

# CONSCIENCE IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Brian Lewis\*

Mention conscience and most people immediately think of morality. Conscience, we recognise, determines the moral quality of what we do (or fail to do when we know we should). 'Conscience', as Pope Benedict XVI said in 1966 when Cardinal Ratzinger, 'is the supreme and last tribunal of the human person and it is what we must obey'.<sup>1</sup> We also know from experience that it is possible not to heed the voice of conscience but that the failure to do so carries with it the painful experience of guilt.

The phenomenon of conscience is a complex reality and will repay further investigation.

## Levels of Conscience

At its most concrete level, conscience struggles with some particular issue of conduct that confronts us and reaches a decision about what should or should not be done. It can be said to be the application of what one knows (in the broad sense of knowing) to the moral evaluation of a particular act, done or to be done. For this reason conscience is said to bear *witness* to what one has done, to *instigate* or to *bind* to a certain action, or to *accuse* or *blame* a person for something done. All these usages result from the actual application of what we know to conduct.

Conscience can also be seen in a broader way as the habitual consciousness of the fundamental moral principles, such as 'love and do good', 'shun evil', 'respect human life and property', 'seek truth', etc., that must guide the judgments of actual conscience in particular situations. Although mediaeval moral theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas preferred to speak of conscience at the first level as a rational judgment commanding us to do this, avoid that, they admitted that this second level could also be called conscience.<sup>2</sup>

There is a third level of conscience. Against the background of a personalist anthropology, the Second Vatican Council in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* speaks of conscience at its deepest level as the 'inner core and sanctuary' of the human person, 'where one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in one's depths', and where 'in a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by the love of God and neighbour'. This law, which the person discovers in the depths of conscience, is 'always summoning us to love and do good and avoid evil'.<sup>3</sup> Renowned Anglican moral theologian, John Macquarrie, speaks of this level of conscience as 'a special and very fundamental mode of consciousness or self-awareness - the awareness of "how it is with oneself"'.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, these three levels of conscience should not be separated from one another or too sharply distinguished. They are obviously in continuity with one another. Conscience at the first level (we might call it *situational conscience*), as the application of what a person knows to the moral evaluation of a particular act, done or to be done, brings to bear on the assessment of that act, not

---

\* Dr Brian Lewis is one of Australia's most eminent moral theologians who is now living and writing in Ballarat.

1 Cited in his message to the Canadian Religious Conference in 2006, see John Allen, *Word from Rome*, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

2 They in fact preferred to use a different name, *synderesis*, which they mistakenly thought came from St. Jerome. This very archaic and meaningless name should today probably be scrapped.

3 *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16

4 John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics* (SCM Press: London, 1970), p.112

only the habitual knowledge of fundamental moral principles that everyone has, but also the development of these or further precepts acquired in the course of one's life from parents and significant others as well as from life's experiences. It is not a mere deduction from these but rather a personal search in the light of all this input for the right decision in the concrete circumstances obtaining.



1Photo courtesy mellybean - flickr.

The basic universal knowledge of moral principles, somewhat akin to the sense of moral value, is natural and innate in human persons.<sup>5</sup> St Paul refers to it as 'the law written on their hearts' and goes on to say 'while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them' (Romans, 2:14, 15). The law written on our hearts, as has already been pointed out, is confirmed and developed by parental directives and prohibitions and by teachers, pastors and advisers, all reflecting a particular culture and social and historical background.

The young person's conscience thus formed seems to be the phenomenon Freud was referring to as the *superego*: 'The long period of childhood during which the growing human being lives in dependence on his parents leaves behind it a precipitate, which forms within his ego a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged. It has received the name of the superego... The parents' influence includes not only the personalities of the parents themselves but also the racial, national and family traditions handed on through them, as well as the demands of the immediate social *milieu* which they represent'.<sup>6</sup> Conscience, then, at this second level reflects the standards or conventions of a particular society or even a part of that society, to which one must conform in order to be accepted by that society.

Therefore, although we may acknowledge that the conventional conscience, or the superego as described by Freud, has a real and vital role to play in the formation of conscience, its function is only an aspect, and certainly not the most important aspect, of the phenomenon of conscience. It is much more important to understand the deeper level of conscience, the inner core of the person, where one is aware or conscious fundamentally of oneself.

