

Conscience according to John Henry Newman

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Introduction

THE IMPORTANCE of conscience is recognized far beyond Catholic circles. This is due in part to the common experience of an interior voice that commands certain good actions and reproves bad actions. It is also commonly admitted that we have a certain duty to follow our conscience, even though it can be sometimes mistaken.

Apart from the rather broad agreement just summarized, the understanding of conscience is quite diverse. Since the Catholic Church speaks—officially at least since Pope Pius IX—of the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians in invincible ignorance, some suggest that invincible ignorance is the best warranty of personal freedom. And a view of conscience separated from objective truth and goodness could mean that Hitler and his accomplices acted morally. Confronted with such views,¹ the theologian Joseph Ratzinger found in John Henry Newman the master of a view of conscience that is not opposed to the liberating power of truth.

I will try to present some aspects of John Henry Newman's understanding of conscience, which has to be understood within his practical approach to human life and religion. Conscience, being the center of natural religion, is a preparation for faith. It can be perverted, and—perverted or not—it receives some divine help. Newman took his conscience as a guide, which led him to the Catholic Church.

¹ See Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (Philadelphia: The National Catholic Bioethics Center/San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 13–17.

Practical Approach

One of the reasons why Newman highlights the importance of conscience is his view of the human being as a practical being:

It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract.²

To most men argument makes the point in hand only more doubtful, and considerably less impressive. After all, man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. He is influenced by what is direct and precise.³

If we are, generally speaking, practical beings, this is true above all in the field of religion. And not to be practical in such a field is a radical mistake:

When a man does not make the truth of Christianity a practical concern, but a mere matter of philosophical or historical research, he will feel himself at leisure (and reasonably on his own grounds) to find fault with the evidence. . . . If religion be not a practical matter, it is right and philosophical in us to be sceptics.⁴

Practical does not mean trivial or materialistic. Conscience is interesting to us not only because it is “practical,” but because it is emotional, it introduces us to relations with persons. And from these persons we move towards a higher Person:

Conscience . . . is always, what the sense of the beautiful is only in certain cases; it is always emotional. No wonder then that it always implies what that sense only sometimes implies; that it always involves the recognition of a living object, towards which it is directed. Inanimate things cannot stir our affections; these are correlative with persons. If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear.⁵

Believers cannot be indifferent to arguments against their faith. And they reply with arguments. But Newman has doubts about the practical

² *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903 [1870]), 36. Henceforth, GA.

³ GA 95.

⁴ *Parochial And Plain Sermons*, In eight volumes, New impression, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907–8 [1834–43]), II.II: 21. Henceforth, PPS (Sermons of the Anglican period of Newman).

⁵ GA 109.

effect of non-practical arguments, because “[o]ur reasoning powers are very weak in all inquiries into moral and religious truth.”⁶ Conscience on the other hand provides a practical and efficient argument:

Catholics go into the world; they mix with men of all religions; they hear all manner of sophistical objections made to the Church, her doctrines, and her rules. . . . My dear Brethren, this is a day in which much stress is laid upon the arguments producible for believing Religion, Natural and Revealed; and books are written to prove that we ought to believe, and why. These books are called Natural Theology, and Evidences of Christianity; and it is often said by our enemies, that Catholics do not know why they believe. Now I have no intention whatever of denying the beauty and the cogency of the argument which these books contain; but I question much, whether in matter of fact they make or keep men Christians. I have no such doubt about the argument which I have been here recommending to you. Be sure, my Brethren, that the best argument, better than all the books in the world, better than all that astronomy, and geology, and physiology, and all other sciences can supply,—an argument intelligible to those who cannot read as well as to those who can,—an argument which is ‘within us,’—an argument intellectually conclusive, and practically persuasive, whether for proving the Being of a God, or for laying the ground for Christianity,—is that which arises out of a careful attention to the teachings of our heart, and a comparison between the claims of conscience and the announcements of the Gospel.⁷

We are practical beings, religion is practical, and conscience is at the center of Newman’s practical approach to religion.

Preparation for Belief in God

Faith comes from God, but it does not mean that it cannot be prepared, as John the Baptist shows; God creates in us certain dispositions to faith.⁸ We play our role in this preparation for faith, or in our refusal:

⁶ PPS I.XVII: 218.

⁷ *Sermons Preached in Various Occasions* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908 [1856]), 60–70: Sermon 5, Feast of St. Thomas—4th Sunday after Advent, 1856. Preached in the University Church, Dublin. Henceforth, SPVO.

⁸ See SPVO 60: “The Holy Baptist was sent before our Lord to prepare His way; that is, to be His instrument in rousing, warning, humbling, and inflaming the hearts of men, so that, when He came, they might believe in Him. He Himself is the Author and Finisher of that Faith, of which He is also the Object; but, ordinarily, He does not implant it in us suddenly, but He first creates certain dispositions, and these He carries on to faith as their reward.”

If I attempt to set before you, my Brethren, as far as time permits, how it is, humanly speaking, that a man comes to believe the revealed word of God, and why one man believes and another does not. And, in describing the state of mind and of thought which leads to faith, I shall not of course be forgetting that faith, as I have already said, is a supernatural work, and the fruit of divine grace; I only shall be calling your attention to what must be your own part in the process.⁹

As a matter of fact, "few minds in earnest can remain at ease without some sort of rational grounds for their religious belief; to reconcile theory and fact is almost an instinct of the mind."¹⁰ In order to do this, we must start from the sensible world, which is the prime object of our knowledge. But we move beyond the material world towards a moral dimension, where we notice our conscience, which leads us to God:

Now certainly the thought of God, as Theists entertain it, is not gained by an instinctive association of His presence with any sensible phenomena; but the office which the senses directly fulfil as regards creation that devolves indirectly on certain of our mental phenomena as regards the Creator. Those phenomena are found in the sense of moral obligation. As from a multitude of instinctive perceptions, acting in particular instances, of something beyond the senses, we generalize the notion of an external world, and then picture that world in and according to those particular phenomena from which we started, so from the perceptive power which identifies the intimations of conscience with the reverberations or echoes (so to say) of an external admonition, we proceed on to the notion of a Supreme Ruler and Judge.¹¹

When Newman looks for a possible proof of the existence of God, conscience is at the center of the argument:

I have already said I am not proposing here to prove the Being of a God; yet I have found it impossible to avoid saying where I look for the proof of it. . . . I must start from some first principle;—and that first principle, which I assume and shall not attempt to prove, is . . . that we have by nature a conscience.¹²

The experience of conscience is for Newman the best indication of God's existence:

⁹ SPVO 61.

