
Phenomenon of conscience

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Nikola Bižaca, Josip Dukić,
Jadranka Garmaz, *Preface* 5-8

A German theologian D. Mieth rightly argues that gradual defining of the notion of conscience, as an elaboration of appropriate science about conscience, is the result of long and persistent mental efforts of the so called Christian West.¹ And indeed, it was a centuries-long theological and cultural process, as old as Christianity itself, which has its roots in the Old Testament metaphor “*heart*” and “*kidneys*” and in the New Testament “*syneidesis*”. Theological elaboration of the notion of conscience started as early as in the patristic period. St. Augustine’s self-analysis of conscience as the “voice of God” emphasizes the absoluteness of the postulate of conscience, but also its character of a response. Medieval theology speaks about conscience as about an innate human feature. We analyse its functioning and its development too.

In that context the debate between Bernard and Abelard is well known. On Abelard’s side, modern appreciation of subjectivity is in some way anticipated and faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the personal insight is placed in the centre of the concept of sin. Opposition to such an attitude is the insistence on the objectivity of the law as the criterion of correct conscience. Thomas Aquinas considers conscience within the above mentioned tension between the subjectivity of his own insight and the objectivity of the law. According to Aquinas conscience and unconditional validity of its demand are rooted in man’s orientation toward God, but also in his free responsibility, which requires the formation of conscience.²

¹ D. Mieth, *Gewissen*, in: CGG, Bd. 12, Herder, Freiburg im Br., pg. 141.

² J. M. Aubert, *Coscienza e legge*, in: *Iniziazione alla pratica della teologia*, vol. 4, Queriniana, Brescia, 1986., pg. 212-216.

In XIX and XX century, in the field of philosophy, psychology and sociology, the functioning and meaning of the phenomenon of conscience was intended to be interpreted without any relation to God. The answer of neo-scholasticism, which dominated up to II Vatican Council, was inappropriate. Interpreting the classical scholastics in a simplified manner, neo-scholastics emphasizes one-sidedly the objectivity of the truth incorporated into a closed system of chained rules that norm as many predicted situations as possible. Such an approach to conscience is still evident in the preparatory documents of II Vatican Council. In the neo-scholastically intoned draft of the dogmatic constitution on moral order, conscience was reduced to the function of reinterpreting and accepting the moral order presented by series of positive norms and rules.³ The authors of that draft seem to have overlooked all the complexity of the phenomenon of conscience, which was partly perceived even by high scholastics. Here we draw distinction between the “fundamental conscience” as the ability to distinguish between good and bad, and “actual or functional conscience” which actualizes that distinguishing in a concrete situation. Freedom of conscience and especially freedom of worship was, of course, unacceptable for the authors of that text!

II Vatican Council, on the contrary, has put the subjective character of the person in the centre.⁴ Conscience is no longer described as predominantly passive reading of normative rules, but as an engaged receptive-creative event of existential searching, trying to discover how one can, individually choosing in a given situation, realize love for God and the neighbour as the centre of the Gospel, how to imitate Christ, i.e. how to respond to the supreme call to build up the Kingdom.⁵ Conscience, as the last resort of personal moral engagement and searching for the value integrity of any person, whether a Christian or non-

³ K. Golser, *Gewissen und objektive Sittenordnung, Zum Begriff des Gewissens in der neueren katholischen Moraltheologie*, (WBTh 48), Wiener Dom-Verlag 1975, Wien, 1975., pg. 16-36.

⁴ GS 16; DH.

⁵ E. Chiavacci, *Teologia morale*, vol 1, Cittadella, Assisi 1979, pg. 128-129.

Christian, becomes the foundation of religious freedom at the Council, and one of the strongholds of dialogical evaluation and encounter of the Catholic community with religions.

