Pierre Charron Biography

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Biography

The French philosopher and theologian Pierre Charron (1541-1603) wrote an influential study of skepticism. He was also a renowned preacher and reformer.

Born in Paris in 1541, Pierre Charron studied law at Paris and Orléans before receiving a law degree from Bourges. After a brief period of law practice in Paris he entered the priesthood. He then went to Montpellier, where he studied law and theology and received a doctor's degree in canon and civil law in 1571. The same year he returned to Paris and began to preach. His eloquent sermons soon brought him fame and a variety of new positions. He served as preacher to Margaret of Valois, Queen of Navarre, as theological adviser in several dioceses in southwestern France, and as canon in Bordeaux. In his capacity as an adviser, Charron succeeded in carrying out Church reforms in accordance with the decrees of the Council of Trent. While in Bordeaux, he formed a close and lasting friendship with Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. In 1589 he tried to fulfill an earlier vow to enter a monastery but was rejected, probably because of his age.

In his first major work, *Les Trois Vérités* (1593; *The Three Truths*), Charron defended the Roman Catholic Church against its Protestant opponents. His three basic truths were: the existence of God and the necessity of religion; the existence of a "revealed religion," founded by Christ; and the maintenance of the pure truth by Catholicism, the oldest of the Christian religions.

In 1600 Charron published *Discours chrestiens,* a collection of 16 eloquent sermons. In that year he gave up his active duties and retired to Condom in southwestern France. In 1601 he published his most famous work, the controversial *De la sagesse* (*Of Wisdom*). In this work he developed the idea of skepticism by insisting that man, by use of his own capacities, can know nothing. What man considers true principles are really only "dreams and smoke." This attitude does not undermine religion, however, since it leaves man's intellect blank and thus ready to accept the revealed truths of Christianity. In addition, Charron also developed the view that the man of wisdom (the skeptic) is guided not only by the commands of God but also by the dictates of nature. This emphasis on natural morality was an important step in the philosophical study of ethics.

While visiting Paris, Charron suffered a stroke and died on Nov. 16, 1603.