¹⁰ *Apologia pro vita sua*, The Two Versions of 1864 & 1865, Preceded by Newman's and Kingsley's Pamphlets, With an Introduction by Wilfrid Ward, Henry Frowde (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 351. Henceforth, AP.

¹¹ GA 103–4.

¹² GA 104–5.

November 7, 1859. Ward thinks I hold that moral obligation is, because there is a God. But I hold just the reverse, viz. there is a God, because there is a moral obligation. I have a certain feeling on my mind, which I call *conscience*. When I analyse this, I feel it involves the idea of a Father and a Judge,—of one who sees my heart, etc. . . . All men know what the feeling of a bad or good conscience is, though they may differ most widely from each other as to what conscience enjoins . . . This is Conscience, and, from the nature of the case, its very existence carries on our minds to a being exterior to ourselves; for else, whence did it come? and to a being superior to ourselves; else whence its strange, troublesome peremptoriness? . . . Such is an argument for the being of a God which I should wish, if it were possible, to maintain. It has been my own chosen proof of that fundamental doctrine for thirty years past. . . . I am led to it, not only by its truth, but by its great convenience and appositeness in this day. 1) It is a proof common to all, to high and low, from earliest infancy. It is carried about in a compact form in every soul. It is ever available—it requires no learning—it is possessed by pagans as well as Christians. 2) And next: it is intimately combined with practice. It is not some abstract truth wrought out by the pure intellect . . .¹³

¹³ *Proof of Theism*, in Adrian J. Boekraad and Henry Tristram, *The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God, According to J. H. Newman* (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1961), 103–25; 1859, 103–22. See also *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before The University of Oxford, Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*; new impression (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909) (sermons of the Anglican period of Newman, 1826–43), 18–19: “Now, in the first place, it is obvious that Conscience is the essential principle and sanction of Religion in the mind. Conscience implies a relation between the soul and a something exterior, and that, moreover, superior to itself; a relation to an excellence which it does not possess, and to a tribunal over which it has no power. And since the more closely this inward monitor is respected and followed, the clearer, the more exalted, and the more varied its dictates become, and the standard of excellence is ever outstripping, while it guides, our obedience, a moral conviction is thus at length obtained of the unapproachable nature as well as the supreme authority of That, whatever it is, which is the object of the mind’s contemplation. Here, then, at once, we have the elements of a religious system; for what is Religion but the system of relations existing between us and a Supreme Power, claiming our habitual obedience: ‘the blessed and only Potentate, who only hath immortality, dwelling in light unapproachable, whom no man hath seen or can see?’” See also SPVO 65–66: “This is Conscience; and, from the nature of the case, its very existence carries on our minds to a Being exterior to ourselves; for else whence did it come? and to a Being superior to ourselves; else whence its strange, troublesome peremptoriness? I say, without going on to the question what it says, and whether its particular dictates are always as clear and consistent as they might be, its very existence throws us out of ourselves, and beyond ourselves, to go and seek for Him in the height and depth, whose Voice it is. As the sunshine implies that the sun is in the heavens, though we may see it not, as a knocking at our doors at night implies the presence of one outside in the dark who asks for

This argument, which is quite in conjunction with others, is likely to be contested on the basis of the social character of our perception of moral norms.¹⁴ But it is unlikely that education could explain the whole

admittance, so this Word within us, not only instructs us up to a certain point, but necessarily raises our minds to the idea of a Teacher, an unseen Teacher: and in proportion as we listen to that Word, and use it, not only do we learn more from it, not only do its dictates become clearer, and at its lessons broader, and its principles more consistent, but its very tone is louder and more authoritative and constraining. And thus it is, that to those who use what they have, more is given; for, beginning with obedience, they go on to the intimate perception and belief of one God. His voice within them witnesses to Him, and they believe His own witness about Himself. They believe in His existence, not because others say it, not in the word of man merely, but with a personal apprehension of its truth. This, then, is the first step in those good dispositions which lead to faith in the Gospel." See also GA 389–91: "Our great internal teacher of religion is, as I have said in an earlier part of this Essay, our Conscience. Conscience is a personal guide, and I use it because I must use myself; I am as little able to think by any mind but my own as to breathe with another's lungs. Conscience is nearer to me than any other means of knowledge. And as it is given to me, so also is it given to others; and being carried about by every individual in his own breast, and requiring nothing besides itself, it is thus adapted for the communication to each separately of that knowledge which is most momentous to him individually,—adapted for the use of all classes and conditions of men, for high and low, young and old, men and women, independently of books, of educated reasoning, of physical knowledge, or of philosophy. Conscience, too, teaches us, not only that God is, but what He is; it provides for the mind a real image of Him, as a medium of worship; it gives us a rule of right and wrong, as being His rule, and a code of moral duties. Moreover, it is so constituted that, if obeyed, it becomes clearer in its injunctions, and wider in their range, and corrects and completes the accidental feebleness of its initial teachings. Conscience, then, considered as our guide, is fully furnished for its office. I say all this without entering into the question how far external assistances are in all cases necessary to the action of the mind, because in fact man does not live in isolation, but is everywhere found as a member of society; I am not concerned here with abstract questions. Now Conscience suggests to us many things about that Master, whom by means of it we perceive, but its most prominent teaching, and its cardinal and distinguishing truth, is that he is our Judge. In consequence, the special Attribute under which it brings Him before us, to which it subordinates all other Attributes, is that of justice—retributive justice. We learn from its informations to conceive of the Almighty, primarily, not as a God of Wisdom, of Knowledge, of Power, of Benevolence, but as a God of Judgment and Justice; as One, who, not simply for the good of the offender, but as an end good in itself, and as a principle of government, ordains that the offender should suffer for his offence."

