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AN UNDERSTANDING OF CONSCIENCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

This article presents the three sources of moral wisdom for a full and mature conscience-based decision. While Scripture and Tradition hold a foundational place in the formation of conscience, experience as a source of moral wisdom is essential and critical, because it provides the human context for decision-making. Experience, however, has long been viewed only from the point of view of individuals, and not from the point of view of community, failing to see that individual experience is shaped by communal experience. If the communal aspect of experience, however, has been viewed at all, it is without any assessment of whether it is through the lens of the victors (dominant culture) or the lens of the victims or vanquished. This article asserts that the experience of the victims or vanquished must be given a preferential perspective in line with what is at the core of the Gospel, and in view of the imperative of our times where love of neighbour demands a praxis of justice beyond a praxis of charity.

Keywords: Conscience, Enrique Dussel, Experience, Justice, Liberation, Poor, Richard M. Gula, Scripture, Solidarity, Timothy E. O'Connell, Tradition

The place of conscience in moral theology has a rich and varied history. We are aware of the foundational place that is given to the

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primacy, dignity, and inviolability of conscience.¹ This article introduces a way of understanding conscience in continuity with tradition, but also proposes a more contemporary anthropology from which to understand conscience and how it functions. It has three sections. The first section presents an understanding of conscience, particularly in the Catholic moral tradition. This section relies heavily on the work of Richard M. Gula and James F. Keenan. The second section introduces the three sources used in shaping our conscience: Scripture, Tradition, and experience. In this section, I focus primarily on the place of experience as a source in forming our conscience. I use in particular the work of liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel to show how his understanding of the human person as radically social/material leads us to rethink the way we view experience. While the treatment of conscience in this article is largely based on what is basic and foundational, what I propose as a new understanding of experience based on Dussel's work offers a new lens to understanding experience as a source of moral wisdom which is critically important in providing a context for both Scripture and Tradition.

1. The Three Dimensions of Conscience

In his treatment of conscience in his book, *Reason Informed by Faith*, Richard Gula, on the basis of Timothy E. O'Connell's work, presents three dimensions of conscience as capacity, process, and finally as judgment.² O'Connell identifies these three dimensions as conscience/1, conscience/2, conscience/3.³ Conscience/1 or conscience as a capacity refers to "a general sense of value, an awareness of personal responsibility, which is utterly characteristic of the human person."⁴ He notes that the very existence of this capacity enables us to engage in a lively disagreement over what is right or wrong when faced with the challenge of moral choice. But far from refuting the meaning of conscience 1, debate and disagreement only affirms the existence of the dimension of Conscience 1. This is because we agree that there is such a thing as right and wrong, and that we are morally bound to do what is right and avoid what is wrong.⁵ Conscience 1, while it is basic, is not sufficient. People are impelled to moral inquiry, which is a function of Conscience/2, at the base of which is

¹Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*, New York: Paulist Press 1989, 130.

²Richard M. Gula, *Moral Discernment*, New York: Paulist Press 1997, 18.

³Timothy E. O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, Minneapolis: The Seabury Press 1976, 89.

⁴O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*.

⁵O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 90.

search for objective moral truth. For this reason, conscience 2 needs to be properly formed.⁶ “It needs to be guided, directed, and illuminated. It needs to be assisted in a multitude of ways.”⁷ It is in the realm of Conscience 2 that the Church as a teacher of moral values plays a foundational role. But conscience 2 is not accountable to the church, but to the truth. And the person in his or her search for the truth, turns to the Church, insofar as the Church helps illumine the truth. The final dimension of conscience is conscience/3 or conscience as judgment. It is essential to note that this judgment is not simply a decision that is of our choosing on a whim but rather a demand placed on our entire being based on the objective moral truth we face in each moral situation we find ourselves, as guided by conscience 2 and grounded in conscience 1. Conscience 3 binds us to the truth as we have come to grasp it or more accurately as it has come to grasp us, in the very concrete demand of our situation.⁸ “If I genuinely *believe* that I should do something, it is not only accurate that I may do it. More than that, I should do it. Indeed, I *must* do it.”⁹ Properly understood a well-formed conscience frees us to do the right thing. This is not a libertine understanding of freedom, that seeks to relativize all moral reality to a matter of personal choice, but rather one that accepts obedience as a foundational element of authentic freedom.¹⁰ It is important here to underscore the fact that these dimensions are not really three separate realities or stages in any developmental sense but rather “the three senses in which we can understand the *one* reality of conscience.”¹¹ These dimensions must always be viewed as inseparable. We spoke of how Conscience/2 or conscience as process is the dimension that allows for formation based on the critical engagement of the ‘sources of moral wisdom.’ It is to these sources which we now will turn.

⁶O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*.

⁷O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 91.

⁸O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 91-92.

⁹O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 92.