The Council detachment from the one-sidedness of a “perceptivistic” neo-scholastic approach met, and has been still meeting, explicitly or implicitly, with the disapproval of Lefebvre-thinking church circles. On the other hand, the post-Council debate has indicated certain inadequacies of the Council speech about conscience. So, for example, J. Ratzinger very soon pointed out, among other things, the lack of appreciation of philosophy and humanistic-scientific insights.⁶ The post-Council debate, both on the level of theology and on the level of teaching interventions, is now facing two major interpretation challenges of civilization character. The exaggerated trendy individualism starts from the “auto-referential” understanding of conscience, as of “my conscience”. Such understanding is guided by a subjective desire in the function of self-realization and without taking into account the other, especially the transcendent moment. Another great challenge comes from ever growing reductivism of some sciences which reduces the conscience to its conditionality, i.e. to its evolutionary functionality. Conscience is described as a mere epiphenomenological expression of physical factors which form and enable its functioning. Its fundamental meaning is valued exclusively as psychological schematism necessary for a successful evolutionary adaptation to reality.

Theological answers to these fundamental cognitive reductionisms and challenges are multiplying daily. Therefore, the International Theological Symposium, held on 22nd and 23rd of October 2010 at the Theological Faculty in Split, University of Split, tried to give an inevitably fragmentary presentation of some actual approaches and evaluations of the phenomenon of conscience, but also tried to mediate an interdisciplinary insight into the current standard Catholic speech about conscience.

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Kommentar zum Gaudium et Spes*, in: Das Vatikanische Konzil, LThK, Bd. III, Herder, Freiburg, 1968, pg. 328-331

In the introductory presentation A. Vučković (Split) analyzes three philosophical approaches to the phenomenon of conscience (Socrates, M. Heidegger, H. Arrendt). Although the views of Heidegger and Arrendt about the meaning and function of conscience do not postulate an explicit link of conscience and transcendently divine reality, an unambiguous communication of their evaluation of conscience is evident. In his presentation I. Živković (Zagreb) talked about the way in which some of the influential authors and schools of modern and contemporary psychology, such as psychoanalytical, behaviouristic, humanistic and cognitive approach, interpret the genesis, role and functioning of the phenomenon of conscience. The analysis of M. Vidović (Split) offers the Biblical foundation of conscience. Conscience, understood biblically, can be described as a mediating instance thanks to which the objectively-principled God's will is transformed into a subjective rule appropriate to the particular situation of human subject.

The presentation of E. Schockenhoff (Freiburg) is dedicated to a specifically Catholic moral-theological approach to conscience. Along with classical approaches to conscience throughout the history of theology and also some current approaches to conscience, the author focuses on the presentation and evaluation of the "creative nature of conscience". He shows that "creative conscience" is the most appropriate instrument for living the Gospel in the new living conditions.

I. Raguž (Đakovo) covers the issue of conscience in theological-dogmatic terms. Describing the meaning and functioning of conscience from Trinitarian-analogical and historical-salvific point of view, the author sees in the scope of Church a privileged place of not only the primary realization of conscience, but also a place of its "expansion", formation and growth.

In his work A. Bucher (Salzburg) first gives a brief historical review of the theme of conscience in the Catholic religious pedagogy up to the contemporary crisis of conscience. Since the recent Catholic pedagogy is understood interdisciplinary and also adopts the relevant knowledge of social science and

humanities, the author wonders what we know concretely about the development of conscience. In the third part the author offers a few theses for the appropriate formation of conscience the aim of which is the formation of responsible conscience.

Two final contributions deal with the reception of the concept of conscience at the level of two undoubted expressions of contemporary cultural scene. So, L. Baugh (Rome) shows, on the basis of an analysis of some artistic and intellectually engaged films, the creative exuberance in the film approaches to the phenomenon of conscience, but also the recognizability of various philosophical and religious influences that characterize the discourse on ethics and conscience within the respective film narratives. The text of B. Vidović (Split) deals with the logotherapy of V. Frankl under the aspect of studying the role and functioning of conscience within the therapeutic process of identifying and accepting the meaning of life.

