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On the Role of Conscience in Christian Ethics

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Recent debates within the Church, together with their associated developments, have once again raised the issue of conscience as a topic for discussion. Perhaps most publicity has been focused on disagreement over the ordination of women. Thus one group would claim the right to withdraw from any church activities in which women were exercising a function as ordained ministers even when the denomonation to which they belong had made the corporate decision to admit women to such a role. Correspondingly, the other group would consider it a moral obligation to campaign against and even defy the legislation of a denomonation which denied that women could properly be given the same ecclesiastical status as men. Both parties would equally claim to acting out of 'conscience', often as if the invocation of the term were sufficient to rule out any further debate.

It would seem, therefore, that the time is right for an investigation of the role that conscience has come to play in Christian moral thinking. Indeed, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has asked its Doctrine Committee to report on the church's understanding of conscience and the mode of its development and operation. I write as a member of that church, and this rather preliminary study is offered as very much a Presbyterian view, with the hope that it might contribute to a more general discussion.

It would seem that there are two main uses of 'conscience'. The first, and perhaps the most common, understanding is in terms of feeling, especially feelings of guilt. Thus we speak of 'pangs of conscience' and of 'a guilty conscience' and of a 'clear' or a 'good' conscience. This experience of moral pain or discomfort seems to point to something which although within us is not altogether part of us as it provides a kind of running commentary on our past behaviour, our present pattern of life or our contemplation of future action. The role of Jiminy Cricket in Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* probably sums up the essentials of what many people consider their consciences to be.

The second use of conscience has to do with reason rather than feeling. Here we are speaking of the process by which a person makes mature judgements of good and bad, right and wrong and of his responsibility to stick to those judgements even in the face of majority opinion or prudential disadvantage. It is within this context that someone is compelled to say: "Here

I stand, I can do no other..", for he can reject the judgement he has made only at the cost of rejecting himself as a rational person.

Clearly these two uses of 'conscience' need to be distinguished, although there are obvious connections between them. For example, if a person publicly repudiated deeply held religious or political convictions simply because of a fear of imprisonment by hostile authorities we would expect her to feel inner moral condemnation. But conscience as feeling has no necessary connection with rational convictions. Take the case where someone has been brought up to believe that sexual gratification is intrinsically evil. That person might discover overwhelming arguments which rightly lead him to change his mind, but nevertheless he might have profound difficulties in marriage because of persistent pangs of guilt. It is notable that this experience of conscience found its place in the psycho-analytic theories of Sigmund Freud and his successors. Whatever we might think of such theories as a whole, they have been helpful in drawing attention to the pathological side of guilt feelings.

Thus, on their own, feelings of conscience are an uncertain guide for morality. They are tied to upbringing, culture and varieties of underlying moral beliefs so that a Buddhist might have a bad conscience about placing slug pellets in his garden while a Christian might feel no moral discomfort about such an action. The possibility of a Nazi conscience, troubled about an act of weakness in allowing an appealing Jewish child to escape capture would seem to be as feasible as a Christian conscience, troubled that no action was taken to help those who died.

In the New Testament conscience is frequently considered in terms of feeling and some scholars would argue that this is the primary use of the expression[1]. Thus the phenomenon of an accusing, even a defending conscience is evidence for the moral responsibility of the Gentiles before God (Romans 2:15) but a clear conscience is not in itself sufficient for moral complacency (1 Corinthians 4:4). Indeed, a conscience can be seared or corrupted (I Timothy 4:2, Titus 1:15) or misleading because it is imperfectly educated (1 Corinthians 8:4-8). When, through Christ, we draw near to God in faith we are delivered from a guilty conscience by the assurance that our sins have been forgiven (Hebrews 10:22).

The following moral consequences appear to follow from this. The first is the obligation to live a consistent Christian life which leaves the conscience clear. In Acts 24:16 Paul declares: "..I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man", and references a 'good' or a 'clear' conscience in

Romans 9:1, 2 Corinthians 1:12, 1 Timothy 1:19, etc., relate to the peace of mind which matches life with faith. Such consistency should also be detected by the consciences of others (2 Corinthians 4:2, 5:11).