¹⁰James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, 3rd ed., New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, 27. “Here we should never forget the language of conscience is the forceful language of being called, of being commanded. As *Gaudium et Spes* states, conscience “holds us in obedience”—it “summons” us. True, conscience is often used with the word *freedom*, but this is not a freedom to do whatever we want. Rather, the call for freedom of conscience is so that we are not constrained from heeding our conscience. For this reason, Christians refer to the “dictates” or the “demands” of conscience: conscience “demands” that we love God, ourselves, and our neighbours. Conscience “dictates” that we pursue justice. In fact, *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us that by conscience we will be judged.”

¹¹Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 131. Italics added.

2. Three Sources of Moral Wisdom

Gula notes of the ways in which Conscience/2 “is formed in community and draws upon many sources of moral wisdom in order to know what it means to be human in a truly moral way.”¹² While there are many ways to identify what constitutes a *source* for ascertaining moral wisdom, I will list the three sources as informed by the Christian faith: Scripture, Tradition, and experience.¹³ I will give a brief explication of each of these sources relative to their function in forming conscience. As aforementioned I will particularly focus on experience and how it is understood from within the liberation tradition.

2.1. Scripture

Keenan speaks of the need to view all Scriptures, and in particular, the Christian Testament, through the lens of what he terms ‘revealed reality.’¹⁴ For Keenan ‘we are invited to look at reality in a new way; through: the mercy of God redeeming the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Then, in light of God’s revelation, we formulate our code of ethics through our reason, experience, and long tradition.’¹⁵ This understanding allows us to move away from a more common approach to Scripture as a book which offers us a ‘revealed morality’¹⁶ in which we “figure out if the text reveals a new code of ethics by which we should live.”¹⁷ This approach which is a more prescriptive than visional treats scripture as a source of laws and rules rather than as a source of moral vision which informs and inspires us. When this prescriptive approach is used for contemporary interpretation, the context in which Scripture was written must be reckoned with, because it was not addressed directly to our time.

This manner of approaching scripture through the lens of ‘revealed reality’ is more illuminative rather than prescriptive. It opens a vision of life that we must take seriously as we seek to respond to the call of authentic discipleship. It is important to emphasize that all consultation with Scripture, even as revealed reality, must be done within the context of a faith community lest we see only from within our limited moral horizon. This is particularly important for the

¹²Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 133.

¹³While there are many other lists that can be drawn these three sources seem to have a certain recognized status.

¹⁴James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom* 2nd ed., New York: Sheed and Ward Book, 2010, 100.

¹⁵Keenan, *Moral Wisdom* 2nd ed., 100.

¹⁶Keenan, *Moral Wisdom* 2nd ed., 99.

¹⁷Keenan, *Moral Wisdom* 2nd ed., 99.

Catholic understanding of Scriptural interpretation in the context of an ongoing relationship between Tradition and Scriptures.¹⁸

2.2. Tradition

There is a multitude of ways to conceptualize the term tradition. In this section I identify how this term is used as a source in moral deliberation in general and in the formation of conscience in particular. The meaning of tradition is often conflated to the official teaching of the magisterium.¹⁹ This limited view of tradition is true not only in the Catholic Church but in other Christian denominations as well. If tradition is understood in this limited sense, the role of the church in the moral life is restricted to the relationship between conscience and the official teachings of the magisterium.²⁰ Tradition should be understood much larger than merely propositional truths to which we must give assent. It must also go beyond the official church teachings on morality. Tradition is what the entire church is all about, its nature, its vision, its history, and its stories. In this light, we might think in terms of replacing the virtue of obedience relative to the church teaching with a much richer and biblical virtue of fidelity. As Christians our fidelity is not to an ethical norm or principle but rather to a person.²¹ We seek to become more fully the Jesus we love and follow. We are called to be faithful to our call of discipleship. As a shaper of moral character, bearer of moral tradition, and as a community of moral deliberation, the church in general, and in its moral teaching in particular, shows us the way to discipleship.²²

The church as a shaper of character opens us to a moral vision that inspires and influences us to become a particular kind of person. The way we image ourselves, and what we do with our lives, how we choose and act, is influenced by our moral vision. The church as bearer of moral tradition helps to 'locate oneself within a history of value and along a continuum of development.'²³ As members of the church, we are formed and nurtured by its core values as passed on through tradition. Aligning with this tradition, we belong to a community, that gives us a sense of identity.²⁴ In being a community of moral deliberation, the church 'contributes to the moral maturity

¹⁸Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 2nd ed., 100.

¹⁹Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 199.

²⁰Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 199-200.

²¹Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html "

²²Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 199.

²³Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 202.

²⁴Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 202.

of its members.²⁵ It opens a space where the faithful can engage in debate and discourse, that helps inform and form their conscience. Allowing debate and discourse does not negate the importance or relevance of official teaching of the institutional church. Rather, it allows the church to enter into dialogue among its members so that their assent or dissent to its teaching is based on a genuine personal appropriation and conviction. This is necessary in a pluralistic and globalized world where other world views seek to claim their minds and hearts.