All in all, the outcome of the symposium presentations of actual discussions and their range on the theme of conscience leads to the conclusion that the history of thought and perception of conscience is going on in society and the Church and that contemporary scientific insights and new ethical issues require from theology further plunging into the nature, meaning, functioning and methods of forming conscience.

Ante Vučković, *Silent voice of conscience: three philosophical interpretations of conscience.....* 9-41

Original scientific paper

Summary

Conscience is a voice, a silent voice. It is the most unusual of all voices. It can be the most important voice if man attaches that importance to it. And it can be silenced, too, and from a silent voice become a dead voice. Understanding the voice of conscience ranges from God's voice in man to the voice of the ideology the man becomes subjected to. It

is therefore necessary to interpret it. The author has chosen three philosophical interpretations of the voice of conscience: Plato's, Socrates', primarily the one from Socrates' defence, and then Martin Heidegger's and Hannah Arendt's. This approach enables getting closer to the phenomenon of conscience from different aspects. Socrates sees his own uniqueness in that voice that he hears. Whatever he is doing and what he is becomes inseparable from the voice of conscience. For Heidegger the phenomenon of conscience is the voice of *Dasein* which strikes the one beyond hope in his inauthenticity and awakens him to authenticity. Hannah Arendt faces with the phenomenon of the impotence of conscience to resist the cooperation with totalitarianism on the one hand, and with the phenomenon of conscience that works within the ideology on the other hand. This is particularly shown in the example of Eichmann, whose trial she monitored and described in the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This leads her to the search for an efficient power which is able to resist the historical gusts of totalitarianism. She does not recognize that power in conscience, but in thinking. While conscience easily adapts to ideology and goes on living recklessly, active thinking, by which an individual is able to shape his/her life, is able to resist what he/she finds immoral or inhuman, regardless of the beliefs of the majority and views of the ideology. These three interpretations of conscience may help the one who wants to expose to the questions of conscience within the believers relationship with God.

Eberhardt Schockenhoff, *Essence and Function of Conscience from the Standpoint of Catholic Moral Theology* 43-59
Original scientific paper

Summary

Traditionally philosophy and theology dealt with the *judgment* of conscience, but nowadays the term *decision* of conscience is used. That linguistic change indicates the difficulty that calling to one's own conscience is used for exempting oneself from moral commitment, for example in the

case of abortion. If conscience wants to be the last committing judgmental factor, it has to be associated with ethical i.e. moral norms.

St. Augustine understands conscience as the voice of God in man. Encounter between God's call and human response occurs in conscience. St. Thomas Aquinas describes conscience as an innate moral judgmental power. It is *applicatio notitiae ad actum*, i.e. it checks one's own past or future act with regard to habitual moral knowledge.

Contemporary moral theology uses the term *creative conscience*. It applies the universally valid moral norms to concrete situations. Namely, the norm as such performs only an outline function, because it must have a certain degree of abstraction so that it could be applicable to as many cases as possible. The task of conscience is not primarily of dispensative but of creative nature in the sense that, in the frame of moral norms, it evaluates the past activities and reveals the possibilities of future activities.

The Beatitudes and antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) are in fact the binding, orientation standards for a Christian. By means of his/her creative conscience he/she will be discovering how to act according to the Gospel in new living contexts.

Anton Bucher, *Conditioned reflex of fear or human core? Conscience in Catholic pedagogy* 61-74
Conference paper

Summary

Conscience has always been one of the central topics of the Catholic religious pedagogy. In this work the author first presents a brief historical review of the theme of conscience in the Catholic religious pedagogy up to the contemporary crisis of conscience. Since the recent Catholic religious pedagogy is considered as interdisciplinary and also adopts the relevant cognitions of social and human sciences, the author wonders what we specifically know about the development of conscience.

In the third step he offers several theses for a suitable formation of conscience in order to raise a responsible conscience.

