* in which he asks “the earth itself, the winds that blow, and the whole air, and all that lives in it... ‘What is my God?’” Likewise he asks the sky, the moon and the stars: “What is my God?” None of these was God, he was told. He went on to speak to “all the things that are about me, all that can be admitted by the door of the senses.” They, too, he was told, were not God. Then at last he understood: their beauty was all the answer they could give, and the only answer he needed to hear.

Following his conversion, Augustine set out with Monica to return to North Africa, resolving to dedicate the remaining years of his life wholly to the service of Christ. They reached the port of Ostia and were delayed there, because the Mediterranean was infested with pirates and no boats would put to sea.

How different was the Augustine who returned to North Africa from the one who had left for Rome! Now he was as avid to leave the world as he had been to plunge into it; as ardently in search of obscurity as he had once sought fame.

It was while they were waiting in Ostia that Augustine and Monica had an extraordinary, mystical experience which is described in the *Confessions* with incomparable artistry and skill. They were looking out of the window of the house in which they were staying into the courtyard below, talking together serenely and joyfully about the eternal life of the saints, which, they agreed, “no bodily pleasure, however great it might be and whatever earthly light might shed luster upon it, was

worthy of comparison, or even mention.” As they talked, ranging over “the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the very heavens themselves,” they came to survey “the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it,” Augustine said, “with all the strength of our hearts.”

Then they reached out and touched this eternal Wisdom, which like eternity itself is neither in the past nor the future, but just *is*. Touched it only to return, leaving, Augustine writes, “our spiritual harvest bound to it, to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an end; far, far different from Your Word, our Lord, Who abides in Himself forever, yet never grows old and gives new life to all things.” Whoever has tried to give expression in words with a beginning and an end, to the perspectives and shape of this creation in which we live, cannot fail to feel awed that so great a writer as Augustine should suffer a like predicament.

It was after this experience that Monica told Augustine she had nothing left to live for: God had granted her every wish, now that her son was His servant, and spurned such joys as this world had to offer. Nine days later she was dead, and Augustine, leaving her mortal remains in Ostia, returned to North Africa to undertake what would become his great life’s work. This was to be no less a task than to salvage from a world in ruins the Christian faith, in order that it might provide the basis for a new, splendid civilization which would grow great and then in its time, falter and fail as men, forgetting the eternal Wisdom that Monica and Augustine had glimpsed at Ostia, thought to find in their own mortal bodies the joy of living and in their own mortal minds its meaning.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine’s last reference to his mother asks everyone who reads the book to remember “Monica, your servant, and with her, Patricius, her husband, who died before her, by whose bodies I was

brought into this life.” Through the centuries Monica has been duly remembered. As for Augustine, the rest of his life was spent in North Africa. He never crossed the sea again.

His idea was to gather a few similarly inclined friends round him and share with them a monastic life on his small estate in the hills where he was born. It was not to be. His gifts were too famous and too precious, and the need for leadership in the Church too great for him to be left in peace. As he told his congregation many years later, when he had long been a bishop, he came to Hippo—one of the many small ports along the North African coast—to see a friend whom he hoped to persuade to join him in the monastic life. Because Hippo had a bishop, Augustine went to the cathedral fearing no threat to his own privacy, but was recognized, grabbed, made a priest, and in due course a bishop.

Augustine wept when, almost under compulsion, he was first ordained a priest. Probably he would have had difficulty in explaining just what the tears were about, but one of the causes was certainly his lost dream of a life of prayer and meditation away from a troubled world. He was forty-three years old when he first mounted the cathedra as Bishop of Hippo. Thenceforth, he was endlessly involved in the duties and responsibilities of his office and the often bitter controversies of his time.

Contemplating Augustines’s achievement one stands amazed. By becoming their bishop, he had in truth become the servant of his congregation—those volatile Christians of North Africa whose feelings he understood so well. Preaching to them often daily, spending his mornings adjudicating their private disputes, being available constantly to any one of them in need of help or counsel, and all the while conducting an enormous correspondence—his administrative burden was very great. Yet he was a man withdrawn from the commotion around him. Despite his great fame and involvement in his troubled times, he was

somehow isolated, as though in his own inner sanctity he had achieved the monastic life he so longed for.

Gatherings of the North African hierarchy brought Augustine often to the great metropolitan church at Carthage, where he delivered many of his greatest polemics, placing his dazzling gifts unreservedly at the service of his Church.