2.3. Experience

The area of experience is one that is in need of the most revising in terms of its place as a source of moral wisdom. I propose that the three points that need addressing are — the first is how we view who does the experiencing, which is an issue of anthropology; the second is whose experience is given authority, which is an issue of adjudication; and the third is how experience is shaped, which is an issue of solidarity. This section relies heavily on the work and insights of Enrique Dussel, who is a seminal thinker in liberation philosophy and theology.

2.3.1. *From Ego to Ego Sum: A New Anthropology*

In liberation philosophy, Dussel demonstrates how the foundational elements of our understanding of personhood, what is commonly termed the ego, and particularly the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' model of personhood is based on a distorted history that negates previous history. He asserts that previous actions of genocide and colonialism were an *a priori* condition, which were necessary to give Descartes the leisure (and privilege) to think. It is this erasure of history that had led to its profound distortion.

The ontology did not come from nowhere. It arose from a previous experience of domination over other persons, of cultural oppressions over other worlds. Before the *ego cogito* there is an *ego conquiro*; "I conquer" is the practical foundation of "I think." The centre has imposed itself on the periphery for more than five centuries.²⁶

Further along Dussel cites some more particular aspects of this conquest.²⁷ Unfortunately, Dussel's view has not critically shaped the

²⁵Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 206.

²⁶Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1985, 3.

²⁷Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 8. In his *Philosophy of Liberation* Dussel speaks to the various patterns of exploitation that are part of the Wests' colonial past, including

anthropology that governs much of our current understanding of experience. We fail to see the communal history that has entered into our understanding of our individual experience, and more critically, whether this history is viewed from the point of view of the victors (conquest) or the point of view of the vanquished. When we speak of people relying on their experience, we usually speak of their individual and personal experience.²⁸ Even when we speak of communities, we frequently see them in terms of a Hobbesian social contract model.²⁹ This type of vision was transmitted throughout the world by various means including philosophical education by the people in power to those who became leaders in the periphery. These leaders of the periphery were people who were born in countries or in communities that were exploited or oppressed. They later became students within the various centres of education and power. They returned to educate the people in the worldview in which they were indoctrinated.³⁰ This vision that puts emphasis on individual experiences disallows the capacity of people to understand that their individual experiences are mediated through their allegiance and commitment to communities that exist *a priori* their individual experience. This means “I am with” (*Ego Sum*) is prior to “I am” (*Ego*). Being part of a community constitutes a person’s ontology.³¹

A contemporary example of experience as communal is the Black Lives Matter movement. It is difficult for the dominant (read White) community to understand how African-Americans feel the pain of their communities as their pain. Even when members of this dominant community try to sympathize with them, they usually speak only of their individual experience (“I was also harassed by a police officer once”). There seems to be a lack of understanding of the

the destruction of the Aztec and Inca empires, and the African slave trade among many others.

²⁸This is part of the critique made by Pope Francis on the level of ‘hyper individualism’ that he sees as part of the contemporary, industrialized West.

²⁹<http://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>

³⁰Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 12. Dussel speaks of how the various students that came from the periphery (or colonized) communities were ‘brainwashed’ (his term) with the anthropological distortion that included the erasure of the history of colonialism and its subsequent destruction of other alternative anthropologies.

³¹Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 44. “The face of the other, primarily as poor and oppressed, reveals a people before it reveals an individual person... The individualization of this collective personal experience is a European deformation derived from the bourgeois revolution. Each face, inscrutable mystery of decisions not yet made, is the face of a sex, a generation, a social class, a nation, a cultural group, a historical period.”

communal/collective pain experienced by the African-Americans as a community. In using personal experience as a source of moral wisdom, I propose that we view it through a lens which allows us to understand how people embody their individual experiences as part of a larger fabric of communal experience. And in line with Dussel's view, this communal experience must be critically assessed as to whether it is from the view of the victor (conquest) or view of the vanquished.

2.3.2. Authority of Absolute Otherness: Adjudicating Reality

The second point regarding whose experience is given authority shifts the focus from our experience to the experience of the other. This would require that we re-calibrate the authority given to our individual/personal experience. A properly formed conscience must always use insight gleaned from experience, but from the experience of the other.³² By fully grasping the autonomy of the other particularly the fact that they have an existence prior to our contact with them, we dethrone our tendency to fetishize or self-deify our experience. The authority that we give our experience would have to be critiqued from within a much more radical location, that of encounter with the other.³³ The shift of authority of experience from our individual/personal experience to the experience of the other impacts our understanding of Scripture and Tradition as sources of moral wisdom. The subverting of the authority of experience from our individual/personal horizons by the experience of the other would have powerful and far-reaching implications for how we relate to Scripture and Tradition. What would it mean, for instance, to read the journey of the Jewish people finding their promised land, a land which was already populated, from within the horizon of the Tsitsistas (who we call, mistakenly Cheyenne), who had first populated the land? Is there an issue of unjust displacement here? How would we have to rethink the place of 'natural law' within sexual relations (an aspect of our Tradition) if we take into consideration that other cultures (natural, human cultures) view sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular from within their worldview? Does this

³²Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. by Eduardo Mendieta, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003), 143. "The ethics of liberation, in contrast, starts from the affirmation of the real, existing, historical other." He terms this the *analectic element* in liberation philosophy.

