

On *Syneidēsis* and Error in Orthodoxy

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I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Rom. 12:1–2

The term *syneidēsis*, “conscience,” appears more than twenty times in the New Testament, mostly in First Corinthians, but also in other Pauline epistles including Romans, Second Corinthians, First and Second Timothy, and Titus. Although Paul brought *syneidēsis* into the Christian lexicon, Luke also used it in his Acts, as did Peter and the writer of Hebrews. There are three instances in the wisdom literature of the Septuagint, translating the original Hebrew עֵדָם (*madaʾ*) from the root עֵד (*yod-daleth-ayin*), “knowledge,” and one use of the root בֵּת (*lamedh-bet*), “inner man, heart, mind, will.”

It is difficult to determine a single meaning for the term from these several occurrences, but its etymology yields something like “with-knowledge” or “together-knowledge,” or even “joint-knowledge,” and the concept it designates is by and large an epistemic and ethical one. Later, from the third through the fifth centuries, the term acquired the meaning *ē theou phonē* or *vox Domini*—voice from God or of the Lord—as we see in Origen and Augustine. This may be called the *internal* notion of *syneidēsis*. But there is another meaning of the term, one that has been more influential for the

later Byzantine form of Orthodoxy: the notion of monepiscopacy and the doctrine of following the bishop and doing nothing without him. *Syneidēsis* is used in this sense in letters that were allegedly written by Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–107) but were quite possibly pseudepigraphal works of later origin. This idea, which may be called the *external* notion of *syneidēsis*, can also be identified with a deference to what is called conciliarity in Eastern Orthodoxy. Having a good conscience, and in fact being a Christian, is equivalent to being obedient to the bishop and to the decisions of bishops’ councils. Whoever is not so disposed is referred to as *ou katharos estin tē syneidēsei*, being “impure in conscience” and *ouk eusyneidētoi*, “not having a good conscience.”¹

One might interpret the *internal* notion from a passage such as this one from Hebrews: “Pray for us; for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things” (*proseúchesthe perí emón; peithómetha gar óti kalēn syneidēsín échomen, en pásin kalōs thélontes anastréphesthai*) (13:18).² It would be a mistake to read the Ignatian notion of conciliarity into the first person plural here, since that

¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians* 7.2 and *Letter to the Magnesians* 4.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Also see *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8 and *Letter to Polycarp* 4.1 in the same volume.

² Further examples include Rom. 9:1 and 2 Tim. 1:3.

would miss the semantic import of *peithómetha*, a sureness born of “a clear conscience.” Nor should this verse be read as promoting a wholly individualistic form of Christian thought, however. Let us call to mind, for instance, biblical conciliarity as manifest in the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, which considered practical issues regarding the relationship between Gentiles and the Law. And upon deciding the matter according to what “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15:28), the apostles sent a very concise letter detailing four things the council deemed appropriate for Gentile believers, namely that they “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity.” It was not concerned with doctrine per se or with formalizing an instance of dogma, but simply with *toutōn tōn epánagkes*, “these necessary things.” Moreover, there was no threat of excommunication or condemnation as a heretic. Thus too, in the verse from Hebrews, the reference is not to some instance of individualism, but to what is indicated in this text from Acts concerning the council’s decision. In symphony with the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, the resolution was arrived at *conscientiously*.

Similarly, and consistent with a recurring theme connected to the notion of *syneidēsis* as articulated in Acts 23:1 and 24:16, Paul lays out this particular aspect of being human in Christ in Romans chapter 8: “But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. . . . You have received the spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:9, 15–16). One could plausibly

refer to this form of *syneidēsis*, “the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit,” as a transformed way of *knowing*, a pneumatic epistemic norm marking the thinking of “children of God” and “new creations in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:16–17), *for the Body of Christ and for the life of the world*. The renewal of the mind (*tē anakainōsei tou noos* in Rom. 12:2), or *anakainōsic* epistemology, as it were, describes believers as having access to God not through something or someone outside themselves but *within* their own persons. Power derives not from a worldly emperor but from the King of the Jews who bears witness *internally*, and so Peter exhorts the faithful to be a *ieráteuma ágion*, “a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). The attuning of the mind to this “internal witness” is perhaps the primary form of ascetic discipline. Even so, it was almost completely undervalued during the ensuing developments, which led to Christianity’s becoming the sanctioned religion of the Roman Empire.