The word used for conscience in both Latin (*conscientia*) and Greek (*syneidesis*) indicated 'consciousness' in a general sense before coming specifically to mean the moral consciousness. At this third level the basic function of conscience is to disclose us to ourselves. As Macquarrie says, 'Specifically, conscience discloses the gap between our actual selves and that image of ourselves that we already have in virtue of the "natural inclination" towards the fulfillment of our end.'<sup>7</sup>

Conscience is not merely a disclosure; it is also a call, a summons. It always carries with it a sense of obligation. It is the very person who is experienced as under obligation to be a certain kind of person, that is, a loving, relating person. Rather than a call commanding us to *do* certain things, the basic command of conscience is to *be*. It is a call to that full humanity of which we already have some idea because of the very fact that we are human at all, and that our nature is to exist, to go

5 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1:79:13; see also article 12

6 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, tr. James Strachey (Hogarth Press: London, 1949), p.3-4

7 *Three Issues in Ethics*, p.114

beyond where we are at any given moment'.<sup>8</sup>

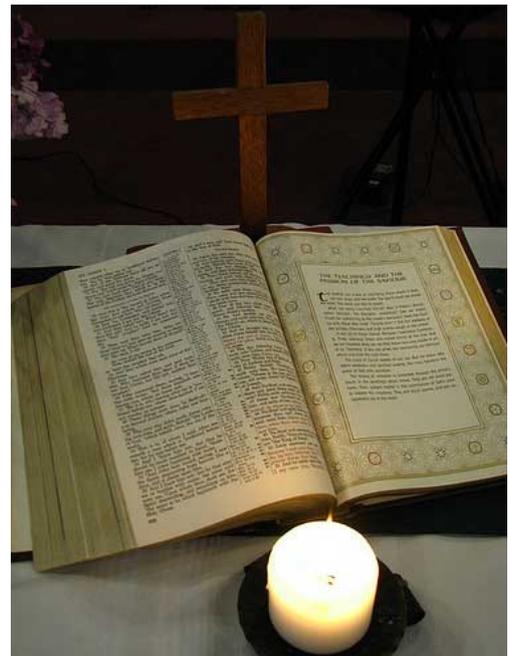
When St. Paul refers explicitly to conscience in the passage from Romans cited above, he would seem to be thinking not just about a knowledge of fundamental moral principles, but about this third level of conscience, the inner core of the personality, that 'bears witness' as to how it is with us. Conscience may thus 'excuse' or, perhaps more likely, 'accuse' us. That we can be accused from the depth of our being indicates that there is an image there of ourselves, an ideal, that is being violated by what we actually are and that calls for the realisation of something better.

The person we become will influence the conscience choices we make in particular situations. What we do in everyday life will depend on who we are. Thus morality depends on reality, as moralist Daniel Maguire never tired of stressing.

### A Mature Conscience

The evolution of conscience goes hand in hand with the moral development of the person, the goal of which is the formation of *character*. Character, even more than moral principles, determines the choices one makes and in turn the choices made qualify and confirm the character of the person making them.

Initially and of necessity the child's conscience is *authoritarian*, evolving out of the innate general moral principles and, as we have noted, out of parental directives and prohibitions, often accompanied by promise of reward or threat of punishment. The child learns to obey without necessarily knowing why some things are to be done and others avoided, simply acquiescing in face of the parent's competence and knowledge. The child is taught to live according to moral values, from early stages enforced by obedience, but gradually needs to be encouraged to form its own beliefs and convictions, to recognize and respond to moral values for their own sake, and thus to begin to develop good habits. In the first ten years or so of life the child struggles to differentiate from parents, to move from an authoritarian to an authentic conscience, where choices are made out of one's own internalized moral beliefs and convictions. Authentic conscience has to be discovered under the tyranny of the superego of Freudian analysis.



JL - flickr

Authoritarian conscience is meant to evolve gradually into an authentic adult conscience, which arises from personal conviction of the inner value of the course of action to be followed or shunned. The free and deliberate choices the person then makes in interacting with the social environment and the development of good habits help to shape moral identity and conscience at all its levels. As the child develops towards adulthood, emphasis thus shifts from the family and other childhood communities to personal responsibility for what is done or not done. The directives and values learnt from others now become part of the person's own inner attitude and conviction. Internalized attitudes, convictions and beliefs will lead to right judgments of conscience.