¹⁴ See John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 105: "If we do not take conscience at its face value, if we seek critically to understand how conscience has come into existence and has come to work as it does, then we do indeed find

of the great authority of conscience. And one of the key points of the argument is precisely that conscience implies a higher authority. Unlike taste, it is not only about the beauty of our actions; it includes a sanction, which comes from on high,¹⁵ and therefore “conscience does not repose on itself, but vaguely reaches forward to something beyond self.”¹⁶ Is that enough to constitute a proof? Newman does not look for a proof in the mathematical sense:

Inasmuch as He who made us, has so willed that in mathematics indeed we should arrive at certitude by rigid demonstration, but in religious inquiry we should arrive at certitude by accumulated probabilities.¹⁷

And in any case, in most of our life we do not ask for impossible proofs:

Our dearest interests, our personal welfare, our property, our health, our reputation, we freely hazard, not on proof, but on a simple probability, which is sufficient for our conviction, because prudence dictates to us so to take it. We must be content to follow the law of our being in religious matters as well as in secular.¹⁸

Natural Religion and Revelation

The argument from conscience is within what Newman calls natural religion, which prepares for Revelation. God put into us a moral sense, which he would not contradict in Revelation: “no religion is from God which contradicts our sense of right and wrong.”¹⁹ Still, there are two levels of religion: the interior voice of our conscience, and the external voice of the proclaimed revelation:

We are between two, the inward voice speaking one thing within us, and the world speaking another without us; the world tempting, and the Spirit whispering warnings. Hence faith becomes necessary; in

persons in the background, but human persons, not a divine one. If we stand back from the experience of conscience and try to understand it, it is overwhelmingly plausible to see it as an introjection into each individual of demands that come from other people; in the first place, perhaps, from his parents and immediate associates, but ultimately from the traditions and institutions of the society in which he has grown up, or of some special part of that society which has had the greatest influence upon him.”

¹⁵ See GA 106–7.

¹⁶ GA 107.

¹⁷ AP 292.

¹⁸ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909[1845]), 115. Henceforth, DD.

¹⁹ GA 419.

other words, God has most mercifully succoured us in this contest, by speaking not only in our hearts, but through the sensible world; and this Voice we call revelation. God has overruled this world of sense, and put a word in its mouth, and bid it prophesy of Him.²⁰

We will have to see the relationship between these two voices, and then between them and the alternative interior and exterior voices. The main principle is that the religion of nature, far from being opposed to revelation, leads to it:

Obedience to conscience leads to obedience to the Gospel, which, instead of being something different altogether, is but the completion and perfection of that religion which natural conscience teaches. Indeed, it would have been strange if the God of nature had said one thing, and the God of grace another; if the truths which our conscience taught us without the information of Scripture, were contradicted by that information when obtained. But it is not so; there are not two ways of pleasing God; what conscience suggests, Christ has sanctioned and explained; to love God and our neighbour are the great duties of the Gospel as well as of the Law; he who endeavours to fulfil them by the light of nature is in the way towards, is, as our Lord said, “not far from Christ’s kingdom”; for to him that hath more shall be given.²¹

When one follows his conscience, the reception of the Gospel goes on in the same line:

His conscience anticipates the mystery, and convicts him; his mouth is stopped. And when he goes on to read that the Son of God has Himself come into the world in our flesh, and died upon the Cross for us, does he not, amid the awful mysteriousness of the doctrine, find those words fulfilled in him which that gracious Saviour uttered: ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me’? He cannot choose but believe in Him.²²

To follow our conscience helps our moral life; to follow the ecclesiastical superiors helps our holiness:

The supremacy of conscience is the essence of natural religion; the supremacy of Apostle, or Pope, or Church, or Bishop, is the essence of revealed; and when such external authority is taken away, the mind falls back again of necessity upon that inward guide which it possessed even

²⁰ PPS IV.XXI: 313–14.

²¹ PPS VIII.XIV: 202.

²² PPS VIII.VIII: 119.

before Revelation was vouchsafed. Thus, what conscience is in the system of nature, such is the voice of Scripture, or of the Church, or of the Holy See, as we may determine it, in the system of Revelation. . . . And as obedience to conscience, even supposing conscience ill-informed, tends to the improvement of our moral nature, and ultimately of our knowledge, so obedience to our ecclesiastical superior may subserve our growth in illumination and sanctity, even though he should command what is extreme or inexpedient, or teach what is external to his legitimate province.²³

Religious experience is not the only thing that helps our conscience. Culture also does:

The image of God, if duly cherished, may expand, deepen, and be completed, with the growth of their powers and in the course of life, under the varied lessons, within and without them, which are brought home to them concerning that same God, One and Personal, by means of education, social intercourse, experience, and literature.²⁴

The fact that conscience can be helped means that it is not sufficient. Therefore natural religion is not of itself sufficient either. In order to see more fully the relationship between natural religion and revelation, we must see how conscience must be educated and can be perverted.

