“The heart has its reasons”

In the 17th century Blaise Pascal, renowned mathematician and Christian intellectual, disputed with the rationalistic apologists of his time, such as René Descartes. Pascal wrote: “The heart has its reasons which reason knows not” and “We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart.”

Pascal did not claim that belief in God or faith in Jesus Christ is against reason or that it is irrational and anti-intellectual. He was, rather, articulating a more balanced and biblical description about how belief actually operates. My mentor, Prof. Bill Edgar, wrote: “Reason is good and necessary as long as it knows how to submit to the truth. To do that, it needs the heart’s right disposition. The heart, as Pascal puts it, does have its reasons. But a system of rationalization alone will never lead to God.”

Pascal understood that human beings are indeed complex creatures. We act and believe for both rational and emotional reasons. We disbelieve or embrace faith for often contradictory motives. Phenomenologically, Tim Keller articulates three factors that determine the intellectual plausibility and existential credibility of faith: intellectual reasons, interpreted personal experience, and social conditioning. People tend to believe if they have good intellectual reasons, personal experience that does not psychologically preclude trust in God, and a supportive community open to or tolerant of a worldview that deviates from the accepted “group think.”

Further, Pascal understood, as did Paul before him, that faith is not simply concerned with rationality or emotion, but motive. According to Romans 1:19-23, unbelievers already know God, but they do not demonstrate the proper spiritual and ethical response to the knowledge they have. The question, therefore, is not whether or not humans have a relationship with God, or whether or not they have knowledge of God, but what manner of relationship and knowledge he/she already has -- obedient or disobedient, acknowledgment or suppression of the truth. Sadly, sinners are highly motivated to deny God’s existence or goodness, for “the heart has its reasons.”

As an example, consider someone who claims to be an atheist but whose motive for disbelief is rooted in a negative personal or communal experience. Basically, this objection claims that God has misbehaved. He has been unfair or unjust. He is not good, so He does not merit affection, worship, obedience, or faith. Sometimes, the atheist has experienced trauma in his/her life. Something happened which so offended the conscience that, in effect, they cannot forgive God for permitting this or that evil to happen.

In such cases, often the best response is empathy and a willingness to listen. Sometimes, it is wise to share your testimony or experience with suffering. It is useful, also, to probe his/her religious history and ask questions like: When did you stop believing? Why? What happened? How do you feel about that decision now? How is your atheism working out for you in everyday experience? Why do you hold your atheism so dearly?

Or, you might ask the unbeliever to consider God’s witness in their lives through the “riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience” (Acts 14:17), despite their painful experience. Assist them to think about what they should be thankful for. As Paul said: “For he did good by________?” or “He satisfied your hearts with________?” Explore how God’s kindness is designed to lead them to repentance. Talk about the implications of the biblical view of God:
Does it make sense to use (or presume on) His grace to live in sin and rebellion (Rom 2:4-5)? Or, is it wiser to “honor him as God” and “give thanks” (Rom 1:21)?

Finally, it is important to listen much more than we speak. (There is a reason God gave us two ears and only one mouth!) Learn to ask lots of questions and listen carefully. Pray that the Spirit leads you and gives you discernment about how to proceed. Look for the dissonances in your neighbor’s soul, between what they really know and what they actually do or say. Many times, intellectual arguments and worldview are simply a mask to protect a soul embittered by suffering -- their own sin or damage done to them through the sins of others.

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