

CONSCIENCE and FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

In Christian belief, conscience is put into you by God and is God's voice. It says that it only leads you astray if you don't inform it and go with God's plan to inform it. It is the judge in your head.

Conscience to the religious person is the voice of God. The idea is that God programs a moral sense into you but if you think without regard to him or let yourself be misled or make a mistake then this voice is distorted and dulled.

My moral sense should be free. It is not a moral sense if I am forced or programmed. Even if my free will is real it does not follow that my thinking is not programmed. If my thinking is not programmed, the moral thinking part could still be. Thinking and willing are related but not the same thing so our moral sense might not be free. Religion assumes that as we have a moral conscience it is the voice of God. If our ideas of good and evil fit what God would stand for, it does not follow that they are authorised by him or given by him. We just want to use God to feel good about the terrible responsibility that conscience implies.

Conscience to the non-religious is about being part of society and thus a nice thoughtful person. It is the voice of human nature as in society not the voice of God.

A secular state can only respect and care about the latter kind of conscience. For the religionist, it is hard to have any regard for such a conscience for it is about assuming God does not matter. The religionist fears what it may lead to for there is no God to refer to or help from him to fix it.

St Paul denied that his conscience was his only judge in 1 Corinthians 4:4. He said he cannot even judge himself and that only God can judge him. In other words, conscience and God are made functionally the same thing.

Cardinal Newman noted that conscience needs to be informed and respected because it is about duties to yourself and others. It is not stand-alone.

The conscience is forceful in the sense that it polices you in regard to doing right and wrong and threatens in some way if you do wrong. The conscience is what tells you what you think is right and wrong. It is not a authority-granting faculty. It is not an ability which authorises me to act. It is a judgment made by our thinking minds about the goodness or otherwise of our deeds we have done, are doing, or are thinking of doing. Conscience does not authorise you to do anything - it tells you the moral worth or otherwise of your act. You can feel something is wrong when it is not. So going against your feelings does not make you a violator of your moral conscience. Only doing what you see as wrong can do that.

We may refer to conscience as a faculty or power or ability or thing but all it really is strictly speaking is me being a being whose nature is to consider right and wrong. I am my conscience. In the same way I can think of my awareness of anything as a faculty but in fact it is me.

Conscience then should be informed by research for you hurt yourself if you get it wrong and you hurt others even if it is only by misleading them.

Most people believe in freedom of conscience though in practice they force their beliefs on others.

Religion, for example, forbids homosexuals to love one another sexually or romantically. The Law of Moses sentenced homosexuals to death. There was no concern for freedom of conscience.

Central to the debate about how far society and the law should go in respecting a religious conscience, a clear distinction is made between religious belief and religious action. We think what we think and our thoughts and beliefs are private. They are not the province of legislators or police. It is generally agreed that it should not be illegal to believe in religious extremism. It is generally agreed that if a person acts on that belief so as to infringe on the rights and freedoms of others that should be illegal.

You cannot let everybody follow their conscience. Social order would fall apart and everybody would be put in danger from those with erroneous or distorted consciences. People would take advantage if we were too liberal in respecting consciences. The consciences of the rich and powerful would end up coming first. The result would be people with bad consciences forcing their will on good people by abusing those people in the name of conscience. For example, the

murderer may be forcing his conscience that bids him to kill on the innocent victim. So, you cannot respect every conscience but have to prefer the rights of the person with the informed conscience to one with an evil and traitorous conscience.

The rights of most consciences come before those of the minority when it is one or the other. This principle of the conscience of the majority coming first, though true, is impossible in practice for many of the same reasons that Utilitarianism, the doctrine that bringing about the greatest happiness of the greatest number is what is moral, is impractical. For example, it means you have to take it for granted that most people are telling the truth about what their conscience says and that is impossible to know. Most people are afraid to express what their consciences tell them is right.

The conscience rights of those who know what right and wrong are, are to come first. They are to be given chief consideration even if they are in a minority – otherwise you cannot impede murderers and rapists. Religion puts a wall in the way for few can give you rational reasons for having the moral codes they have thanks to it and the ethical system. Religious domination of others is plainly seen then to be based on irrational malevolence and bigotry. It likes to dress evil up as good.

Religion puts God's perception of right and wrong before anybody else's for it says God alone is wise and deserves to be treated as the only important being. Any other wisdom comes from him and human beings are weak and fallible. And all that coming from religion when it cannot prove that there is a God! The evidence for our existence and that of other people is stronger meaning God should not come first – ever. The doctrine of Jesus that God must be loved and others loved only for his sake and not their own plainly proves that he intended each sect of Christianity that would appear, to strive for absolute power. And power over every detail of life for to allow some sin to go unpunished is to encourage it, which is against the conscience of God. It proves that that is their secret agenda. It has to be secret for they wouldn't dare confess it. They do realise that they are after total domination for they say that right consciences, meaning consciences that agree with them, must prevail. They say that God's wishes come before their own so they admit that domination is thought to be right.

The position of humanism is that the right consciences must prevail and education in ethics and the rationale is a must but since we are secular and the law is to uphold public order and not religion we pose no threat to religious freedom but allow as much of it as possible. We do not have to rule everybody in all things to avoid the encouragement to evil-doing that derives from legal inaction. We will not have the consequences of our liberalism on our consciences because we are putting humanity first and not God and that is only right.

Conscience is really about making a decision for thinking of others or only yourself. But if religion is wrong to condemn self-centredness or if genuine self-sacrifice is an impossibility then it follows that all it is good for is making conscience hypocritical.