Perverted Conscience

Conscience is practical and can fail. But this does not happen only because it is practical, since something similar happens at the intellectual level. In neither case does error invalidate the capacity:

Both the moral and the intellectual sanction are liable to be biased by personal inclinations and motives; both require and admit of discipline; and, as it is no disproof of the authority of conscience that false consciences abound, neither does it destroy the importance and the uses of certitude, because even educated minds, who are earnest in their inquiries after the truth, in many cases remain under the power of prejudice or delusion.²⁵

The specific problem of conscience is that in the practical field our desires have a significant weight. If we want to follow them, we might be led astray:

²³ DD 86–87.

²⁴ GA 116.

²⁵ GA 234.

At first our conscience tells us, in a plain straightforward way, what is right and what is wrong; but when we trifle with this warning, our reason becomes perverted, and comes in aid of our wishes, and deceives us to our ruin.²⁶

Newman warns us when he describes the process that can lead, step by step, to a perversion of our conscience:

This is the path which leads to death. Men first leave off private prayer; then they neglect the due observance of the Lord's day (which is a stated service of the same kind); then they gradually let slip from their minds the very idea of obedience to a fixed eternal law; then they actually allow themselves in things which their conscience condemns; then they lose the direction of their conscience, which being ill used, at length refuses to direct them. And thus, being left by their true inward guide, they are obliged to take another guide, their reason, which by itself knows little or nothing about religion; then, this their blind reason forms a system of right or wrong for them, as well as it can, flattering to their own desires, and presumptuous where it is not actually corrupt. No wonder such a scheme contradicts Scripture, which it is soon found to do; not that they are certain to perceive this themselves; they often do not know it, and think themselves still believers in the Gospel, while they maintain doctrines which the Gospel condemns. But sometimes they perceive that their system is contrary to Scripture; and then, instead of giving it up, they give up Scripture, and profess themselves unbelievers.²⁷

But our conscience is natural; a sign of this fact is that children can recognize the right from the wrong, if their instinct has not been distorted.²⁸ Of course it does not always happen, but there are at least relevant cases.²⁹ Therefore, when we reject our conscience in order to follow our desires, we reject our very nature:

²⁶ PPS VIII.V, 67.

²⁷ PPS I.XIX: 254–55.

²⁸ See GA 112: “The child keenly understands that there is a difference between right and wrong; and when he has done what he believes to be wrong, he is conscious that he is offending One to whom he is amenable, whom he does not see, who sees him. His mind reaches forward with a strong presentiment to the thought of a Moral Governor, sovereign over him, mindful, and just. It comes to him like an impulse of nature to entertain it. It is my wish to take an ordinary child, but still one who is safe from influences destructive of his religious instincts.”

²⁹ See GA 114: “Such is the apprehension which even a child may have of his Sovereign Lawgiver and Judge; which is possible in the case of children, because, at least, some children possess it, whether others possess it or no.”

Though I lost my sense of the obligation which I lie under to abstain from acts of dishonesty, I should not in consequence lose my sense that such actions were an outrage offered to my moral nature.³⁰

Weak Conscience and Divine Help

One might do what is bad in a non-guilty way, because one follows one's conscience. Newman gives the striking example of St. Paul persecuting the Christians.³¹ Mistakes in good faith—following an erroneous conscience with the desire to do what is good—are not dead ends. God helps such persons:

When men err in ignorance, following closely their own notions of right and wrong, though these notions are mistaken, — great as is their sin, if they might have possessed themselves of truer notions (and very great as was St. Paul's sin, because he certainly might have learned from the Old Testament far clearer and diviner doctrine than the tradition of the Pharisees), — yet such men are not left by the God of all grace. God leads them on to the light in spite of their errors in faith, if they continue strictly to obey what they believe to be His will.³²

Divine help is not only interior. Since the voice of the tempter is in the external world as well as within ourselves, God's voice is also in the world, through revelation and its proclamation:

And thus there are two voices even in the external world; the voice of the tempter calling us to fall down to worship him, and he will give us all; and the voice of God, speaking in aid of the voice in our hearts: and as love is that which hears the voice within us, so faith is that which hears the voice without us; and as love worships God within the shrine, faith discerns Him in the world.³³

The specific weakness of our conscience is a reason why an external revelation is necessary:

All sciences, except the science of Religion, have their certainty in themselves; as far as they are sciences, they consist of necessary conclusions

³⁰ GA 106.

³¹ See PPS VIII.XIV: 210: "Great as St. Paul's sin was in persecuting Christ's followers, before his conversion, that sin was of a different kind; he was not transgressing, but obeying his conscience (however blinded it was); he was doing what he thought his duty, when he was arrested by the heavenly vision, which, when presented to him, he at once 'obeyed;' he was not sinning *against light*, but *in darkness*."

³² PPS II.IX: 105–6.

³³ PPS IV.XXI: 314. See also PPS V.XVII: 251–52.

from undeniable premises, or of phenomena manipulated into general truths by an irresistible induction. But the sense of right and wrong, which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biassed by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand. Natural Religion, certain as are its grounds and its doctrines as addressed to thoughtful, serious minds, needs, in order that it may speak to mankind with effect and subdue the world, to be sustained and completed by Revelation. In saying all this, of course I must not be supposed to be limiting the Revelation of which the Church is the keeper to a mere republication of the Natural Law; but still it is true, that, though Revelation is so distinct from the teaching of nature and beyond it, yet it is not independent of it, nor without relations towards it, but is its complement, reassertion, issue, embodiment, and interpretation. The Pope, who comes of Revelation, has no jurisdiction over Nature.³⁴

God helps people who follow their conscience—perverted or not perverted. This help can be accepted or not. Who follows his conscience wants more, because of what he has already tasted:

A religious man, who has not the blessing of the infallible teaching of revelation, is led to look out for it, for the very reason that he is religious. He has something, but not all; and if he did not desire more, it would be a proof that he had not used, that he had not profited by, what he had. Hence he will be on the look-out. Such is the definition, I may say, of every religious man, who has not the knowledge of Christ; he is on the look-out.³⁵

The contrast is sharp between the one who uses what he already has in order to get more, and the one who does not use what he has, in order not to be disturbed:

The one is active, and the other passive, when Christ is preached as the Saviour of the world. The one goes to meet the truth; the other thinks that the Truth ought to come to him. The one examines into the proof

³⁴ *Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk*, in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching, Considered in a Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D. D.*, and in a *Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900 [1875]), 253–54. Henceforth, LDN.

