

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2016

Pages: 647-653

Editorial

Conscience

Conscience is one of the most often used words, not only in the theological and philosophical circles, but also in ordinary conversational language. We hear about the freedom and dignity of conscience, the right and duty to follow one's conscience, the demands of conscience, the need to examine our conscience, the necessity to inform our conscience, and so on. In the popular language, conscience is often used as a synonym for morality itself. Yet, it is a very difficult task to define what conscience. At the same time we all know that we have conscience. It is clear that we all have certain principles in life; we always try to hold on to them. When there is the need of a decision, we feel that there is something in us that tries to discern or evaluate the different sides of the act about which we have to decide. In certain moments we find it very difficult to decide what we should. Or, when we do something wrong, we feel that something inside us disturbs us and when we do something good we are encouraged and are appreciated by our inner self. Or, we know that we do or do not do things because something in us has commanded us to do so or not to do. When we use the word conscience, somehow we refer to all these, at least vaguely — that it refers to some principles or attitudes or a basic capacity that we have, that it is a process of discernment, that it is a decision and its evaluation.

Conscience has great importance in moral thinking. We know that what comes in the realm of morality is the human act. This human freedom is based on conscience. When we speak of the freedom of the person, the freedom of choice, etc. we are actually speaking about conscience. Only in the context of this freedom, a consideration of morality becomes relevant. In other words, we cannot think of morality apart from conscience. We will become

convinced of it if we just consider how much has been written on conscience and how many theological and philosophical controversies are centred on conscience. Theologians have often attempted to give a comprehensive vision of conscience taking into account its religious, intellectual, affective and moral aspects. Conscience is seen with reference to the totality of the person, as his/her search for wholeness and self-transcendence and to be in communion with God.

We also hear people say, "I don't care about anything but my conscience" or, "My conscience is the only norm for me." At the same time, we do not do anything out of an arbitrary individualism and we do not appreciate if others do so. If we are doubtful about the rightness or wrongness of something, we try our best to become clear about it. The criterion of a mature conscience is said to be the ability to decide for oneself about what one should do. This does not mean that one should take decisions by oneself in an arbitrary way. One has to listen to others, to the sources of wisdom. This is a process that takes place in dialogue with the community.

Today many theologians point out that conscience is human beings yearning for wholeness. Bernard Häring tells that conscience has to do with man's total selfhood as a moral agent. The intellectual, volitional and emotional dynamics are not separated; they mutually compenetrates in the very depth. The call to unity and wholeness pervades our conscience. It is a longing for integration of all the powers of our being that, at the same time, guides us towards the Other and the others. There cannot be peace in our conscience unless our whole being accepts the longing of the intellect and reason to be one with the truth.¹

Experience can be said to be the basis of the formation of conscience. Self-determination or fundamental option is based on the concept of human nature or the concept of the meaning and significance of human life. But this idea is formed from experience. Here, experience is not limited to mere physical events in my life — it includes everything that comes to me through the senses, everything that passes through my thought and imagination, the family and society where I live, the socio-political structures, etc. Religion plays a vital role here.

¹Cfr. Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Vol I, Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1985 (reprint; first published in 1978), 234-238.

For a Christian, the ultimate meaning of life can be found only in reference to Jesus of Nazareth. For a Christian, moral growth is not merely an appropriation of certain ideas and values, but it is a transformation into Jesus Christ. The Christian is not merely one who follows a set of values and rules that Christ has given, but one who has a personal experience of Jesus Christ, one who has committed oneself to the person of Jesus Christ. The ultimate criterion to evaluate one's experiences, the ultimate criterion to check whether what one has arrived at is the truth is the life and message of Jesus of Nazareth. This is what Vatican Council II teaches when it says, "In reality, it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear."² John Paul II repeats this in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and says that as Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), the decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather in Jesus Christ himself. He underlines that "People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil."³ The more one understands and integrates the life of Jesus into oneself, the more intimately one follows the person of Jesus, the more one becomes Christ-like, the more formed is one's conscience. A Christian conscience is formed only through prayer, meditation on the Word of God and a deep personal experience in the community of the message and the person of Jesus Christ.

Conscience is a traditional, yet an ever-new theme in theology. We speak about the primacy, dignity and inviolability of conscience; we also speak about the objective moral order. The relation between these two has been rather complex. Similarly, in theological discourses, especially in the last few decades, the relation between the autonomy and inviolability of the conscience and the teaching authority of the Church has been rather tensed and uneasy. Formation of conscience, the process and agents of the formation of conscience, etc. also have been important concerns. Pope Francis' statement in *Amoris Laetitia*, namely, "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (AL, 37) has caught the attention of many and has given new perspectives to the concept of conscience and its formation. Articles in this issue deal with many of these pertinent issues on conscience.

²Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

³John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 8, see also numbers 1-27.

Oswald Cardinal analyses the relation between conscience and magisterium, situating it in the context of a basic dimension of Christian life, namely, the community. A responsible use of the conscience presupposes a well formed and informed conscience that is always in search of the truth. In this task, the Church's moral teaching is essential. According to Cardinal Gracias, although the inviolability of the conscience is to be respected, it is not an autonomous judge. To make the Church's teaching one's own is a challenge today. A well-formed and informed conscience is of vital importance, since the Christian community is called to be the moral conscience of the society.

The following article by Vimal Tirimanna also discusses the same issue. He points out that although Vatican II assigned to a properly formed conscience of a person, the full dignity it deserves, during the last few decades we find a strengthening of an erroneous view that conscience has to always simply and blindly follow what the hierarchical magisterium teaches. On the other hand, he holds that the hierarchical magisterium is of immense importance because it is that interpretation of the accumulated moral wisdom and guidance that gives a Catholic his/her unique religious identity. On the other hand, based on Catholic moral tradition and official teaching he shows that a call for blind obedience to the magisterium is not in agreement with the tradition and official teaching. Instead, he suggests the need for a constant dialogue between the conscience and the hierarchical magisterium in their search for moral truth.

Raphael Gallagher focuses on one particular dimension, namely, the act of conscience as a decision. He begins the discussion by asking the question whether one can uphold the dignity of the conscience and at the same time give due respect to the magisterium. He tries to answer this on the basis of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. In the light of the call to holiness advocated by *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 5, he argues that conscience decisions should begin in the presence of God, who is holy. *Gaudium et Spes* complements this by addressing how this process continues by acting in the world. Gallagher suggests that the final decision in conscience is best shaped by moving from holiness to goodness. Following this, he evaluates the methodology of moral theology.

Charles E. Curran discusses the treatment of conscience in *Amoris Laetitia*, in light of its chapter 8, primarily focusing on the possibility of communion for the divorced and remarried. The role of conscience

here is presented elaborating upon the broader historical development of this issue which has been discussed for the last half a century. The first part — the remote context — presents the relevant literature in the last 50 years on this issue based on the decision of conscience in the internal forum. The second part refers to earlier statements by Pope Francis and the two Synods of 2014 and 2015. Following this the teaching of *Amoris laetitia* is presented and analysed. Curran points out that *Amoris laetitia* insists on the central role of conscience. Though Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia*, does not explicitly accept the communion for the divorced and remarried, there are indications that he favours the possibility of Communion for some divorced and remarried. Although the change indicated is in pastoral practice only, Curran points out that past history indicates that a change in pastoral practice often leads to a change in teaching. In the whole discussion on the communion for the divorced and remarried, the understanding of conscience and its role is evident.

According to Thomas Srampickal, conscience is basically the human capacity to feel, think, judge, react and respond to situations in the light of one's moral values and principles. Conscience is so complex a reality that it demands interdisciplinary approach, and argues that we need to give due consideration to the contributions of psychology which has helped a lot in the understanding of conscience. His article deals with moral development and conscience formation in the light of the findings of psychological researches, especially identification theory, cognitive-developmental approach, behaviourism and character study. He also tries to show that these theories, though they appear diverse, are also complementary.

Making Pope Francis's question, "Who am I to judge?," Peter I. Osuji argues that there is a revival of the primacy of conscience. Moreover, he underscores the importance of culture in the formation of conscience. According to Osuji, culture aims at properly formed conscience which is a key to noble living. In his opinion, since cultural values, norms, and ideals which form conscience are varied, conscience is varied, and judgment of conscience is varied. However, he makes it clear that we should guard against moral relativism. Underscoring the importance of culture, Osuji makes it clear that the African cultures consider the individual conscience very much in the context of community or in relation to Palaver.

Rene Sanchez, after having presented a Catholic understanding of the conscience, discusses the three sources of moral wisdom for a mature conscience-based decision. He shows that while Scripture and Tradition hold a foundational place in the formation of conscience, experience is a significant source as it provides the human context for decision-making. He argues that experience has long been viewed only from the point of view of individuals, and not from the point of view of community. Moreover, experience has been viewed often through the lens of the victors/dominant culture only. Sanchez asserts that the experience of the victims must be given a preferential perspective.

