

## The Problem of Conscience

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Conscience is personal and unique. Prior to my birth, my conscience never existed. It is mine and it is me: who I am, what I think and feel, how I act, what I say and do. At the same time my conscience is part of my consciousness and my consciousness is part of the consciousness that all human beings share. All humans have consciousness, and all have a conscience. My conscience therefore is intimately connected to all other consciences. In some ways my conscience is part of your conscience, as yours is part of mine, and our consciences are part of the consciences of others. This is both good news and bad. Good because it confirms, as what is taught in both Biblical and patristic theology, that all of humanity is created in God's image. That is to say it demonstrates that we are all descendants of Adam and Eve. But this is also bad news because the uniqueness of consciences results in an incredible diversity of human mores and morals. This diversity produces tensions, animosity, disagreements and violent clashes. We have a problem and a paradox: We all have a conscience. This is a part of our being that we share with everyone. However, our individual consciences can and do diverge with one another (sometimes in quite significant ways), and this can and frequently is a cause of serious conflicts between individuals, clans, countries and cultures.

It would be convenient to ascribe the differences in individual conscience to the fact that not everyone believes in God. But it is clear that many religions, exemplifying a diversity of behavioral patterns, all regard their consciences as governed by a divinity. Even Christians' consciences exhibit opposing beliefs. The dilemma of how to regard the conscience of others, especially of those we would disagree with, is particularly acute for Christians. If the conscience is an essential part of my life, is there a qualitative change in it in the new Christian life? Does my conscience change when I enter into the Church? For example, normative Christian ethics directs us to love all, including enemies. God "desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth" (1 Tim. 2:3) and Christians are to "strive for peace with all men" (Heb. 12:14). But my Christian conscience leads me to say and do things that are in stark opposition to your conscientiously and firmly-held beliefs, which may lead to intense emotional disputes and even physical clashes.

While Orthodox Christianity does not have a developed theology on the subject, there is much to discern about conscience in Scripture and the ascetical tradition. Together with life itself, God's greatest gifts to humanity are conscience and freedom.

They are the constituent aspects of life that Adam and Eve possessed, and they played the decisive role in their tragic story. The ill use of freedom becomes their fall leading to their “consciousness” of being naked. The first recorded case of conscience in action. Not much later, the human conscience is activated by the first murder. When God tells Cain that “the voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me,” it is as if a deeply implanted “voice” in the core of human existence “speaks” to God, who in turn speaks to Cain. The cause is a violent act against another human being and the victim’s blood prompts the conscience: “Blood, to be sure, has no voice, but innocent blood that has been spilled is said to cry out not by words but by its very existence. . . . It does not accuse the wrongdoer with words so much as bind him by the accusation of his own conscience. For in silence and without contradiction the wrongdoer’s conscience always convicts and judges him.”<sup>1</sup>

As a moral stopgap, conscience acts as if God speaks directly to us. Significant here too is that conscience is activated by something done to somebody, underlying the relation of individual conscience to others.

The connection between law and ethics in the Old Testament makes the conscience the inbred psychological mechanism that is guide and judge. Divinely sanctioned ethical actions and behavior are both morality and law. God shows “you, O man, what is good; and what the Lord requires, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). And after breaking the law and disobeying commandments comes judgement, just as it should: “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against

him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me” (Mic. 7:8). To avoid judgment we have the conscience which is effective in keeping us virtuous and preventing us from making wrong choices. The Christian ascetical tradition adopts this concept as axiomatic. For example, Saint Isaiah the Solitary writes, “Let us stand firm in the fear of God, practicing virtue and not giving our conscience cause to stumble. In the fear of God let us keep our attention fixed within ourselves, until our conscience achieves its freedom. When there is a union between a conscience and a person it will be a holy guardian.”<sup>2</sup> While conscience acts like a rudder keeping us on track, it occupies a greater and more effective role by alerting us when we are off the mark. Conscience as remorse is meant for our improvement and salvation. In “The Great Canon of Repentance,” Saint Andrew of Crete has us call out, “For this I am condemned in my misery, for this I am convicted by the verdict of my own conscience, which is more compelling than all else in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

In the New Testament, particularly in the Johannine and Pauline writings, conscience is “fleshed out.” The story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 reveals the effects of a conscience transformed by an encounter with Christ. As Jesus begins writing with his finger in the dirt, the accusing elders walk away “having been convicted by their own conscience,” according to the King James’s Version (John 8:9). Could there be a connection to Abel’s blood on the ground? There Cain’s conscience is activated by God’s consequential judgment. Here Christ’s awakening of the conscience exists in contrast to the principles of Old Testament morality that the elders espouse. Jesus’s judgment

<sup>1</sup> *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1989), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah the Solitary, “On Guarding the Intellect,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1, ed and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 6.