³⁵ SPVO 66.

that God has spoken; the other waits till this is proved to him. He feels no personal interest in it; he thinks it not his own concern, but (if I may so say) God Almighty's concern. He does not care to make the most of his knowledge. . . . And next, supposing proof is actually offered him, he feels no sort of gratitude or delicacy towards Him who offers it: he says without compunction, "I do not see this"; and "that does not follow"; for he is a critic and a judge, not an inquirer, and he negotiates and bargains, when he ought to be praying for light.³⁶

Nothing dispenses us, whatever the state of our conscience is, from our duty to enquire.³⁷ Newman sees a fault in the Apostle Thomas's insufficient use of his previous knowledge, which he could have applied to the new situation of meeting with the risen Lord.³⁸

Conscience under Attack

Our conscience is threatened by our sins, by our perverted desires. But it is also threatened by its cultural dismissal. Newman mentions the argument that denies the existence of a particular Providence on the basis of the existence of uniform laws in nature.³⁹ Others say, from the chairs of the universities, that guiltiness and the possibility of a choice between good and evil are primitive illusions.⁴⁰ Next to these rather academic critics of conscience, Newman mentions the popular view that identifies conscience not as a voice of authority within us, but as the basis for a refusal of authority:

When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one's leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he like it, in his own way. Conscience has rights because it has

³⁶ SPVO 69–70.

³⁷ See SPVO 72: "And so, alas! it is now: many is the man who has a drawing towards the Catholic Church, and resists it, on the plea that he has not sufficient proof of her claims. Now he cannot have proof all at once, he cannot be converted all at once, I grant; but he can inquire; he can determine to resolve the doubt, before he puts it aside, though it cost labour and time to do so."

³⁸ See SPVO 71–72.

³⁹ See GA 116.

⁴⁰ See LDN 249.

duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a licence to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them.⁴¹

These critics of conscience itself lead to some religious indifference, and are in turn supported by the indifference of many towards either God or their conscience:

Let us consider the state of mind of the multitude, who care little or nothing for religion, who disobey their conscience, who think as little of its dictates as they can, who would get rid of it, if they could. . . . They are contented with themselves; they think themselves as happily conditioned as they can be under the circumstances; they only wish to be let alone; they have no need of priest or prophet; they live in their own way and in their own home, pursuing their own tastes, never looking out of doors; perhaps with natural virtues, perhaps not, but with no distinct or consistent religious sense. Thus they live, and thus they die. Such is the character of the many, all over the earth; they live, to all appearance, in some object of this world, and never rise above the world, and, it is plain, have nothing of those dispositions at all which lead to faith.⁴²

Next to these cultural attacks against conscience, there are also some attacks in the name of conscience against the Catholic Church.

Our Conscience in a Conflict of Allegiance between the Pope and the Queen

Not surprisingly, the declaration of the dogma of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1870) was not very well received by Anglicans. In 1875, Newman replied on this point to the critiques published by the intermittent prime minister of Queen Victoria, William E. Gladstone. Newman summarizes Gladstone's question:

The main question which Mr. Gladstone has started I consider to be this:—Can Catholics be trustworthy subjects of the State? has not a foreign Power a hold over their consciences such, that it may at any time be used to the serious perplexity and injury of the civil government under which they live?⁴³

⁴¹ LDN 250.

⁴² SPVO 68–69.

⁴³ LDN 179.

Newman explains that papal infallibility cannot be understood without the infallibility of the Church, and that in this sense papal infallibility was already believed by Catholics before it was defined.⁴⁴ Gladstone gives too much weight to papal infallibility, which does not extend to all fields of human life and in any case is rarely used.⁴⁵

For our topic, the main question is to know whether Catholics have to abandon their conscience because they must accept something which comes from another human being. On top of that, can Catholics be good citizens, since they must obey a foreign Head of State also in moral questions: after all, moral questions include all fields of human life.⁴⁶

Newman replies at different levels. He points out that of course the Catholic Church restricts the field of personal choices for her members, but any society restricts in a certain measure the personal liberty of its members: England itself restricts the rights of English Catholics, who do

⁴⁴ See LDN 321: "To determine therefore what is meant by the infallibility of the Pope we must turn first to consider the infallibility of the Church." And see LDN 304: "For myself, ever since I was a Catholic, I have held the Pope's infallibility as a matter of theological opinion; at least, I see nothing in the Definition which necessarily contradicts Scripture, Tradition, or History." See also GA 150: "But it is not the necessary result of unity of profession, nor is it the fact, that the Church imposes dogmatic statements on the interior assent of those who cannot apprehend them. The difficulty is removed by the dogma of the Church's infallibility, and of the consequent duty of 'implicit faith' in her word. The 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' is an article of the Creed, and an article, which, inclusive of her infallibility, all men, high and low, can easily master and accept with a real and operative assent. It stands in the place of all abstruse propositions in a Catholic's mind, for to believe in her word is virtually to believe in them all. Even what he cannot understand, at least he can believe to be true; and he believes it to be true because he believes in the Church."

⁴⁵ See LDN 331: "If he forbade his flock to eat any but vegetable food, or to dress in a particular fashion (questions of decency and modesty not coming into the question), he would also be going beyond the province of faith, because such a rule does not relate to a matter in itself good or bad." And see LDN 338: "Papal and Synodal definitions, obligatory on our faith, are of rare occurrence; and this is confessed by all sober theologians."