His public utterances and writings are full of arresting, challenging phrases, as fresh and relevant to our ears as to those who first heard them.

“This is the door of the Lord; the righteous shall enter in,” was written on the lintel of a church in Numidia. However, “The man who enters,” Augustine wrote:

is bound to see drunkards, misers, tricksters, gamblers, adulterers, fornicators, people wearing amulets, assiduous clients of sorcerers, astrologers. He must be warned that the same crowds that press into the churches on Christian festivals also fill the theatres on pagan holidays...

Wherever the towering mass of the theater is erected, there the foundations of Christian virtue are undermined, and while this insane expenditure gives to the sponsors a glorious result, men mock at the works of mercy...

It is only charity that distinguishes the children of God from the children of the Devil. They all make the sign of the Cross, and answer “Amen” and sing Alleluia, they all go to church and build up the walls of the basilicas...

Take away the barriers afforded by the laws! Men’s brazen capacity to do harm, their urge to self-indulgence would rage to the full. No king in his kingdom, no general with his troops...no husband with his wife, no father with his son, could hope to stop, by any threat or punishment, the license that would follow the sheer sweet taste of sinning...

Give me a man in love; he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal Country. Give me that sort of

man; he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just doesn't know what I am talking about...

You are surprised that the world is losing its grip? That the world is grown old? Don't hold onto the old man, the world; don't refuse to regain your youth in Christ, who says to you: "The world is passing away; the world is losing its grip, the world is short of breath. Don't fear, thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle."

Though no one has ever been more insistent on the need for purity, equally no one has ever been less of a Puritan in the pejorative sense. Everything in creation delighted Augustine. He spoke to his congregation of the gloriously changing colors of the Mediterranean, which he had so often observed. All created things should be loved, he insisted, because God made them. The sea, the creatures, everything that is, speaks of God.

It was because Augustine was so aware of the universality of God's love and presence that he could easily communicate with all sorts and conditions of men. For instance, he once told the fishermen at Hippo:

It will not be held against you that you are ignorant against your will, but that you neglect to seek out what it is that makes you ignorant; not that you cannot bring together your wounded limbs, but that you reject Him that would heal them.

Again, like his Master, like the Gospels themselves, he used everyday imagery to make his points. As when he compared God's gifts to us to a man giving his girl a bracelet.

If she so delights in the bracelet as to forget the giver, that is an insult to him, but if she so delights in the bracelet as to love the giver more, that was what the bracelet was for...

We take for granted the slow miracle whereby water in the irrigation of

a vineyard becomes wine. It is only when Christ turns water into wine, in quick motion, as it were, that we stand amazed.

And there was always the North African countryside:

When all is said and done, is there any more marvellous sight, any occasion when human reason is nearer to some sort of converse with the nature of things, than the sowing of seeds, the planting of cuttings, the transplanting of shrubs, the grafting of slips? It is as though you could question the vital force in each root and bud on what it can do, and what it cannot, and why.

So, this scintillating mind lives on in his words. Words which take account of the times in which they were spoken or written and the fears and anxieties these times generated, but which brush aside empty hopes of fashioning a better world out of mere mortal hopes for one.

I no longer wished for a better world, because I was thinking of the whole of creation, and in the light of this clearer discernment I have come to see that, though the higher things are better than the lower, the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone.

Augustine was fifty-six years old and in Carthage when, in the year 410, someone came and told him that Rome had been sacked. It must have been a dramatic moment in his life. Of course he knew that something of the kind was liable to happen and had prepared himself and his flock, as far as he could, for it. "Don't lose heart, brothers," he told them, "there will be an end to every earthly kingdom, and if this is actually the end now, God sees." Even so, he continued to nourish the hope, as people do when great disasters loom, that somehow it wouldn't happen.

In our time as in Augustine's we have witnessed great disasters, and we know how the flame of hope burns on. I remember well a bright August Sunday afternoon in 1940 when I stood on Camden Hill and

heard the roar of the first wave of the German Luftwaffe coming over London, and thought, “No, it can’t happen!”

Like many of my generation I felt that the cities of Western civilization had been morally bombed before the actual bombs began to fall. But Augustine loved and revered Rome. He saw it not just as the symbol of a great empire but as civilization itself—everything that he had admired and after which he had aspired when he was growing up and as a student in the great metropolis. Rome was art, literature, all the things he wanted to achieve; it was all that the French statesman Talleyrand would describe centuries later, when he witnessed what he thought to be the ruin of French civilization, as *douceur de vivre*, the “sweetness of life.”