---

<sup>8</sup> Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics*, p.115. Vatican II seems to be saying much the same thing: 'in this interiority the human person transcends the universe, turning to this profound interiority whenever he/she enters within the heart, where .....true human destiny is discerned', *Gaudium et Spes*, n.16

The question arises whether in some instances the dictates of a person's authentic conscience may clash with the requirements of the conventional conscience handed on by parents and others. Conventional morality is certainly not the same today as it was in Freud's time, especially in the area of sexual morals, and young people are much more susceptible to peer pressure than was the case then. However, it is still true that there are instances when an individual person should listen to her/his own conscience rather than follow the moral standards of their society. This is something one ought not to do lightly or without serious consideration. As Macquarie wisely points out, 'on the level of individual conscience, there is always a grave danger of self-deception and perversion'<sup>9</sup>. Conscience remains fragile. Lack of a moral sense, false ideas, social pressures ('everyone does it') or just sheer negligence are fruitful sources of errors of judgment in conscience.

In order to offset its fragility and to limit the frequency of error, a mature conscience needs to be an *informed* conscience, in the sense of theoretical knowledge and a grasp of sound moral principles, but even more it must be a *formed* conscience. In order to become a mature person and to make good conscience decisions, one needs to be able to do this with consistency and with a fair degree of ease, not just on occasion or sporadically. In other words, a mature person must be a *responsible* person. For this one needs a good habit, a *virtue*, of responsibility. Aristotle spoke of the person of practical wisdom and emotional balance. Translating the Greek, St Thomas Aquinas called this the virtue of *prudentia*. Practical wisdom (*prudentia*) is not an innate gift; it has to be acquired by repeated efforts until a pattern of good behaviour is built up and established as a virtue, a dimension of the person's character.

An essential aspect of this vision is that one cannot develop or exercise the virtue of practical wisdom without the other moral virtues, which are necessarily interconnected. One cannot make a right decision in some circumstances unless one has control of one's aggression, or in another situation without being able to overcome timidity. A morally mature person needs to have all those virtues that are relevant to his/her normal lifestyle. This means that a sort of instinctive harmony develops between the person and genuine moral values. Such harmony is rooted in and evolves through the growth of good habits, genuine moral virtues. The formation of conscience thus involves the development of this harmonious relationship of the person to what is true and good, an ongoing, indeed a life-long task.

In order to act maturely in conscience, a person needs to be not only formed in character but also *informed* adequately about issues with which one is confronted. The basic orientation towards moral good has to be translated into practice by choices of particular goods and values in concrete situations. This means that in facing a particular issue to be decided upon one must have sufficient knowledge to make a reasoned judgment of conscience. When the moral values at stake in a particular situation are pretty clear, as is often enough the case, a morally mature person knows and judges what should or should not be done instinctively, one could say intuitively, that is, not by reasoning to a conclusion, but by a certain resonance of the whole person with the goodness involved or by a sense of revulsion in confrontation with evil. Deliberation about reasons and principles, if there is any, comes after the decision is made.

Sometimes, however, the crucial moral values or disvalues in a concrete situation do not shine out clearly or at once. Then one has to embark on a process of deliberation. Armed with the relevant factual information about the issue, one must reflect upon it in the light of one's personal beliefs, convictions and moral principles. It is also important that one have sufficient practical life experience to be able to recognize and face up to the most probable consequences of certain types of actions, the pros and cons of which must then be weighed up. In some more difficult cases one

may need to consult others for advice and counsel: parents, teachers, professional counsellors, the Church of which we may be members (if we accept the Church as in a special way illuminated and guided by the Spirit of Christ, this advice should have particular relevance and importance for us). The energy expended on this process of deliberation should be proportionate to the complexity and importance of the situation.

In conclusion we make the point that the transition from an authoritarian to an authentic mature conscience is not always successfully made. Genetic make-up, misguided parental training, the inculcation of false moral values, may inhibit moral development and the growth of a mature conscience. Some remain all their lives under the domination of an authoritarian conscience. Social pressure, whether of the whole culture or of peer groups, may also be influential in either leading to an awareness and love of moral values or imprinting unconscious prejudices and moral blind spots that can divert or falsify practical judgments of conscience.