⁴⁶ See LDN 224: "Now the main point of Mr. Gladstone's Pamphlet is this:—that, since the Pope claims infallibility in faith and morals, and since there are no 'departments and functions of human life which do not and cannot fall within the domain of morals,' p. 36, and since he claims also 'the domain of all that concerns the government and discipline of the Church,' and moreover, 'claims the power of determining the limits of those domains,' and 'does not sever them, by any acknowledged or intelligible line from the domains of civil duty and allegiance,' p. 45, therefore Catholics are moral and mental slaves, and 'every convert and member of the Pope's Church places his loyalty and civil duty at the mercy of another,' p. 45."

not complain about it.⁴⁷ He adds that obedience to civil authorities is not a specifically Catholic idea but is in the Bible: would the Anglican Gladstone tear such texts from the Bible?⁴⁸

As for a possible conflict between two obediences, Newman takes some extreme examples, chosen for the sake of exposition although he considers them more or less impossible. In case of a direct conflict between England and the Pope, Catholics would first try to use their privileges as citizens to have a political influence.⁴⁹ Then the choice would depend on the matter. For instance, Catholics should not obey a state that would impose on them the participation in non-Catholic religious services.⁵⁰ But in some cases the Pope should not be obeyed by some Catholics, for instance against their oath as members of Parliament or as soldiers.⁵¹ Newman shows with many examples that Catholic theologians affirm the duty to follow even a conscience in error, provided that one has tried to be duly informed.⁵² As a matter of principle, a English Catholic should obey both the Queen and the Pope, but without giving absolute obedience to either, because neither of them has the right to such an obedience.⁵³

⁴⁷ See LDN 269–71.

⁴⁸ See LDN 225–26.

⁴⁹ See LDN 239–40.

⁵⁰ “Suppose, for instance, an Act was passed in Parliament, bidding Catholics to attend Protestant service every week, and the Pope distinctly told us not to do so, for it was to violate our duty to our faith:—I should obey the Pope and not the Law” (LDN 240).

⁵¹ See LDN 241–42: “Let us suppose members of Parliament, or of the Privy Council, took an oath that they would not acknowledge the right of succession of a Prince of Wales, if he became a Catholic: in that case I should not consider the Pope could release me from that oath, had I bound myself by it. Of course, I might exert myself to the utmost to get the act repealed which bound me; again, if I could not, I might retire from parliament or office, and so rid myself of the engagement I had made; but I should be clear that, though the Pope bade all Catholics to stand firm in one phalanx for the Catholic Succession, still, while I remained in office, or in my place in Parliament, I could not do as he bade me. Again, were I actually a soldier or sailor in her Majesty’s service, and sent to take part in a war which I could not in my conscience see to be unjust, and should the Pope suddenly bid all Catholic soldiers and sailors to retire from the service, here again, taking the advice of others, as best I could, I should not obey him.”

⁵² See LDN 259–61.

⁵³ See LDN 243: “When, then, Mr. Gladstone asks Catholics how they can obey the Queen and yet obey the Pope, since it may happen that the commands of the two authorities may clash, I answer, that it is my rule, both to obey the one and to obey the other, but that there is no rule in this world without exceptions, and if either the Pope or the Queen demanded of me an “Absolute Obedience,”

Even in the religious field, the Pope is not the supreme authority. He's under the natural law, which is the impression in us of the divine law and which is called "conscience" when it is apprehended in us.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the Pope cannot go against the previous Tradition.⁵⁵ Even in the rare occurrences when the Pope would do something as strong as releasing people from their obligation of loyalty towards their temporal rulers, this action would be limited by moral law, and in any case would not be infallible:

Now let us observe how the Pope restrains the exercise of this right. . . . Also in this limitation is implied that the Pope's definite sentence involves an appeal to the supreme standard of right and wrong, the moral law, as its basis and rule, and must contain the definite reasons on which it decides in favour of the one party or the other. . . . Lastly, the Pope

he or she would be transgressing the laws of human society. I give an absolute obedience to neither. Further, if ever this double allegiance pulled me in contrary ways, which in this age of the world I think it never will, then I should decide according to the particular case, which is beyond all rule, and must be decided on its own merits."

⁵⁴ See LDN 246–47: "It seems, then, that there are extreme cases in which Conscience may come into collision with the word of a Pope, and is to be followed in spite of that word. . . . I say, then, that the Supreme Being is of a certain character, which, expressed in human language, we call ethical. He has the attributes of justice, truth, wisdom, sanctity, benevolence and mercy, as eternal characteristics in His nature, the very Law of His being, identical with Himself; and next, when He became Creator, He implanted this Law, which is Himself, in the intelligence of all His rational creatures. The Divine Law, then, is the rule of ethical truth, the standard of right and wrong, a sovereign, irreversible, absolute authority in the presence of men and Angels. . . . 'The natural law,' says St. Thomas, 'is an impression of the Divine Light in us, a participation of the eternal law in the rational creature.' This law, as apprehended in the minds of individual men, is called 'conscience;' and though it may suffer refraction in passing into the intellectual medium of each, it is not therefore so affected as to lose its character of being the Divine Law, but still has, as such, the prerogative of commanding obedience. 'The Divine Law,' says Cardinal Gousset, 'is the supreme rule of actions; our thoughts, desires, words, acts, all that man is, is subject to the domain of the law of God; and this law is the rule of our conduct by means of our conscience. Hence it is never lawful to go against our conscience; as the fourth Lateran Council says, 'Quidquid fit contra conscientiam, ædificat ad gehennam.'"