<sup>3</sup> “The Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete,” <https://akroasis.org/texts-and-resources/great-lent/the-great-canon-of-saint-andrew-of-crete-thursday-of-the-fifth-week-of-great-lent/>.

comes in the form of forgiveness and the command to “go sin no more.” In Saint John’s Gospel, the person of Jesus Christ emerges as the guiding principle of all existence. Previewed powerfully in the Prologue, this is developed extensively in the Final Discourse (John 13–16). Conscience is commensurate with truth, and subsequently with Jesus Christ who is The Truth. “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (John 18:37). Conscience is made perfect by being in Jesus Christ Himself, the “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14.6). Embodying Christ’s teachings and life is the ideal conscience. As our primary motivating principle, guiding light, and source of truth, Jesus in a real sense *becomes* our conscience. “By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts . . . for God is greater than our hearts, and knows everything. . . . All who keep his commandments abide in him and he in them” (1 John 3:19–24).

Not contradicting Johannine concepts, Saint Paul sees conscience as the sacred psychological component that functions in relation to the quality of faith and governs our relations with each other. In the famous passage that is regarded as the foundation of “natural law,” Saint Paul acknowledges that even nonbelievers have consciences that can “accuse or excuse” them (Rom. 2:15). Saint Paul did not promote natural law as such; he was describing the universal quality of conscience in general. But he distinguishes a category of conscience that he calls “pure” and “good.” With this designation, conscience becomes an essential component to spiritual growth. The “aim of our charge,” Timothy is instructed, is love which comes from a “pure heart and good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Pure con-

science strengthens faith, for when rejected “certain persons made shipwreck of their faith” (1 Tim. 1:19). Without a pure conscience, true faith is incomplete. All believers should “hold the mystery of faith with a pure conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9). Pure conscience is a state of grace, achieved by faith and good works. It makes possible the acquisition of the Holy Spirit and the nurturing of spiritual gifts enabling one to “serve with a pure conscience” (2 Tim. 1:3). A pure conscience is the *sine qua non* that effectuates sacramental life. During the Divine Liturgy, we pray to be made worthy “to partake of the heavenly and awesome Mysteries of this sacred and spiritual table with a *pure* conscience, for remission of sins, for the communion of the Holy Spirit, for inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

What stands out in Saint Paul’s descriptions of conscience is a keen pastoral insight. The Apostle’s special contribution to understanding conscience is that it is never just a private or personal matter. “For we are members one of another” (Eph. 4:25). An individual conscience may function alone but never apart from other consciences. Saint Paul emphatically refuses underhanded and cunning ways of preaching, because “by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). Relationships between human beings are enacted by means of and through consciences. By means of a good conscience, we “act honorably in all things” (Heb. 13:18). The good conscience motivates compassion, decency, charity, forgiveness, etc. “For this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly

sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (2 Cor. 1:12). Decisively, the pure conscience's surety exists only while it is "conscious" of other consciences. Offending somebody else's conscience, even unintentionally, is immoral. "Wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (1 Cor. 8:12).

Conscience can be corrupted, distorted, diminished, become dormant, ineffective or evil. That this happens to humanity is no surprise. But corrupt consciences become corruptive in the body of the Church, where by definition, ordinary conscience is a *pure* conscience. This is why special emphasis on restoring the conscience takes place at certain moments during the Divine Liturgy. In the priestly prayer at the beginning of the Cherubic Hymn, God is supplicated to cleanse hearts and souls from an "evil conscience." This cleansing is necessary because the sacramental mystery that is the Divine Liturgy is ineffective without a pure conscience. By communing without repentance or purification, we can call condemnation on ourselves.

The pure conscience is restored by the remembrance of God, by the remembrance of death, through repentance and penitence, and in ways with no personal initiative. Such was the case for Saint Peter when the cock crowed, and for Saint Mary of Egypt when she tried to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. These movements of the conscience, which can be terrifying, are holy and life-saving events. They are entrenched within our psyches. The conscience is where man truly senses the fear of God. But the movements of the conscience are not always welcome; we attempt to thrust away the irritating inner stirrings which only return with additional impact. But communion with God can only be achieved through and by a pure conscience. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev described this when he wrote the following: Conscience is that depth of human nature where man encounters God, hears His voice and obtains His commandments. The conscience is the remembrance, in our sinful life, of God and God-like life. It is the conscience which recognizes divine revelation, truth, righteousness, the whole and

