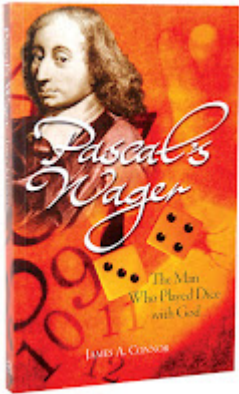


Review: Pascal's Wager



Once more satisfying my recent desire to delve into some church history this book by James A. Connor, *Pascal's Wager: The Man Who Played Dice with God*, caught my eye because a) Pascal is one of those people that I know of but know little about and b) as a software engineer in a former life there is some inherent geekiness to the word "Pascal."

Connor writes a very helpful biography. Providing a timeline upfront he interleaves narrative about Pascal's life with necessary contextual expositions about issues such as the state of French politics (this is the era of Cardinal Richelieu and the Three Musketeers – the latter, sadly, not being mentioned) and intellectual and scientific progress (this is the era of Descartes and Fermat). It makes for a very informative and easily accessible read. It's one of the better attempts at biography that I have read.

Pascal's intellectual and other contributions are well described and discussed. We read about his invention of the *Pascaline* calculating machine, his work with conic sections, his "proving" of the existence of the vacuum, and his delving into the means and method of calculating probabilities. However, the tension that Connor draws out foremost in the book is the Pascal's spiritual deliberations.

This tension revolves around the issue of Jansenism of which Pascal was a follower. Connor paints Jansenism as an extreme counter-reformation wing of the Catholic church with almost Calvinist like propensities towards concepts of predestination and election. Connor's theological analysis is more than adequate and he helpfully draws the lines from Jansenism back to Augustine and demonstrates the consequent antagonism with the Jesuits.

This is where Connor inserts his own opinion into the story. This book is certainly no starry-eyed hagiography of Pascal for Connor disagrees with the “Augustinian” position explicitly and sees it as antagonistic to the modern enlightenment that was fomenting in Pascal.

*“...the Jesuits opposed Augustine’s limitations on human freedom. And their liberality, I would argue, was the wellspring from which the modern idea of liberty fowed.”
(page 57)*

The entire last chapter is less biography than philosophical treatise on the spirituality of gambling, drawing upon Pascal’s famous “wager” that it is reasonable to “bet” on the existence of God as the comparison of odds to reward demanded it. Augustine theology rests on the understanding of original sin and the total need for grace. Connor insists that probability theory shows that anything can happen when the numbers are big enough, concluding:

“If you have big enough numbers, you don’t need God, and that is the heart of it... It seems finally to come down to choice, perhaps even to the Two Standards: people who believe in God do so because they want to; people who don’t believe don’t because they want to. Almost makes on think of efficacious grace.” (Page 213)

And so while Pascal himself, although sometimes uneasily practiced, is able to intertwine spirituality and intellect, Connor himself is unable to. Pascal’s famous “night of fire” was an encounter with truth beyond reason:

“He began to question the power of reason itself; while never really doubting its capacity to reveal truth, he decided that the capacity was limited to lesser truths and could not supplant the truths of revelation. Piety was no longer an empty practice, and reason was no longer a royal road to

truth.” (page 150)

Connor isn't dismissive of the spiritual (“Mystical experiences are what they are”, page 141) but he doesn't seem all that comfortable with them. I think he admires Pascal for his contribution to the modern world. I think I admire Pascal for his complexities, his wrestling with experience and reason, his failings, his fervour, his passion, his tragedy.

But I can only enter into that admiration having read a book like this. I'm sure there are plenty of other commentators of Pascal. I enjoyed this one.