³³Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy*, 141. Here he speaks of the distinction between living from within the 'legal framework' of *Egypt*, which presupposes, incorrectly, a just order, to living through a period of 'transition from an old' order to the new order which is *not-yet* in force."

require a rethinking of natural law itself, as we reckon with the plurality and diversity of its understanding in different contexts?

2.3.3. From Practice to Theory and Back Again: The Primacy of Solidarity

One of the ongoing concerns when dealing with experience is the question of how do we make ourselves available to other experiences, particularly those that will properly shape our conscience in ways that we are able to view reality clearly and faithfully. I believe we have to place emphasis on praxis, specifically that which involves working towards the liberation of the oppressed people of the world. This emphasis on praxis through the lens of the poor is at the heart of liberation theology. Liberation theologians have spoken eloquently of how their theology has been shaped by their work with the poor. It is through this work of solidarity that we see the poor as victims. Their condition of poverty is not a product of circumstances of their own making or of some metaphysical reality but rather of structural and systemic forces.³⁴

The focus on praxis does not negate the place of theory. Rather it sharpens the connection between praxis and theory, as praxis can force a theoretical shift. We are aware that as we move into a new historical period, we are encountering new realities that were not part of our previous experience.³⁵ These new realities challenge us to construct new theories that speak to our new awareness.³⁶ What I am suggesting is that our theoretical articulations must be subjected to interrogation which includes the critical question — how does this theory reflect the experiences of the victims of the system (economic, political, cultural, etc.)? This is not to say that this question is the sole criterion against which the validity of theory is assessed, but only that it should not be absent from the consideration, and that it should be

³⁴Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta, Camilo Perez Bustillo, Yolanda Angulo, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013, xxii. "In *Ethics* the Other will not be denominated either metaphorically or economically with the label of the "poor." Now, inspired by Walter Benjamin, I will refer instead to the subject of *Ethics* as a "victim," a concept that is both broader and more exact."

³⁵Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, xv, Preface, Here Dussel speaks eloquently of how the process of globalization has now made us even more aware of the historical (and global) dimensions and implications of the current economic, political, cultural realities. We must view all history now from a true 'world system' lens.

³⁶Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, xviii, This echoes a bit the language of Gutierrez who spoke of liberation theology as an expression of the 'irruption of the poor' onto the world stage.

given preference. Liberation theology writings hold at their core that preferential option for the poor is constitutive of the Gospel. I argue that this should be at the core of all theological ethical theory and praxis. "We must act and do theology while touching the victims."³⁷ This view calls for renewed commitment not only to individual acts of charity but much more to a praxis of justice founded on solidarity with the suffering of individuals and communities.

As we move away from viewing experience as only an individual phenomena to viewing it as an engaged communal praxis, we recalibrate our understanding of what a properly formed conscience is for a person of faith. In our contemporary context, our conscience must be deeply informed and formed by the rise of systems that bears the tragic marks of class inequality, myths of racial superiority (and inferiority), and sinful dismissal of the voices of women and our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. We must subvert built-in blinders of our experience. I propose that we begin by honouring the experiences of those others who have been silenced and abandoned. Engaging with their experiences with empathy and solidarity, we can then revisit the sources of Scripture and Tradition through their lens, they who are dispossessed and marginalized.

3. Concluding Statement

While Scripture and Tradition hold a foundational place in the formation of conscience, experience as a source of moral wisdom is essential and critical, because it provides the human context for decision-making. Experience, however, has long been viewed only from the point of view of individuals, and not from the point of view of community, failing to see that individual experience is shaped by communal experience. If the communal aspect of experience, however, has been viewed at all, it is without any assessment of whether it is through the lens of the victors (dominant culture) or the lens of the victims or vanquished. This article asserts that the experience of the victims or vanquished must be given a preferential perspective in line with what is at the core of the Gospel, and in view of the imperative of our times where love of neighbour demands a praxis of justice beyond a praxis of charity. It also proposes that the moral wisdom of Scripture and tradition be revisited from this preferential perspective, a proposal that will be pursued more fully in another discourse.

³⁷Johann Baptist Metz, *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed., by John K. Downey, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press, 1999, 8.