Other obligations relate to the fact that the consciences of different people can prompt them to incompatible behaviour. This is illustrated by the passages in 1 Corinthians and Romans where Paul discusses whether it is right for a Christian to eat meat which has been offered to idols. Paul identifies two groups. The first is composed of those who have reached clear opinions - who "know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but on", that "..food does not bring us to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" (1 Cor. 8:4,8). But there are others who are not so sure, who think of "such food .. as having been sacrificed to an idol" (1 Cor. 8:7), who consider "one day more sacred than another" (Rom. 14:5). Paul does not hide his own opinion on these matters. The first group, 'the strong' have reached the right conclusions. But being right is of less importance than the obligation both to obey the prompting of one's own conscience and to preserve the integrity of the consciences of others, even when they are 'weak' (1 Cor. 8:10).

Thus Paul gives the prompting of conscience a paramount moral importance. The 'weak' brother who because of the example of the 'strong' is "emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols" is 'destroyed' (1 Cor. 8:10-11), because "the man who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23). In other words, if we are morally uncertain about a situation, we should withdraw from it.

Similarly, the 'strong' brother is under obligation to forgo his rights and sacrifice his freedom, even if this means abstaining from meat and wine. Indeed Paul goes so far as to say: "..whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God". Thus we are to avoid anything which might cause the conscience of another person to give him pain.

However, if the prompting of conscience is paramount in every situation this would mean that the entire range of our behaviour ought to be ruled by the conscientious scruples of others. But Paul imposes strict limitations on the extent to which conscience should have such a role. Obviously there were Jewish believers who experienced various degrees of doubt as to whether Gentiles could become Christians without also adopting at least some aspects of Judaism. The letter to the Galatians is a sustained rejection of their right to conscientious scruples on these matters. For Paul, the central themes of the

conscientious scruples on these matters. For Paul, the central themes of the gospel are at stake and, consequently, contrary views and even uncertainty are not to be tolerated. Even in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 the markers are already set out by comments such as "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking.." (Rom. 14:17) and "..food does not bring us near to God" (1 Cor. 8:8). Thus, after all, the operation of conscience must be subservient to convictions about truth, and its authority is limited to areas which have little importance compared with the vital matters of the faith.

It is hardly surprising that Paul should come to such a conclusion, for unless conscience is held to be an infallible and universal moral alarm signal the final standards of morality have to be found elsewhere. Indeed, any system of morals must imply circumstances when the guilt feelings of others are either ignored or treated as signs of grave moral aberration. For example, the trial of Adolph Eichmann revealed that his mass murder of Jews was in line with a scrupulous conscience. Indeed, on one occasion he felt so guilty about having helped a half-Jewish couple that he even "confessed his sins" as he put it, to his superiors[2].

This leads us to the question of how we distinguish between essential truths of faith and morality and the lesser matters where the scruples of others can be given priority. And this introduces the second idea of conscience in terms of rational reflection and judgement concerning good and bad, right and wrong. Historically it is this role of conscience which has been mostly taken for granted in theological and philosophical thinking. For Aquinas, *synderesis* is the capacity to attain some knowledge of natural moral law by rational reflection, while *conscientia* is the application of the principles so perceived to particular situations. Calvin defines conscience as the augmentation of our knowledge by a sense of the divine judgement so that it emerges as a forum for judging our inner as well as our outer lives. Thus, ".. a good conscience is nothing but inward integrity of heart" (Institutes IV.X.4).

Puritans like William Perkins viewed the operation of conscience as a 'practical syllogism' enabling the application of universal principles of conduct to particular situations. Richard Baxter rejects the idea of conscience as an autonomous moral authority. It is authorised only ".. to discern the law of God and call upon us to observe it.." (Christian Directory). It is true that the Puritans were aware of an accusing conscience as "a hell worm which shooteth like a stitch in a man's side", but the primary of role of conscience is as a faculty for applying revelation to life.

Westminster Confession of Faith falls into this tradition. Thus the Confession considers conscience as an activity of reason in discerning moral values and principles from the Word of God, and applying them to our lives.

This would seem to be the view of conscience required by Romans 13:5 where Christians are told to submit to the authorities 'not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience'. In other words, the obligation to submit to the government is a moral one, derived from the convictions of the gospel rationally applied to the situation. Similarly, the stand Paul takes against Judaising influences in the Galatian Church is based on an argument that such tendencies pervert the gospel of Christ.