Augustine’s first duty was to hearten his flock and prevent the panic and demoralization which the flood of refugees already beginning to arrive in North Africa from Rome might well have brought about. In a sermon delivered at the time, he compared the capture of Rome by Alaric, king of the Visigoths, with the destruction of Sodom, reminding his listeners that in the latter, biblical case, everyone had perished and the city had been eradicated by fire, never to exist again. In Rome, there were many survivors, including all who had taken refuge in the churches, Alaric himself being an Arian Christian. There had been a great deal of destruction, of course, but as Augustine pointed out, cities consist of men, not walls. Rome had been chastised but not destroyed.

“The world,” he said “reels under crushing blows, the old man is shaken out, the flesh is pressed, the spirit turns to clear flowing oil.”

Then he turned to the deeper question of the relations between earthly cities, like Rome, which have their day, rising and falling like everything in time, and the Heavenly City or City of God, which is everlasting. This question occupied him for the next seventeen years, almost to the end of his life, and resulted in his great work of genius,

The City of God, which directly or indirectly influenced the thought of Christians on what they owed to God and what to Caesar through the succeeding fifteen centuries.

We live perforce, and always must, in earthly cities. They are our location, our set, with history for our script. At the same time, in all creation we are unique in being capable of envisaging a Heavenly City not susceptible to the ravages of time, existing beyond the dark jungle of the human will. As Saint Paul said, and Augustine echoed: "Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come."

Pursuing his theme, Augustine ranged over the whole of human history as then understood. His conclusions have lost none of their force in the light of whatever has been invented, concluded and speculated upon in the subsequent fifteen centuries:

The centuries of past history would have rolled by like empty jars if Christ had not been foretold by them...

These were the two motives which drove the Romans to their wonderful achievements: liberty, and the passion for the praise of men...

What else was there for them to love save glory? For, through glory, they desired to have a kind of life after death on the lips of those who praised them...

The Heavenly City outshines Rome, beyond comparison. There, instead of victory, is truth; instead of high rank, holiness; instead of peace, felicity; instead of life, eternity...

Take Aristotle, put him near to the Rock of Christ, and he fades away into nothingness. Who is Aristotle? When he hears the words, "Christ said," then he shakes in hell. "Pythagoras said this." "Plato said that." Put them near the Rock and compare these arrogant people with Him who was crucified!

In our fallen state, our imperfection, we can conceive perfection. Through the Incarnation, the presence of God among us in the lineaments of Man, we have a window in the walls of time which looks out

on this Heavenly City. This was Augustine's profoundest conclusion, and in his great work he enshrined it imperishably, to be a comfort and a light in the dark days that lay ahead, when in the year 430, the triumphant Vandals would cross into Africa, reaching the walls of Hippo itself, as he lay dying there.

Today, the earthly city looks ever larger, to the point where it may be said to have taken over the heavenly one. Turning away from God, blown up with the arrogance generated by their fabulous success in exploring and harnessing the mechanism of life, men believe themselves to be at last in charge of their own destiny. As we survey the disastrous consequences of such an attitude, the chaos and destruction it has brought, as Augustine did the fall of Rome and its aftermath, his words on that other occasion still stand applicable, as he says, to all circumstances and conditions of men:

In its sojourn here, the Heavenly City makes use of the peace provided by the earthly city. In all that relates to the mortal nature of man it preserves and indeed seeks the concordance of human wills. It refers the earthly peace to the heavenly peace, which is truly such peace that it alone can be described as peace, for it is the highest degree of ordered and harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God and of another in God. When this stage is reached then there will be life, not life subject to death but life that is clearly...and assuredly life giving. There will be a body, not a body which is animal, weighing down the soul as it decays, but a spiritual body experiencing no need and subordinated in every part to the will. This is the peace that the Heavenly City has while it sojourns here in faith, and in this faith it lives a life of righteousness. To the establishing of that peace it refers all its good actions, whether they be towards God or towards one's neighbor, for the life of this City is utterly and entirely a life of fellowship.

blaise pascal

1623 – 1662

Some ten centuries after Augustine was called on to salvage the Christian Church from the ruins of the Roman Empire, Blaise Pascal, in the France of the Bourbon kings, took upon himself the task of defending the Christian faith against the arrogance and pride of those who believed they could live without God or mold His purposes to their own.