⁵⁵ See LDN 329: "Another limitation is given in Pope Pius's own conditions, set down in the *Pastor Æternus*, for the exercise of infallibility: viz., the proposition defined will be without any claim to be considered binding on the belief of Catholics, unless it is referable to the Apostolic depositum, through the channel either of Scripture or Tradition; and, though the Pope is the judge whether it is so referable or not, yet the necessity of his professing to abide by this reference is in itself a certain limitation of his dogmatic action."

declares with indignation that a Pope is not infallible in the exercise of this right; such a notion is an invention of the enemy.⁵⁶

A conflict between conscience and the Pope is thus made very unlikely by the fact that it could happen only when the Pope is infallible. But he can be infallible when he speaks about general propositions, which are not the typical field of our conscience:

I observe that conscience is not a judgment upon any speculative truth, any abstract doctrine, but bears immediately on conduct, on something to be done or not done. . . . Hence conscience cannot come into direct collision with the Church's or the Pope's infallibility; which is engaged in general propositions, and in the condemnation of particular and given errors. . . . A Pope is not infallible in his laws, nor in his commands, nor in his acts of state, nor in his administration, nor in his public policy. . . . Since then infallibility alone could block the exercise of conscience, and the Pope is not infallible in that subject-matter in which conscience is of supreme authority, no deadlock, such as is implied in the objection which I am answering, can take place between conscience and the Pope.⁵⁷

Of course it does not mean that Catholics do not have to listen to the Pope, and presume that their conscience is right against his voice. They must take the matter seriously:

If in a particular case it [conscience] is to be taken as a sacred and sovereign monitor, its dictate, in order to prevail against the voice of the Pope, must follow upon serious thought, prayer, and all available means of arriving at a right judgment on the matter in question.⁵⁸

Fundamentally, the authority of the Pope rests on divine authority. As conscience is a divine voice within us, a Pope acting against Conscience would act against himself as Pope:

Did the Pope speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act. He would be cutting the ground from under his feet. His very mission is to proclaim the moral law, and to protect and strengthen that "Light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world." On the law of conscience and its sacredness are founded both his authority in theory and his power in fact.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ LDN 221–22.

⁵⁷ LDN 256–57.

⁵⁸ LDN 257–58.

⁵⁹ LDN 252.

And the Pope cannot change this situation, because “no Pope ever will be able . . . to create a false conscience for his own ends.”⁶⁰ Here Catholics and Protestants agree more than first meets the eye, because most Catholics and Protestants see conscience as “the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.”⁶¹ This is why Newman could say one of his most famous sentences:

Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.⁶²

Not only are conscience and infallibility not incompatible, but conscience is better served by Catholic principles than by Protestant ones. Different understandings of the role of conscience can actually lead Protestants to different conclusions. A Protestant who takes the divinity of Christ as his starting point might become Catholic; one who takes private judgment as the main criterion might end up humanitarian; one who refuses the sacramental principle might come to refuse the inward divine law and end up atheist.⁶³ So, conscience can lead from good

⁶⁰ LDN 258.

⁶¹ LDN 248.

⁶² LDN 261.

⁶³ See GA 245–47: “Thus, of three Protestants, one becomes a Catholic, a second a Unitarian, and a third an unbeliever: how is this? The first becomes a Catholic, because he assented, as a Protestant, to the doctrine of our Lord’s divinity, with a real assent and a genuine conviction, and because this certitude, taking possession of his mind, led him on to welcome the Catholic doctrines of the Real Presence and of the Theotocos, till his Protestantism fell off from him, and he submitted himself to the Church. The second became a Unitarian, because, proceeding on the principle that Scripture was the rule of faith and that a man’s private judgment was its rule of interpretation, and finding that the doctrine of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds did not follow by logical necessity from the text of Scripture, he said to himself, “The word of God has been made of none effect by the traditions of men,” and therefore nothing was left for him but to profess what he considered primitive Christianity, and to become a Humanitarian. The third gradually subsided into infidelity, because he started with the Protestant dogma, cherished in the depths of his nature, that a priesthood was a corruption of the simplicity of the Gospel. First, then, he would protest against the sacrifice of the Mass; next he gave up baptismal regeneration, and the sacramental principle; then he asked himself whether dogmas were not a restraint on Christian liberty as well as sacraments; then came the question, what after all was the use of teachers of religion? why should any one stand between him and his Maker? After a time it struck him, that this obvious question had to be answered by the Apostles, as well as by the Anglican clergy; so he came to the conclusion that the true and only revelation of God to man is that which is written on the heart. This did for a time, and he remained a Deist. But then it occurred to him,

dogmatic principles to the fullness of Catholic faith, and from bad principles to a loss of even natural religion.

The best way to illustrate the progress of a Catholic conscience is look at the instance of Newman's conversion.

Conscience and Newman's Conversion

When Newman was young, he was convinced that the Pope was the Antichrist,⁶⁴ and he attacked the Catholic Church because he was convinced that his own views were true.⁶⁵ Later on, while he was tempted by Catholic views within Anglicanism, he tended to defend himself by speaking as much as possible against Rome.⁶⁶ And he did not want to move faster than his actual conviction.⁶⁷ When his conversion process became clear to himself, he respected the conscience of others and even prevented them from following him.⁶⁸ This was in part because of his own temper:

My great principle ever was, Live and let live. I never had the staidness or dignity necessary for a leader.⁶⁹

Therefore he did not try to unset other people's conscience,⁷⁰ and his conversion was a personal path, not a partnership event.⁷¹ He waited until he was sure that he had to convert, because he "never could understand how a man could be of two religions at once."⁷² But when he got

that this inward moral law was there within the breast, whether there was a God or not, and that it was a roundabout way of enforcing that law, to say that it came from God, and simply unnecessary, considering it carried with it its own sacred and sovereign authority, as our feelings instinctively testified; and when he turned to look at the physical world around him, he really did not see what scientific proof there was there of the Being of God at all, and it seemed to him as if all things would go on quite as well as at present, without that hypothesis as with it; so he dropped it, and became a *purus, putus* Atheist."

⁶⁴ See AP 153.

⁶⁵ See AP 294.

⁶⁶ See AP 155–56.