True self-love means that you honour yourself by doing good for others. If you sit around worrying about your problems that is called selfish. But how hurting yourself and wasting your energy could be called selfish is a mystery. If you help others then that is far more self-centred. This is not sacrificing yourself for others. You regard yourself as good for other people meaning you love yourself. You are allowing the good to flow out of you. This is you honouring yourself.

If you help others and do without for yourself, you want to do it under the circumstances. There is always some enjoyment in doing what you want to do. There is enjoyment in doing it. If you feel awful that is caused by a separate faculty – your emotions. The point is, we are programmed to be self-centred and our actions for others can never prove otherwise.

We are encouraged by the religious conscience to think that people put helping others before the enjoyment of doing their will to help. If you ignore that fact then does that say? It says you want to pretend people are not self-centred and you see them as bad and won't admit it!

If you do what you understand as a grave wrong against God and other people then you make yourself a bad person in your heart and will. If you do right or good while intending it to be wrong you are bad.

If you do what you do because it will possibly do good then in so far as you don't know you cannot really intend to do good.

When you forgive, you accept the other person in spite of what they have done. When you forgive yourself, you accept yourself as good despite the evil that you have done. Forgiving means trying to stop the evil from continuing so you can't forgive somebody who would do it again and that somebody includes yourself! Forgiving then has to be against your conscience - you do not forgive because you or the other person will not do it again. You can only guess that you or they will not. You forgive not because of you or them but because of a guess you have made.

The person who does evil wilfully without knowing it is evil is worse than the person who does evil intentionally. Surely it

is absurd to say that the person who takes a donkey while believing that it is not stealing is worse than the person who murders someone and who knows it is wrong? The difference is that if you don't know your action is bad, you could do grave damage. If you know, at least you are in control of your evil.

The Church agreeing with freedom of conscience does not mean you have to let people always follow their conscience (the conscience of people who believe in murder is not respected) – just as agreeing with people having knives does not mean you have to let them do as they please with them. Catholics these days mostly say they follow their own conscience instead of listening to the Church teaching on sexual morality and some other issues. But if you are a Catholic you have to believe not that conscience decides but that conscience must seek out what God has laid down and let God decide what it should see as right and wrong (page 5, Does Conscience Decide?, William J Philbin, Catholic Truth Society of Ireland). In other words, you don't reject the prohibition on contraception just because you see that the ban is harmful but you have to see that God can command what is harmful for a long term good so that may make you accept the prohibition.

Conscience tries to tell you what is right and wrong. It can deceive. Roman Catholics hold that those who see nothing wrong with using birth control are fooled by their conscience. Another example is how people may do wrong and have no sense of having done wrong.

Conscience can be wrong. That does not mean it is wrong all the time. But it does mean it might or may be wrong all the time. Thus if you turn your heart to evil and defiance of God when you commit a mortal sin, then it follows that you cannot be 100% sure it really is wrong or that you intend it to be. Thus mortal sin is an oxymoron for mortal sin implies you fully know what you are doing but conscience prevents you fully knowing it. And you cannot sin unless you violate your conscience. It also follows that it is only me who should judge for it is all very personal. God has no right to judge. It does me no good if God judges me if I do not see for myself that he is right. In other words, a God who judges me instead of helping me to judge me is evil. In earthly life, there is no real justice because we force a judgement of criminality of people not caring how they see themselves. It cannot help them see the truth. If they do they do it in spite of it. It is not about helping. It is not about helping them to learn. Even if retribution - paying back evil for having done evil or giving a person the evil they have earned simply because they have earned it - is lawful it is only lawful if the person at some level knows it is his just desert. That is why you cannot punish a person who has just become seriously brain-damaged for murder.

Conscience for the believer in God is seen as the voice of God and it determines our view of God. For example, God is perfect. If you believe nearly everybody is evil and godless and such deserve to be tormented in Hell forever then you will see the perfect God as being one of strict retribution. If you believe in mercy, your picture of God will be merciful and forgiving. Talk about God though meant to be about a being is really about yourself. God is a projection based on what you want to be right and what you want to be wrong. You cannot sin against God for the only God you put before your eyes is your mirror image.

Finally:

Conscience is said to be about working out the right thing to do in moral terms. But in practice it is treated as God or as an authority - a bad act is thought to be made right or excusable if conscience says to go and do it. The worship of God is a sham - the conscience is the real God. That is why people of conscience do terrible things.

The law can only respect conscience if it is a very serious matter. For example, if you feel you cannot fight in the war for it is wrong you should be allowed to refuse to serve. But if you perform weddings you cannot have the right to refuse to marry a couple who were previously married to others who are still alive but whom they divorced. Officiating at the wedding is not a serious enough violation of your conscience. The following is hypothetical. If legal exemptions are to be allowed to conscientious objectors, the law needs to be sure that it has evidence that it really is about conscience. You can only prove it is a matter of conscience by showing how strong your belief that the act is wrong is and it is your actions that best demonstrate that! Saying you believe something is wrong is not enough. You cannot open the floodgates to those who say, "I have the right to lock people out of the hall for I regard the scheduled boxing match as sinful. Boxing is a sin." You cannot please everybody's conscientious demands for they are all different and some only want the drama.

Conscience is the voice of God but the danger is that it needs to be really the voice of God and what if it is not? It follows that the person is making their own moral perceptions the same as the will of God. No matter how humble that person acts they cannot be humble in that case. For your conscience to be God, means that even if there is a God the one in your head is your own. You are the real God.