Man is only a reed, the feeblest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary for the entire universe to take up arms in order to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water, is sufficient to kill him. But if the universe crushes him, man would still be nobler than the thing which destroys him, because he knows that he is dying, and the universe which has him at its mercy is unaware of it.

Thus did Pascal define man's superiority to nature in his great work, the *Pensées*, more than three centuries ago. If ever there was a thinking reed, it was Pascal himself. In his short life—he died when he was thirty-nine years old—he established himself as an outstanding mathematician, scientist and inventor to the point that it was considered by no means odd to compare him with Aristotle.

Under Pascal's direction, for instance, an experiment was conducted which established the existence of atmospheric pressure, thereby laying

the foundations of the modern science of hydraulics. In Clermont-Ferrand, where Pascal was born, is displayed a mechanical calculator or, as he called it, a *machine arithmetique* designed on the same essential lines as today's computer. In the field of pure mathematics he is also one of the great names. An astonishing yield for one abbreviated life, any item of which would have been enough to insure that Pascal would continue to be remembered.

It is not, however, for any or all of these achievements that his fame has grown through the centuries since his death, but for something that I, like many others before me consider immeasurably greater—his sublime defense of faith as the one sure guide to reality, and of the Christian religion as showing Western man the way out of the cul-de-sac into which science must inevitably lead him.

This cul-de-sac of science has only become the more evident during the twentieth century, in which science has advanced further towards exploring and explaining the nature and mechanisms of matter than in all the rest of recorded time.

The spectacle which Pascal imagined (and we have actually seen) of our earth as a tiny revolving ball in the immensity of space, one among innumerable others great and small, has—far from turning us to God, as Pascal hoped—served rather to sharpen and intensify the idiot conceit of technologically advanced nations. This is well illustrated by the words with which U.S. President Richard Nixon greeted the first astronauts on their return from the moon in 1969:

Let me close off with just one thing. I was thinking, you know, as you came down...it had only been eight days, just a week, a long week, that this was the greatest week in the history of the world since the Creation.

As Pascal foresaw, science, like the old pagan gods, has come to belong to man's quest for power, not truth. Man a thinking reed, yes, but

his very thought processes, properly pursued, induce him to realize the limitations of thought.

For the same reason, Pascal, the most brilliant scientist of his time, denounced not the methods but the vainglorious pretensions of science—an incomparable intellect devoted to showing how very little the intellect can do.

Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Humble yourself, impotent reason. Be silent, dull-witted nature, and learn from your Master your true condition, which you do not understand. Listen to God! See the Earth as a point compared with the vast circles it describes. Stand amazed that this circle itself is only a tiny point in relation to the course traced by the stars revolving in the firmament; that the whole visible world is no more than an imperceptible speck in the ample bosom of nature.

Having thus lost himself in creation's vast perspectives, man may find himself again in a God who cannot see a sparrow fall to the ground without concern, Pascal insisted. In contrast to his great contemporary, Descartes, who pursued an abstract, intellectual truth, Pascal set the personal drama of individual men seeking God. Instead of Descartes', "I think, therefore I am," Pascal said, "I look for God, therefore I have found Him."

How few things there are which can be proved! Proofs only convince the mind. Who has ever been able to prove that tomorrow will come, and that we shall die? And what could be more generally believed?...In short, we must rely on faith when the mind has once perceived where truth lies, in order to quench our thirst and color our minds with a faith that eludes us at every moment of the day.

"Man," he concluded in the *Pensées*, "is great insofar as he realizes that he is wretched. A tree does not know its own wretchedness."

Over France in Pascal's time loomed the formidable figure of Cardinal Richelieu exercising both the power of the Church and the State.

No doubt the author of the *Pensées* had Richelieu in mind when he wrote so scathingly of the pretensions of earthly authority, while at the same time being fully aware of its necessity if laws were to be enforced and order to be maintained. Like all mystics, Pascal was at heart an anarchist who nonetheless realized that as long as men needed rules to live together, they would also need power to enforce them. Like Saint Augustine, he longed for citizenship in the City of God, but meanwhile was content to accept the conditions of living in the earthly city.

It was to Richelieu that Pascal's father, Etienne Pascal, owed his appointment to high administrative positions in the service of the State, and when for a while Etienne fell out of favor and had to stay away from Paris for fear of being arrested, it was his youngest daughter, twelve-year-old Jacqueline, who successfully pleaded for her father with the Cardinal.