The *sola scriptura* strand of Reformation thought has included the conviction that the conclusions of conscience, based on scripture, are a personal matter before God. The Code states: "It is the privilege, right and duty of every man to examine the Scriptures for himself .. Having formed a definite conviction as to what the will of God is upon any subject, it is his duty to accept and obey it" (Par. 11). This idea is firmly stated by the Confession: "God alone is Lord of the conscience.." , "..the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also"(XX. ii). Hence the person who approaches Scripture with a mind which is open to the leading of the Holy Spirit is committed to the ultimate authority of his own conclusions on doctrine and morality. It may be true that Scripture is acknowledged as "the only infallible rule of faith and practice" but interpretation and application have their final authority for each person only on the basis of individual reason and insight.

Notoriously, Christians who acknowledge the authority of Scripture and who claim the guidance of the same Holy Spirit have often differed profoundly on certain issues of doctrine and morality. The Confession approaches this problem by asserting that God has left the conscience "free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship". But an important problem with conscience is a need for criteria which would enable us to distinguish precisely what is 'contrary' to the central issues of the faith, or those matters which are less important options where disagreement can be tolerated and respect for scruples comes into play.

There are, of course, preliminary conditions for being sure of our own conclusions or identifying those convictions of others which genuinely challenge the integrity of our own beliefs. Each person must be persuaded that she has honestly and prayerfully considered all the information which is relevant. We

honestly and prayerfully considered all the information which is relevant. We can only take seriously the claims of another when we are sure that he really understands the issues involved and has adequately researched them. Also, among those who agree on the authority of Scripture there are bound to be matters upon which it would be difficult, rationally, to disagree. Indeed the Christian would have a duty to make his own convictions subject to Scripture and to repudiate or modify them when he saw there was a conflict. Thus, the Confession emphasises that to "believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands [which are contrary to or beside God's Word] out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience". However, this still leaves wide scope for variety of interpretation where it would be sheer arrogance for sinful and fallible human beings to decide that the mere conflict of another's convictions with their own was, in itself, evidence of sin, ignorance or stupidity.

The Confession is helpful, therefore, in drawing attention to the personal nature of conscience, the prior authority of the Word of God for conscientious decisions and the obligation not to have convictions of conscience which either conflict with Scripture or concern matters on which Scripture is either silent or gives no clear ruling. On the other hand it is happy to forbid as 'pretence of Christian liberty' the opposition of 'any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it' as resisting 'the ordinance of God'. The censures of the Church and power of the civil magistrate are to be used against those who publish opinions or maintain lifestyles which are 'contrary to the light of nature', to 'the known principles of Christianity', or are 'destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church' (XX. iv). Thus the Confession chooses the option of imposing conformity. The pacificist who opposes what he otherwise considers to be 'lawful authority', the birth control pioneer who challenged the accepted view that contraception is unnatural, eighteenth century campaigners against slavery, theologians who questioned the adequacy of established confession and creeds, members of Christian pressure groups - all could be stung by the stance of this particular paragraph. We can be grateful for the assertion of the *Code, The book of the Constitution and Government ot the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, that "..civil rulers .. ought not to attempt in any way to constrain men's religious beliefs or invade the rights of conscience" (par. 14).

At least part of the reason for repudiating this strand of the Confession arises because there are genuine differences over what is or is not taught by 'the light of nature', what the 'known' principles of Christianity are, or what is really destructive to the peace and order of the church. (Another reason is a commitment to tolerance and pluralism in society). Imposing conformity only

reasonable consideration and also harmful. We have come to expect society not to tolerate propaganda advocating racism or sex with children. But a general imposition of conformity assumes that we have achieved the enviable position where our doctrinal and moral thinking is beyond substantial improvement and such an assumption would seem to be implied by what the confession has to say.