Based on the Christian understanding of conscience and its formation, Anne Celestine Achieng Ondigo argues that there is a contradiction between electoral violence taking place in Africa and the values central to an African Christian conscience. Using the judgmental and legislative conscience of the African Christian, she asks whether conscience can address the problem of electoral violence in Africa. She underscores that *Gaudium et Spes* has clearly stated that the political community exists for the common good guided by the dictates of the conscience. This demands people with well-formed consciences to become responsibly involved in their political duties voicing their ethical stance in the public square in favour of the common good. She underscores that to ensure this, the Church should work to re-conscientize the people.

James Kumar deals with the formation of conscience in the context of globalization. Globalization is a powerful system with its negative ideologies of 'profit alone.' This ideology of defining the meaning of life only in terms of economic advantages, political power and worldly pleasures, weakens the voice of the conscience. Pointing out that formation of conscience includes corrective formation as well, James Kumar suggests that one has to unlearn the wrong values and perspectives proposed by globalization, and relearn the right life principles according to the 'voice of God.' Thus, from being mere profit orientated and over-consumerist, one can form one's conscience towards 'global justice,' 'equality,' 'common good' and solidarity.

Chiedu A. Onyiloha argues that conscience is a moral faculty which helps humanity to achieve sustainable development. To arrive at individual or communal good, everyone ought to act in good freedom of conscience. However, the freedom of conscience

presupposes coming to terms with one's culture and tradition. Everyone has an obligation to follow one's conscience, but at the same time to take responsibility of one's action.

Arguing that conscience is not just the domain of theological ethics, Delfo C. Canceran adopts an interdisciplinary approach and presents the concept of conscience from the perspective of cognitive sciences. He shows that the idea of moral imagination proposed by Mark Johnson helps us understand the processes of making decisions and choices in deliberation. According to Canceran, the concept of moral imagination is an alternative to the binary moral theories of absolutist ethics and the relativist ethics. Besides, he underscores the importance of experience in structuring our cognition and making sense of the world.

Following the articles on conscience, we have an article on another topic, namely, The Filipino devotion to *Santo Niño*. In this article, Helen C. Romero describes how the story of the image of the *Santo Niño* in the Philippines serves as the focal point of the story of the Filipino people, namely, their quest for new identities.

Shaji George Kochuthara

Editor-in-Chief

Asian Horizons, Dharmaram Journal of Theology

Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2017

Call for Papers

500 YEARS OF REFORMATION

Ecclesia Semper Reformanda is the classical dictum in theology. But unfortunately, the actual plea for reforms in the Church from the part of the members of the Church was most often in history met with repression and elimination of those people who raised their voice for reform. In 1498 the Dominican Friar Savonarola's plea for a reform in the Church of France ended up in his excommunication and burning at stake. In the German Church the fate of the Augustinian friar Martin Luther (1483–1546) was almost the same; he was excommunicated by the Roman Pontiff owing to his 95 theses against the doctrine of indulgence and the aberrations in the Church of his time. His life was actually saved due to the protection and support he received from the German Princes. Today all the Churches, the Ecumenical Movement and almost the entire world are celebrating the 500th anniversary of Protestant Reformation. Recently Pope Francis joined in such an ecumenical celebration at the Lutheran Cathedral at Lund in Sweden.

Asian Horizons would like to join this celebration by dedicating its June 2017 issue to Reformation. We would like to invite articles on the historical as well as theological aspects of Reformation and related issues.

Suggested Topics (only proposals, not exhaustive): Historical, theological and ecclesial context of Protestant Reformation; Ninety-five Theses of Martin Luther; The Theological Works of Luther; Various Protestant Churches and Reform in the Church [can be on any particular Church]; Ongoing Reformation in India: Church of South India and Church of North India; Ecumenism in Asia [Can be on any particular Asian country]; Future of Ecumenism; The Ecumenical Approach of Pope Francis; Emerging Trends of Reform in the Church; *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*; Common Statement on Justification by Faith between Lutherans and Roman Catholic Church in Germany; Ordained Ministry and Priesthood of all Believers; Papacy in Ecumenical Dialogue; Ministry in Ecumenical Dialogue

As usual, we welcome other articles on any area of theological interest and research.

Please send your articles (4500-5000 words, including the footnotes) at the latest by 10 May 2017. Kindly include the abstract of the article in 150-200 words, 5-7 Keywords and a summary of the CV of the author in 100-150 words.

Other regular items: "New Scholars": Abstract of doctoral theses (recently defended and not yet published); Reports and Statements of important conferences, Book Reviews.

For submitting the articles and for more details: Shaji George Kochuthara (editor-in-chief): kochuthshaji@gmail.com

2017: Vol. 11

March: *Amoris Laetitia*

June: Protestant Reformation after 500 Years

September: New Faces of Religious Fundamentalism and Violence

December: Asian Christologies