The children never went to school and Etienne Pascal, a true man of the Renaissance, educated them himself at home, according to carefully thought-out principles. When Etienne was entrusted with the thankless task of collecting in Normandy the exorbitant taxes which Richelieu was bound to impose to pay for the King's wars, his son, very touchingly, worked with him night after night on his desolate accounts. It was this experience which first turned Blaise Pascal's attention to the possibility of inventing a calculating machine.

When through a chance meeting with a priest the family came into contact with the evangelical Jansenist movement within what had become, under Richelieu's dominance, a corrupt and worldly Church, they all responded. Etienne Pascal did not live to see the full involvement of his children in Jansenism, but all three of them—Jacqueline most ardently, her brother Blaise trailing along behind her, and her sister Gilberte, more sedately—remained faithful to its higher standards of piety, charity and devotion.

The Jansenist movement—named after Cornelius Jansen, a Dutch theologian and Bishop of Ypres—was strongly supported at the Abbey of Port Royal, whose Mother Superior, Mère Angélique, belonged to the Arnault family, all ardent followers of Jansen. The movement attracted such gifted, pious people, as well as aristocrats like the Duc de Roanne, a great friend of Pascal. Some of these aristocratic Jansenists became known as the *gentlemen-hermits*.

At Port Royal some of the most dramatic and decisive exchanges of Pascal's life took place with his dearly loved sister Jacqueline, who had insisted on becoming a nun at this famous convent after the death of their father.

Pascal's feelings about her renunciation of the world were mixed. At first he approved, then he opposed, and then he sourly acquiesced. At one point they were involved in a sordid row, which had Pascal shouting angrily that under no circumstances would he agree to his sister's share of their inheritance being handed over to the convent as her dowry when she took her final vows.

This particular row ended in Pascal handing over more to the convent than was required, thereby considerably reducing his income. Such rows, in my experience, are never about what they are about, and I doubt very much whether either of them really cared much about the money as such either way. Jacqueline—who was a girl of quite exceptional gifts, in some ways surpassing those of her brother, and whose dazzling attractiveness shines out across the three intervening centuries—went to the heart of the matter when she upbraided her brother by saying: “If you do not possess the strength to follow me, at least do not hold me back. Do not show yourself ungrateful to God for the grace he has given to a person whom you love.”

In other words, it was envy and pride that were gnawing away at Pascal, not cupidity at all. It riled him deeply that he should go on being

held a prisoner of the world that she had so gracefully and thankfully cast off—a servitude he found increasingly burdensome. In the event, of course, Pascal did turn up when Jacqueline took her final vows. She could see him through the grill in silhouette: on his knees, but still looking cross.

Actually, as I am sure she correctly divined, he was on the run, and she resolved then and there to press him hard, to make of him a Christian saint instead of merely a brilliant scientist and celebrity.

Thenceforth, in their now almost daily exchanges across the grill, it was Jacqueline who made the going. Until, as she wrote to Gilberte in September, 1654:

He opened his heart to me in a way that could not but fill me with pity. He admitted that in the midst of his many occupations and the pleasures of the fashionable world, by which he seemed to set so much store, he was conscious of an overwhelming urge to abandon everything.

It was an important admission, but still, though he felt this extreme distaste for the follies and distractions of society, there was no corresponding inclination to turn to God. How truly attached to worldly things he must have been, Jacqueline reflected, thus to resist the graces that God was sending him and to turn a deaf ear to His appeal!

They broke off to attend Vespers: Pascal under the small visitor's cupola, and Jacqueline behind the grill, praying as I am sure she had never prayed before, that the grace so visibly growing in her famous brother would lead him to take the last remaining step—into God's arms.

Some five weeks later, on the night of November 23, he took that step. Pascal's famous memorial to this experience, written in his own hand, was found sewn into his clothing at the time of his death. He had treasured it and had kept it on his person always. His sister Gilberte piously preserved it, crumpled and faded among his papers. It is a unique

and intensely moving document which like some spiritual seismograph reflects in its very strokes and flourishes the fluctuations of his state of mind as he was writing it.

We may imagine him sitting at home in the evening. He opens his New Testament at the account of the Passion, and his eye fastens on Peter's thrice-repeated denial that he was an associate of Jesus. As he reads the cock crows—not for Peter, but for him, Pascal. Peter, confronted with his disloyalty, wept and so does Pascal, realizing that he too has separated himself from Christ. What desolation, what darkness! Then suddenly deliverance comes, and he understands that he too can be forgiven; that he is forgiven.