There are two reasons which might account for the certainty implied by the Confession. The first is the possibility of a special Divine revelation. We can immediately dismiss this since, for the authors, "The whole counsel of God .. is either set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men" (I.vi). The second reason might be the awareness of being part of a consensus of belief. Such a consensus is, of course, a vital part of church life. Christian faith is learned, articulated and developed within the community of the church. Indeed, how we read Scripture and develop a Christian conscience is developed in interaction with others so that "..no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation"(2 Pet. 1:20). The 'privilege, right and duty' to examine the Scriptures for ourselves takes place amidst discussion and sharing in a community which is bound together in love. But, while general agreement is important, there is always the possibility that the consensus may be challenged by the fresh insight of an active conscience. If this possibility is excluded, the Christian consensus can become a tyranny of the majority enforcing a conformity which excludes diversity, resists change and is therefore closed to fresh understandings and challenges from Scripture. Thus there is a very real danger of quenching the work of the Spirit in developing the life of the Church.

This means that we are still left with an irreducible personal component in the exercise of conscience. There is nothing more to work on than a personal satisfaction with the integrity of our own reason and investigation and our assessment of the claims of others that they have reached their convictions with the same integrity. How we judge such matters cannot, therefore, be presented in terms of clearly defined criteria.

At this stage it would be useful to see how this problem is approached by other thinkers. The best known discussion of conscience occurs in the sermons of Bishop Joseph Butler. Here the idea of conscience develops as a capacity to arbitrate on those occasions when human inclinations, even when ordered according to rational principles, conflict. ".. whether called conscience, moral reason, moral sense, or Divine reason .. as a sentiment of the understanding, or as a perception of the heart.[3] the operation of conscience is a

understanding, or as a perception of the heart.[3] the operation of conscience is a rational activity which is part of our human make-up rather than with an existence and identity of its own. For Butler, the decisions of conscience are ultimate, and since there is no judge outside of conscience itself it would seem that its judgement can only be intuitive.

Initially, the role of intuition appears to leave us with the same problems as those which are generated by the role of conscience as feeling. Intuition can differ from person to person so that, in itself, it is a shaky foundation for moral authority. However, intuitive decisions are not arbitrary. Consider, for example, how an expert musician judges the worth of a new composition, or perhaps a recent hymn tune. Certainly she will approach her assessment from a sound grasp of musical theory and an appreciation of a wide range of music. But more often than not the simple hearing of the hymn tune will be enough to establish its worth. No doubt, on reflection, she could give technical reasons for her judgement. But the initial reaction was the intuitive response of a trained mind.

Similarly the operation of conscience depends on a background of understanding and convictions about the proper order of human nature and, most importantly for the Christian, our knowledge of the Word of God. Otherwise, our moral intuitions degenerate into random responses. In global terms, this implies that, to some degree, the judgement of a person's conscience is relative to the beliefs and understanding of the community to which he belongs. The background of information and training will determine the convictions we hold.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

We introduced conscience as a rational feature of our morality in the context of fundamental judgements which are bound up with our integrity as persons. We have also seen that there is no simple means of marking off those issues which ought to be matters of conscience from others which are either matters of opinion or of peripheral importance to our lives. However, the intuitive element of conscience does not reduce to random impulses, but is an important consequence of living an informed Christian life.

We also investigated the role of conscience as a felt response to our moral situation. The New Testament discussion raised the obligation to live the kind of consistent Christian lives which would keep our consciences clear and quiet. Also, we were left with the obligation to give a higher priority to the

certain matters which are of central importance where truth has to come before scruples.

In practice, when someone claims to have problems with conscience in a certain situation, we need to establish: (a) the extent to which the main difficulty is the experience of moral discomfort, or (b) how far dissent arises from the awareness of deeply held convictions essential to her moral integrity.

In case (a) there is an initial obligation for the person with the uneasy conscience to examine its source. Feelings of moral unease or guilt may well be relics from a way of life he has utterly rejected, or the holding of beliefs he now knows to be false. For example, given the events of Acts 10, it was inappropriate for Peter to feel moral unease about eating with Gentiles and he had an obligation to deal with his feelings. On the other hand it is necessary for those confronted by the negative moral feelings of another to decide on the importance of their own wishes and convictions. They must establish whether or not their own agenda is essential for Christian moral standards and the witness of the Church. If the matters under consideration are peripheral for Christian living then the person's moral unease must have priority. But if they are convinced that essential truths and loyalties are at stake his scruples must be overruled.