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Peter (Settimio Di Porto) denies knowing Jesus. Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 1964.

integrated life. Through the conscience man comes to know himself, his world, his creator and what he was created for.<sup>4</sup>

The modern ascetic Thomas Merton gave conscience considerable thought, which he shared in a short essay called "Prayer and Conscience." He wrote that conscience is very close to our identity, having "a great deal to do with the presence of God." However, that identity of self, and the presence of God, can never come about in isolation: "We don't really find out who we are until we find ourselves in Christ and in relation to other people. We are not individuals, we are persons, and a person is defined by a relationship with others. Thus the Christian conscience is not just an individual conscience with Christian traffic laws, but a kind of collective conscience." Merton credits the Russian Orthodox concept of *sobornost* as the source for his thoughts. He writes that Orthodox theologians "have always had this idea of the Church as a real communion of souls and thought and consciousness," and consequently what is stressed is the "idea of person as being more than the individual, as being in fact that which is drawn out of us when we are in contact with others in Christ, that which is drawn out of us in communion."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that as consciences interact, problems do not arise. They most certainly do. In the contemporary world, terrorism, genocides, migrant crises, environmental abuses, hunger and the spread of diseases are all global challenges of an immense scale. In addressing these challenges, conscience is always involved, more in some cases and less in others. Ter-

rorism is the result of deformed, skewed, or abnormal consciences, in both collective and individual forms. Fanaticism, produced by the deviation of conscience, is often expressed in the guise of religious zeal. For Christians this view is abhorrent. Jesus and the apostles were zealous, but never fanatics. The distinction is crucial. A zealous Christian is commendable, a fanatic one is dangerous. The confusion of the two has resulted in numerous historical episodes that have done great harm to religion in general and Christianity in particular.

The causes of fanaticism are beyond the scope of this essay. Leaving aside for now the fact that pure evil exists, we must acknowledge that often enough, the fanatic is one whose conscience has been painfully wounded. Fanaticism and terrorism are products of complex factors. Living in harsh and difficult circumstances, deprived of basic needs and services, but witnessing others indulge in irresponsible hedonism, vulgar licentiousness, and arrogant chauvinism, consciences are traumatized. The extent to which Christians can influence non-Christians is extremely sensitive and complicated. But in consideration of how Christian consciences function, we need to prayerfully take into account the consciences of all humanity. In our ascetic and spiritual efforts to keep our conscience pure we need to pray with equal determination for purity of all consciences. In fact, this occurs in the Divine Liturgy, when we pray for forgiveness of our sins "and all the errors of all people," and that God's grace will come upon us, the Holy Gifts and "upon all people." A Christian can not say, "My conscience is clear," when an activity that he is engaged in or condones

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, "Salvation and Creativity" (1926), *Berdyaev Online Bibliotek Library*, [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1926\\_308.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1926_308.html).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, "Prayer and Conscience," *Sisters Today* 42 (April 1971): 411-7.

may have caused damage to the conscience of another person.

The conscience is the part of our inner being that chooses to obey God's will, that feels uncomfortable guilt when wrong has been done, and that motivates us to confess our sins. In general, the conscience is the "bullseye" of the soul. "God and our conscience know our secrets. Let them correct us."<sup>6</sup> The Church's "tools of the trade" (prayer, fasting, and almsgiving) are all effective in keeping conscience healthy. Conscience cannot maintain its purity without participation in the sacraments of confession and communion. Introspection of the conscience is a daily exercise in traditional monasticism, but should be a regular part in the life of all serious Christians. Our thoughts, feelings, words and deeds should all be governed by a conscience that is attuned to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the theology of the Church and the witness of the saints.

"Before beginning any work, ask yourself, 'Is this going to be agreeable to your conscience and to the will of God?'"<sup>7</sup>

The functioning pure conscience is the comforting power of Christian witness in the world. The comfort comes from God, through Jesus Christ, who comforts us with his presence; "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4). The salt of the earth and light of the world, the Christian conscience is the leaven in humanity's collective conscience. The world's hunger for love, peace and joy is sustained by the hope that sounds in rustling Edenic leaves, echoed in the prayers of the Church. That is where the paradox and problem of the conscience is resolved. Not through logical contrivance, social action or moral crusade, but through the folly of the cross, on which the Author and Redeemer of all conscience "draws all men to himself" (John 12:32). ✱

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<sup>6</sup> Mark the Hermit, "On The Spiritual Law," in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1, ed and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 114-5.

<sup>7</sup> *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, vol. 2, ed. George P. Fedotov (Belmont, MA: Norland), 216.



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