He looks at his clock and sees it is half past ten. Seated at his desk, he begins his memorial. First, a tiny cross at the top of the paper, followed by the date—“Year of Grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, Feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others belonging to the martyrology.” Then the word “Fire,” signifying “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,” but not, he adds to rub in the point, “the God of the philosophers and scholars” —this, I am sure, with an eye on Descartes.

Now come the triumphant words: “Certainty, certainty, emotion, joy, peace, God of Jesus Christ. *Deum meum et Deum vestrum*, Thy God shall be my God. Oblivion of the world and of everything except God.” His ecstasy is in his pen; the slanting letters proclaim it, like steeples reaching into the sky: “Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy!”

Now, like the saints Paul and Augustine in similar circumstances, Pascal had a craving for solitude, which he found at Port Royal's sister foundation, Port Royal des Champs.

Contrary to what is often suggested, the conversion that Pascal so ecstatically described in the memorial did not result in his abandoning all his worldly interests. For instance, he continued with his scientific

studies and researches, and even as late as the last year of his life he was responsible for starting what was, in effect, the first public transportation system in Paris. Moreover, the most mundane of his writings, the famous *Lettres provinciales* (*Provincial Letters*) were undertaken, almost by chance, after his conversion and involved him as one of the principals in the bitter controversy then raging between the Jesuits and the Jansenists.

The Jesuits favored tempering the severities of Christian doctrine and practice in order to make them more palatable; the Jansenists were insistent that the service of Christ still required the renunciation of worldly pleasures and prizes. Pascal, in any case, would have been temperamentally on the Jansenist side. He loved the pleasures and the prizes much too much to tolerate any mitigation of their ill-repute. As it happened, Port Royal was in effect the headquarters of militant Jansenism, and his beloved Jacqueline one of the most ardent of the militants; he soon became their anonymous and enormously impressive spokesman.

Using to the full his splendid gift of irony, which he deployed in a lucid, flexible style more reminiscent of Jonathan Swift than Thomas Aquinas, Pascal mercilessly lambasted the Jesuits. It was a superb performance, greatly admired by the reading public, who flocked to get the letters as they came out. Despite—or perhaps because of—the letters' great popularity, some of the more staid Jansenists found them a shade disconcerting. The Jesuits of course abominated them.

The controversy which gave rise to the *Lettres provinciales* is the everlasting one between those who think that as far as possible we should be allowed to do what we like in this world, and those who, like Pascal, conceive it to be the glory and the greatness of man to look upwards from what he called “licking the earth,” to survey the destiny that awaits him beyond the ticking of the clock. Today the controversy

ranges round the concept of what is called situational ethics, whereby an act is right or wrong, not intrinsically, but in relation to its circumstances. As Pascal himself put it, nothing is just in itself merely according to reason; everything varies according to the weather. Now, as in Pascal's time, some individual Jesuits would agree.

Who won in the controversy between the Jesuits and the Jansenists? This is what everyone always wants to know; but of course, in truly fundamental disputes like the one between the Jesuits and the Jansenists, between the worldly and the other-worldly, there are no clear-cut winners and losers. It is perfectly true that Jansenism as such has ceased to exist. Persecution followed the appearance of the *Lettres provinciales*, and the religious at Port Royal were required to adhere to an equivocal statement of orthodoxy—an exercise in casuistry that killed poor Jacqueline, or at any rate hastened her early death. Later, on the orders of Louis XIV, the Port Royal of Mère Angélique and the *gentlemen-hermits* was destroyed. As for the Society of Jesuits, they can be said to be going strong, or at any rate going.

Likewise, the Palace of Versailles, which Louis XIV took such pains to have built at the same time as he was destroying Port Royal, still stands—though it is no longer the residence of kings, but a tourist attraction. As for the *Lettres provinciales*, they hold their place in Pascal's *oeuvre*, but as literature (or perhaps better, as an early, brilliant essay in journalism) rather than as an apologia for Jansenism.

How then do the accounts work out? The answer is that they are still not closed, and never can be. Versailles, standing, is essentially as much a ruin as Port Royal ruined.

What Pascal defended cannot be lost. What the Jesuits still defend is lost already. They build the walls of Jericho—which have to be built, but only to fall whenever a Pascal blows his trumpet. While the Jesuits were concerned with tactics, Pascal's mind was on strategy.