The case (b) involves the claim that principles are at stake which the individual holding them can reject only at the cost of rejecting herself. Again there are sets of moral obligations corresponding to the person who makes the claim and those who have to deal with it.

First, an individual has a duty to make sure that he really is entitled to claim that an opinion is a matter of conscience. We have to be on guard against the stubbornness which is a cover for mental laziness or the fear of having to undertake a large scale reorganisation of our beliefs. It is difficult to see how someone who holds a belief on a fairly slim balance of probability could be justified in making it a matter of conscience. According to the Confession, we have a duty not to hold conscientious opinions about issues which are 'contrary' to or 'beside' what the Word of God states. There is also a responsibility not to accept the easy option of 'an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience' (Confession XX.ii), which can be inspired by a 'guru' or peer group as much as by an authoritarian church. Doubtless, we must often rely on the skill and learning of others, but convictions of conscience must always include an essential component of personal decision. As we have seen, the satisfaction

an essential component of personal decision. As we have seen, the satisfaction that we have investigated the issues sufficiently is based on intuition which, for the Christian, will only be as good as his training in Godliness.

The claim that a certain point of view is one of conscience is more often than not accompanied by a significant challenge to those whose opinions differ. The doctor who states that, 'as a matter of conscience' he cannot perform abortions is committed to a way of working which may inconvenience or even conflict with the practice of other colleagues. Similarly, those within the church who 'as a matter of conscience' feel they can have no part in any procedure which results in the ordination of a woman are committed to action which challenges the practice of the rest of the church.

Since convictions of conscience impinge on the lives of others it would seem that we must require more than the mere claim that an opinion is held conscientiously. If we have a particular obligation to accommodate varieties of conscience we have a duty to satisfy ourselves that conscience claims are justified. For example, if we discovered that someone did not really understand the arguments involved, or had simply selected those that suited him we would be quite in order to doubt his right to claim the privilege of conscience. In short, we have a responsibility to require evidence of integrity from those whose convictions challenge our own fundamental views.

The practical consequences of conflicting conscientious convictions raise the question of how far those with contrary opinions can remain as part of a working consensus. For example, a unionist M.P. who acquires the firm conviction that the British presence in Northern Ireland is morally wrong will find that he and his party must soon part company. Within our own church, we would find it impossible to retain a minister who arrived at the conscientious belief that the administration of infant baptism is a grave error. In both of these cases, we have examples of conflicting conscience which must either change the consensus, break it up, or exclude the bearer of the conflicting conscience. Thus, the amount of accommodation I can allow without affecting the integrity of my own convictions is necessarily limited.

How, then do we deal with the person whose conscientious convictions are genuinely at odds with our own? Indeed if we are sure enough of our own doctrine and way of life, why should we respect him anyway? It would appear that the Westminster Fathers would have put him in jail, and a century before he would have been burned at the stake. Indeed, could anyone genuinely be honest in claiming radically different convictions from my own? Is a humanist,

at heart, he is an evil man? Or has he reached what for him is an honest, but for us a mistaken conclusion?

Peter Baelz argues that there are limits to what can be considered as a conscientious action. 'Some moral principles, such as the sanctity of life, are so fundamental that, if a person openly flouts them, he cannot have begun to reflect morally.. He is an evil man, not a non-conformist[4]'. I find it impossible to disagree with him, for the alternative seems to be respect for the conscience of Eichmann. But outside those limits are ranges of possible convictions held by individuals whose rational honesty it is impossible to judge. In the end, it is surely the personal nature of conscience that leads us to respect its general freedom. And that is because persons matter, each significant in his or her own right, created in the image of God with the privilege and responsibility to make those ultimate decisions that can be their's alone. It is because a person's fundamental convictions can never be coerced but only persuaded by argument and, in the end, changed by the grace of God that our Christian obligations include tolerance and respect.

Notes

1. e.g C.A.Pierce, Conscience in the New Testament, (1955).
2. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, (New York, Viking Press, 1963).
3. Works of Bishop Butler, ed. J.H.Bernard, Vol.1 (McMillan Press).
4. Peter Baelz, Ethics and Belief, (London, Sheldon Press), p.47.

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