⁶⁷ See AP 214–15.

⁶⁸ See AP 246, 271–72.

⁶⁹ AP 160.

⁷⁰ See AP 310–11: "My own soul was my first concern, and it seemed an absurdity to my reason to be converted in partnership. I wished to go to my Lord by myself, and in my own way, or rather His way. I had neither wish, nor, I may say, thought of taking a number with me."

⁷¹ See AP 1307: "If there is any thing that was [and is] abhorrent to me, it is the scattering doubts, and unsettling consciences without necessity."

⁷² AP 306.

convinced that some of his previous Anglican principles were not true, he left them:

For myself, I found *I could not* hold them. I left them. From the time I began to suspect their unsoundness, I ceased to put them forward. When I was fairly sure of their unsoundness, I gave up my Living. When I was fully confident that the Church of Rome was the only true Church, I joined her.⁷³

His conversion took time, and this is due to the type of process involved. His view of conversion is somehow similar to his view on the development of doctrine:

What Conscience is in the history of an individual mind, such was the dogmatic principle in the history of Christianity. Both in the one case and the other, there is the gradual formation of a directing power out of a principle.⁷⁴

Conversion, like the development of doctrine, proceeds by positive additions:

A gradual conversion from a false to a true religion, plainly, has much of the character of a continuous process, or a development, in the mind itself, even when the two religions, which are the limits of its course, are antagonists. Now let it be observed, that such a change consists in addition and increase chiefly, not in destruction. . . . True conversion is ever of a positive, not a negative character.⁷⁵

The conversion changes the situation of the conscience. Before he converted, Newman was afraid to be under a delusion.⁷⁶ But after the conversion the course of his thought became finally peaceful:

From the time that I became a Catholic, of course I have no further history of my religious opinions to narrate. In saying this, I do not mean to say that my mind has been idle, or that I have given up thinking on theological subjects; but that I have had no changes to record, and have had no anxiety of heart whatever. I have been in perfect peace and contentment. I never have had one doubt. I was not conscious to myself, on my conversion, of any difference of thought or of temper from what I had before. I was not conscious of firmer faith in the

⁷³ AP 253.

⁷⁴ DD 361.

⁷⁵ DD 200–201.

⁷⁶ See AP 319–20.

fundamental truths of revelation, or of more self-command; I had not more fervour; but it was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains to this day without interruption.⁷⁷

Conclusion

In a sermon, Newman summarizes many of his insights about conscience. In the first place, conscience is a light that comes from Christ and that helps both Christians and non-Christians:

What is the main guide of the soul, given to the whole race of Adam, outside the true fold of Christ as well as within it, given from the first dawn of reason, given to it in spite of that grievous penalty of ignorance, which is one of the chief miseries of our fallen state? It is the light of conscience, “the true Light,” as the same Evangelist says, in the same passage, “which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world.”⁷⁸

In all, this voice is recognized as an authority:

Whether a man be born in pagan darkness, or in some corruption of revealed religion,—whether he has heard the name of the Saviour of the world or not, . . . in any case, he has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression, or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others.⁷⁹

The mere fact that the experience of conscience is common to people of different religions means that the content of conscience is not totally clear, but what is clear is the presence of this conscience:

I do not say that its particular injunctions are always clear, or that they are always consistent with each other; but what I am insisting on here is this, that it commands. . . . It is more than a man’s own self. The man himself has not power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it. . . . He can disobey it, he may refuse to use it; but it remains.⁸⁰

For Newman, whoever follows his conscience is led to the truth, even if—as happened to Newman during part of his life—that truth seems to be against the Catholic Church. It remains a duty to follow our conscience

⁷⁷ AP 331.

⁷⁸ SPVO 64.

⁷⁹ SPVO 64.

⁸⁰ SPVO 64–65.

as a divine voice. Newman raised his glass to his conscience first, then to the Pope. He had good predecessors in such an attitude. St. Thomas Aquinas invoked the divine voice of conscience in comparison with the voice of any prelate:

Conscience only binds because of the force of the divine command or because of the law of nature written within. Therefore, to compare the binding force of the conscience and that of the command of the prelate is nothing other than to compare the binding force of the divine command and the command of the prelate.⁸¹

Of course such views of conscience may seem relativistic. This is not the case with Newman. In 1991, Cardinal Ratzinger showed how Newman's view on conscience cannot be understood independently of truth:

For Newman, the middle term—which establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity—is truth. I do not hesitate to say that truth is the central thought in Newman's intellectual grasping. Conscience is central for him because truth stands in the middle. . . . Conscience for Newman does not mean that the subject is the standard vis-à-vis the claims of authority in a truthless world, a world that lives with a compromise between the claims of the subject and the claims of the social order. Much more than that, conscience signifies the perceptible and demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject himself. It is the overcoming of mere subjectivity in the encounter of the inferiority of man with truth from God.⁸²

For Newman, neither our conscience nor the Pope—adds Ratzinger—justifies a subjective rejection of authority. Both help us discover in a maieutic way the truth that has been put into us by God, our Creator and Redeemer.⁸³

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⁸¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 17, a. 5, translation in *Thomas Aquinas, Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerney (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 237.

⁸² Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 24–25.

⁸³ See *ibid.*, 34: “The true nature of the Petrine office has become so incomprehensible in the modern age no doubt because we think of authority only in terms that do not allow for bridges between subject and object. Accordingly, everything that does not come from the subject is thought to be externally imposed. But the situation is really quite different according to the anthropology of conscience, of which we have tried to come to an appreciation in these reflections. The anamnesis instilled in our being needs, one might say, assistance from without so that it can become aware of itself. But this ‘from without’ is not something set in opposition to anamnesis but is ordered to it. It has maieutic function, imposes nothing foreign, but brings to fruition what is proper to anamnesis, namely, its interior openness to the truth.”