After the Battle of Milvian Bridge in the fall of 312, as the state became more accepting of the Church and vice versa, the idea of conscience came to be associated not only with the monarchical episcopacy but also with the person of the Emperor, who functioned by default as the bishop of the bishops. The “Ignatian” concept of *syneidēsis* thus became dominant. Conscience came to be associated with authority outside the believer, the hierarchical and imperial corollary of the *vox Domini* notion. What we are talking about when we turn to this notion of conscience, therefore, is a *mediated* form of knowledge that is conciliar and therefore “joint” or “together” insofar as one knows *with the bishops and the Emperor*. It is fundamentally not an epistemic issue concerning a

believer and the immediacy of God's communication with him or her, and so it is not so much that hears God's voice and aligns one's thoughts and actions thereto (or not), as with Abraham, Jonah, or Paul. Rather, it is an issue of *conforming thinking to what the imperial and episcopal will has endorsed*, especially in the seven ecumenical councils. Being "sure" means concurring with sanctioned teaching.

This transition to a mediated understanding of conscience laid the groundwork for a sanctioned and authoritative form of Christianity. The main idea of this form of Christianity—later referred to as *orthodoxia*—was that it alone had received and preserved the early tradition of Jesus and the apostles *without change*. It was therefore true Christian belief and practice as opposed to *haireisis*, "heresy" or innovative and false teaching. Whereas the term *haireisis* appears in the New Testament and had currency in early Christianity, the term *orthodoxia* is patristic and came into use much later, in the fourth or fifth century. In late antique Christian usage, the meaning of *haireisis* morphed into "choice" or "opinion" and always carried the connotation of error and not being in submission to Tradition. *Orthodoxia* continued to mean "right opinion" but during this time was refined to mean "right doctrine," and connoted being the recipient and bearer of apostolic tradition.

In its most extreme moments, the *orthodoxia* movement came to resemble Diotrophes (3 John 9–11). This obscure Bible character, often considered the first monarchical bishop whose name has survived, became synonymous in later Christian thought with haughty bishop syndrome and hierarchical overreach. The latter phenomenon was nowhere more evident, for ex-

ample, than in the post mortem condemnation of Origen at the Council of Constantinople in 553.

The idea of a hierarchically and imperially sanctioned form of Christian belief and practice gave rise to a triumphant and perhaps even arrogant form of exclusivity in ecclesial self-identity. As *apostolicity* came to be understood as exclusively conveyed through episcopal succession (without a true understanding of the role played by the imperial model of hierarchy), an irrational preoccupation with the past produced a romanticized view of former times. Many troubling features of present Church conditions (a fixation with antiquated languages, ethnocentric concerns, formalism in liturgical practice at the expense of human needs both personal and communal) may be traced to this tendency. It became the pervasive opinion that sanctioned teaching was superior to any other form of thought or inquiry; this made it unnecessary and even suspect for the Christian psyche, or *phronema*, the more commonplace term, to dialogue with and to learn from other belief systems or engage in self-criticism and constructive analysis of its own doctrines and practices. As John Chrysostom puts it in one of his homilies on 2 Thessalonians, "Is it tradition? Strive no more."³ Set against heresies such as Arianism, Nestorianism, and iconoclasm, traditionally and hierarchically sanctioned teaching was not only influential in its own right but also final and thus requisite. This exclusivist mindset, underlying the impoverished ability of the Church to learn and forming a basic premise for distrust and condemnation of outside influence, was no less fundamental in supporting latent and overt anti-Semitism. Notably present in the long history of the Church, anti-Semitism can be found in numerous docu-

³ John Chrysostom, Homily 4 on 2 Thessalonians, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886–9) [hereafter NPNF], vol. 13. Translation modified.

ments from the age of imperial-episcopal bonding; we need only mention Constantine's comment (as recorded by Eusebius) on the reason for establishing the rules for the celebration of Pascha made at Nicea 325: ". . . in order to separate ourselves from the vile company of the Jews."