In Pascal's time as in ours, the Church's continued existence was threatened from without and from within. The Reformation, like the discoveries and pretensions of science today, had challenged its basic premises, and inside the Church there were those—again, as there are today, in each case with the Jesuits well to the fore—eager to fall in with the new, trendy intellectual and moral attitudes.

Pascal was ready to use his dialectical skill in opposing the innovators, and considered himself to the end of his days a loyal son of the Church, even though he was open to a charge of heresy, and only just missed being excommunicated.

At the same time, what Pascal was concerned with essentially was not an institutional Church or a temporal State, but man himself: that fugitive from reality who must somehow be persuaded to confront his own imperfection and despair, and see through them into the bright light of eternity, his true habitat. "Since men are unable to cure death, misery, ignorance, they imagine they can find happiness by not thinking about such things." Well, Pascal would set them thinking.

Pascal was endlessly fascinated by the ingenuity with which we human beings evade reality. What an extraordinary thing it is, Pascal observed in the *Pensées*, that a man who has suffered some terrible bereavement or has become involved in some desperate plot can forget his troubles so easily. Born to know the universe, to sit in judgment and to rule, he is wholly concerned with trivialities. And if he tries to rise above them, he will only be departing from his natural state, neither angel nor beast, but just man.

Then there are the larger evasions of reality: for example, those mounted in courts of justice and of kings, on battlefields and in legislatures, in laboratories and universities. Thus Pascal anatomized our human condition in his great work, the *Pensées*.

It is the nature of self-esteem and of the human self to love only oneself and

to consider oneself alone. But what can a man do? He wants to be great and finds that he is small; he wants to be happy and finds that he is unhappy; he wants to be perfect and finds that he is riddled with imperfections; he wants to be the object of men's affection and esteem and sees that his faults deserve only their dislike and contempt. The embarrassing position in which he finds himself produces in him the most unjust and criminal passion that can possibly be imagined; 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.

In the high tide of his new-found faith, Pascal took upon himself the stupendous task of producing no less than a defense of the Christian religion. It was an audacious undertaking: to take, as it were, the contemporary atheist by the scruff of the neck and make him see how mistaken he was in rejecting what alone could save him from boredom and despair.

As things turned out, he never got beyond preparing the notes, and his sister Gilberte, in her charming memoir of him, bemoans the fact that all his labors should thus have been fruitless. She need not have worried. The notes, called *Pensées*, have enchanted, infuriated, uplifted, depressed, enlightened, mystified, but always enthralled countless readers from generation to generation and are today as sparkling as when they were written and, if anything, more relevant.

Indeed, I consider that it was a beneficent, if not miraculous, circumstance that Pascal was unable to proceed beyond the notes. The full work, had he lived to complete it, might well have been too massive, too definitive, too dogmatic even in its final conclusions, to appeal, as the *Pensées* have, to all the stragglers and vagrants, like myself, similarly

questing. It might also have lacked something of the quality I find most delectable: a beautiful skepticism that contrasts joyously with the sentimentality and credulity of scientific humanism, which actually takes seriously man's ridiculous pretension to shape his own destiny, pursue his own happiness, and construct his own well-being.

"The red robes of our judges," Pascal insisted, "the ermine in which they swaddle themselves like furry cats, the courts where they sit, the *fleurs-de-lis*, all the august display is very necessary." Likewise, if physicians did not have cassocks and mules and professors did not have square hats and robes four sizes too large, they would never have been able to fool people. Kings and prelates and statesmen are under a similar necessity to dress up in their preposterous robes and gowns and decorations. Otherwise, we should see them for what they are: ham actors in an interminable soap opera called History, in which a mighty Roman Empire stands or falls on Cleopatra's nose, and whole continents are devastated by wars and revolutions purporting to uphold liberty and enlarge happiness, and inevitably destroying both.

Like a sublime kaleidoscope, Pascal presents us with thought after thought, all shining with truth as they come in mint condition from his brilliant mind:

There is nothing which is so much in conformity with reason as the rejection of reason...

Nature confounds the skeptics, and reason confounds the dogmatists. What, then, will become of you, O men, who seek to discover your true condition through your natural reason? You cannot avoid one or the other of these sects, or live with any of them...

Jesus Christ did nothing but teach men that they only loved themselves; that they were slaves, blind, sick, unhappy and sinful; that he had come to deliver them, bring them light, sanctify and heal them; that this would come about through their hating themselves and following him to misery and death on the Cross...