The central claim of importance here is apostolicity as regards Orthodox tradition, namely that Eastern Orthodox thought and practice is the true form of Christianity because it alone has received, preserved, and passed on apostolic tradition without change. Concepts of tradition are not alien to Christian thought. Jesus uses the notion critically when he speaks of "the traditions [*paradoseis*] of men." Paul, on the other, hand employs a more positive use of the term. He urges the church of the Thessalonians, for example, to "stand firm and hold to the traditions [*paradoseis*] which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess. 2:15), and elsewhere tradition is a central tenet in his understanding of the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23). Furthermore, unwritten, secret, or oral tradition consisted of teaching concerning practices, as we learn ironically from Basil in a text he wrote called *De Spiritu Sancto*. There he puts into writing topics received in the oral tradition of the Church. These include signing oneself with the sign of the cross, eastward facing prayer, the Eucharistic words of invocation, blessing of water and oil, anointing with oil, and triple immersion. This type of list was gradually expanded from the fourth century on and came to include the seven ecumenical councils, liturgical texts, hagiography, ecclesiastical histories, patristic writings, and so forth.

Moreover, the idea of there being a tradition that specifies what is to be

believed and practiced is rooted in apostolic teaching (Jude 3, 1 Tim. 6:20). That concept, according to Paul, concerns the person and work of Christ being "in accordance with the scriptures" (*kata tas graphas*) (1 Cor. 15:3). Paul's teaching on what he "delivered" (*paredoka*) (1 Cor. 15:3), stresses an indissoluble and organic connection between apostolic teaching and the *Tanakh* (the components of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim). The teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church is commonly understood in the following manner: the content of tradition was received from the apostles, preserved, and handed down, and is therefore unchanged apostolic teaching, either explicitly or tacitly "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Moreover, just as there is no *change* or *development* in doctrine—what we have is what we received—so too there is no *examination* or *correction* of doctrine, because it has been handed down, received, and passed on *without* change. This is the context for conscience, for *knowing with*, in Eastern Orthodoxy: the *tradition of the fathers* or *Holy Tradition*. Submission to and agreement with *this* identity between "Tradition" and "apostolic teaching," the content of the former being the content of the latter, equals having a good conscience, and thus being a Christian, as Ignatius puts it, while conversely not submitting and not agreeing is to have a bad conscience. The endemic disinterest in dialogue, learning, internal analysis, and criticism is usually justified on this basis. But while Tradition is undeniably influenced by apostolic tradition, the two are not equivalent. Even as the Church was codifying doctrine in the ecumenical councils, it was adding to what the apostles had handed down. Put differently: understanding of and teaching about topics such as the in-

carnation, the doctrine of God, does not remain unchanged from apostolic teaching straight through the history of the Church to the present day. Influences outside of apostolic teaching play a significant and definitive role. In addition to specific teachings received from the apostles, there are also problems subsequent generations have needed to analyze and to attempt to solve. This process necessarily involved innovation. The error lies in a wrongful endeavor to cast new doctrinal statements as received doctrine and to force-feed it by way of a mediated understanding of *syneidēsis*.

Two examples occur in the Councils of Chalcedon in 451 and Nicaea in 787. First, the Christological definition developed in Chalcedon affirms that Jesus is *one person (hypostasis)* in two natures (*ousiai*), without confusion, change, division, or separation, and that this doctrine has come down to us by way of the prophets, Christ himself, and the Symbol of Faith (from the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381): “even as from the beginning the prophets have spoken, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and as the Symbol of Faith handed down [*paredoke*] to us.” Whereas this statement may not contradict what the apostles learned from and taught about Jesus, in terms of terminology and concepts it is not solely *apostolic* in origin, neither implicitly or explicitly. The term *hypostasis* is inherited from Greek philosophy, Stoicism and Platonism, as is *ousiai*, especially from Aristotle. Conceptually the Chalcedonian statement also has philosophical roots, especially in the Neoplatonic category of apophaticism. This is not to suggest error as regards source, as if learning from philosophers is somehow necessarily mistaken, but rather that instead of being forthcoming about

these sources, the council opted to make an anachronistic claim concerning the teaching handed down and declined an opportunity to be explicit about formative influence from other traditions. In the context of a hierarchical and mediated understanding of conscience, the definition is dogmatic because it *has been received unchanged*. Perhaps a more humble perspective is in order: the definition is the best explanation to date based on terminological, semantic and conceptual inheritance from Greek philosophy — but is subject to improvement at a later time.

The Council of Nicaea in 787 did something similar when, in contradiction to the Council of Hieria in 754, and without a thorough examination of that council’s claims, it stated that the making and venerating of icons is received “as handed down.”⁴ This is a considerable claim in the face of an utter absence of any early tradition of making and venerating icons and indeed of the early Christian condemnation of images. Even the commonly cited Dura-Europos house church, used for Christian worship since the third century, fails to provide sufficient evidence on the issue of whether wall paintings were decoration or, as later notions would have it, iconography, since it appears that the space allotted for worship was devoid of images altogether. Several early Christian figures disapproved of images in a manner that would imply no endorsement for the more specific notion and practice of making and venerating icons, and the 787 council provided no examination of scripture, particularly the second commandment, or uses of the terms *eikonos*, *proskynēsis*, and *latrīa* in either scripture or earlier Christian thought. Again, my argument here has to do not with the truth-claim concerning making and venerating icons

⁴Known as a “robber council,” the Council of Hieria was maligned as “headless” because no patriarch was represented. Nevertheless, there were over three hundred bishops in attendance.

that was endorsed by the Council of Nicaea but with the use of a mediated form of conscience to promote the idea that the decision of the council is received tradition, having been handed down from the apostles without change. Built into the mediated notion of conscience is a presupposition of *apostolic veridicality* and the inadmissibility therefore of critical appraisal or disagreement. That epistemological methodology enabled the 787 council to become what it is in the Eastern Orthodox psyche. But the methodology is invalid insofar as it is so utilized in the service of deploying as received and unchanged doctrine and practice the making and venerating of icons without corroborating evidence from Scripture and Early Christian thought.⁵

What is wrong with both of these conciliar statements has nothing to do with their content, but with the way they were packaged as unchanged Tradition, received as it was handed down. They were mandated by employing an exclusively “Ignatian” (or external) understanding of *syneidēsis*. With an eye to the past, to what our fathers have done and accomplished, do

we lull ourselves into false comfort by making *outward adherence* to faith an alibi for ignorance? Have we gone too far in eliminating the internal *syneidēsis*? Have we lost sight of the need to be—as Paul put it in Romans—“transformed by the renewal of [our] mind”? Here Eastern Orthodoxy might perhaps learn from John Henry Cardinal Newman. Though generally derided in Eastern Orthodox thought, the Second Vatican Council achieved for the Roman Catholic Church at least one thing that is commendable; it made explicit Newman’s influence on his own Church when the council affirmed that “the understanding of the things and words handed down grows, through the contemplation and study of believers . . . continually towards the fullness of divine truth.” Although change is stipulated by what has been argued here, let us remember that according to the gospel the corollary of noting and treating error is humility, and that it is humility that unlocks the gates of the mind to *metanoia*, to repentance, transformation, and renewal of the mind in Christ, and thus to heeding the voice of “the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit.” *

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⁵ Examples include Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.8; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.5; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7; Eusebius, *Letter to Constantia*; and Council of Elvira canon 36.



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