We do not grow tired of eating and sleeping day after day, because hunger and fatigue return; without them, we should be bored. It would be the same without hunger for spiritual things; we should be bored. Hunger for justice is the eighth beatitude...

The heart has its reasons which are unknown to reason... It is the heart which is aware of God and not reason. That is what faith is: God perceived intuitively by the heart, not by reason...

What a vast distance there is between knowing God and loving Him...

Since your reason inclines you to believe and yet you cannot believe, your inability to believe comes from your passions. Try, then, not to convince yourself by multiplying the proofs of the existence of God, but by diminishing your passions...

When Plato and Aristotle wrote about politics, they were drawing up plans for a madhouse whose inmates—mankind—would be compelled to invent endless diversions to avoid confronting the circumstances of their existence, which would plunge them into despair, and to fight off the ennui which would otherwise afflict them.

“There is nothing so absurd that it has not been said by one philosopher or another,” Pascal quoted Cicero as having said. The subsequent centuries have certainly not detracted from the force of this observation—least of all, our own.

To Pascal, what sort of creature was this monster man? “What a novelty, what a portent, what a chaos, what a mass of contradictions, what a prodigy! Judge of all things. A ridiculous earthworm who is nonetheless the repository of truth. A sink of uncertainty and error. The glory and the scum of the world. A chaos suspended over an abyss.”

Man is great only in that he knows he is wretched. The very reason on which he so prides himself leads him to conclude that there are an infinite number of things beyond it. Pride separates him from God, and induces him to believe that he is a god himself. When he “licks

the earth” he is cast into the other abyss and seeks his good in sensuality, which is the lot of the animals. Egomania and erotomania, the two sicknesses of the godless, afflict him.

In the *Pensées*, at the very moment of the birth of science as we know it today, Pascal prophesied its downfall—which we are witnessing. As men came to grasp the vast extent and complexity of creation, ranging between the minuteness of the atom and the immensity of the universe, they would become, as he predicted, terrified by the “eternal silence of these infinite spaces.” A choice would confront them between seeing the whole future of man locked up immutably in his physical being, in his genes, or accepting with humility and contrition a role in the mysterious purposes of a loving God.

With passionate intensity, and with the clarity of an evening star shining in a darkening sky, Pascal plumped for the latter choice. If it was a wager, he would bet on it; if a vigil, he would watch for it; if a martyrdom, he would die for it. The alternative to God was nothingness. The way to God was revealed by Jesus Christ, who “is by His glory all that is great, being God, and is by His mortal life all that is stunted and abject. He assumed His wretched condition in order that He might be in all people and serve as a model for all conditions of men.”

So Pascal takes us along with him on his own arduous mental and spiritual pilgrimage, delivering us at his destination, where we find the intersection of time and eternity in a Cross on which God dies in the person of a man, and a man rises from the dead in the person of God.

Pascal’s funeral and burial took place in the church of Saint Etienne-du-Mont on August 21, 1662, at ten in the morning. Some fifty of his friends and relatives, including, of course, his sister Gilberte Perrier, gathered there for the ceremony. Pascal had expressed a wish to be buried in a common pauper’s grave, so that he might lie near the poorest of the poor, who had become so very dear to him, and on whose behalf

in the last year of his life he had sold all his possessions, keeping of all his books only the Bible and Saint Augustines's *Confessions*—a very wise choice. The Christian faith performs this miracle of humbling the greatest minds and proudest spirits—and when was there a greater mind or prouder spirit than Pascal's?—so that they may experience even before dying the joy of losing themselves in the great throng gathered round God's throne.

Later, controversies arose as to the attitude Pascal had to the Church on his deathbed, and about his mental and physical condition. I cannot myself see that either point was particularly material. We know that he ardently sought the consolations the Church has to offer to the dying, and that the eminent doctors who attended him more than lived up to the reputation for incompetence that Pascal's contemporary, the French writer Molière, was to give them in his comedies. Surely, this suffices. What Pascal bequeathed us as a permanent possession is, in Abbé Steinmann's words, the invaluable "inventory of the eternal problems" that he drew up. Also, his incomparable picture of man—ourselves—confronting an empty, silent and illimitable universe, in which the only choices before man are this emptiness and the crucified Christ. This being so, perhaps it is fitting that the only certain likeness we have of Pascal is his death mask.