Ivica Raguž, *Church as a place of “extended conscience”.
Dogmatic-theological reflection on the relationship between
Church and conscience* 75-89
Review

Summary

In the first part the article considers conscience in the context of totalitarian and democratic societies. It turns out that conscience is endangered as much in the former system as in the latter. Namely, conscience is always conditioned by a particular social frame, which may affect it in a positive or negative way. The second part deals with the role of Church in relation to conscience. The author is trying to view this role from the Trinitarian-theological and historical-redemptive aspect. Since all divine persons are one consciousness, and yet one divine consciousness is three-personal, it is realized through the relationship, through dialogue; so that, analogically viewed, we can say that conscience is a place of a personal touch with the truth, but again through the relationship with others, with the Church. Historical-salvific interpretation of conscience counts on the fact that every single person can reach the truth in his/her conscience, but also that, in the history of salvation, God has offered to man a special path to the truth, and that is Jesus Christ, i.e. the Church. The third part considers the relationship between the Church and conscience in the light of its three activities (martyria, liturgy, diakonia). At the time of a great danger from closing and narrowing of conscience, Church is and should be a place of “extended conscience”, a place of true shaping, cherishing and growing of conscience, a place where the horizons of conscience will be permanently expanding, toward God and the neighbour.

Marinko Vidović, *Biblical Conception of Conscience*
(*Standardized Judge of Human Behaviour*) 91-134
Original scientific paper

Summary

Starting from the origin of the term conscience, from its etymological meaning of the correlated and dynamic dimension, the author first establishes the specificity of biblical conception, according to which conscience is a complete person under the aspect of his/her responsibility to the ultimate reality – to God, and in the light of that ultimate reality.

In the following part the author first investigates the Old Testament and then the New Testament conception of conscience. As a synonym to the biblical term “heart”, in the Old Testament, conscience is the person’s ability to judge and evaluate himself/herself in the light of God’s revelation and alliance. It expresses the person’s responsibility to God, to whom he/she willingly recognizes to belong.

The term conscience is more frequent in the New Testament than in the Old, which is the result of a greater reliance on the Greek-Hellenistic thought. Thanks to Paul’s writings, which the author investigates, the conception of conscience in the New Testament becomes clearer. First, one can see that Paul takes the term from general circulation and that he uses it depending on the addressees he is writing to, but at the same time enriches it with the Old Testament understanding and his own maturing in understanding God’s saving work in Christ. To Paul, conscience is his inner inexorable judgment based on the harmony of different criteria, not only on cognition, but even more on the adoption of the proclamation of the Gospel. It is immersed into the dynamism of Chrstic love, and itself is subject to the Judgment of God. The judgment of conscience is final, theological, i.e., in the light of the purpose, and also of the truth as a basic belief about reality, it can be denoted as (in)correct. As such, the judgment of conscience is always a plural reality. To Paul, conscience is primarily a God-related dimension, but evangelically and christologically informed. Specifically Christian conscience is a reflection of Christian

insight into the situation in the world. It is a reflection of Christian knowledge about God and his requirements. Paul does not deny the conscience as a general human reality, but he always sees it in the relation to the external norm, from the public opinion to the proclamation of the Gospel as a God's saving offer in Christ.

In the post-Paul's writings we can see that conscience has become a symbol for an (in)correct Christian life, for an (in)consistent Christian existence. In Johannine writings, its judgment is explicitly and clearly subject to God's Judgment, which even goes beyond the person's reproaches of conscience. Thus, salvation does not depend only on the judgment of conscience.

In conclusion, the author summarizes the results of the investigations and emphasizes that it is correct to understand the conscience as a subjective norm of morality, but in the sense that it transforms the objective God's will into the person's subjective rule of behaviour.

Ilija Živković, *Conscience as a component of a psychological approach to moral development*.....135-171

Review

Summary

Contemporary psychology is primarily interested in how a human being forms his/her conscience, and most of all how he/she comes to moral cognition and what the precondition for conscientious and moral behaviour is. Thus, when dealing with man in general and his way of thinking and taking up an attitude towards things and life, psychologists will first of all take into account the genetic inheritance, which greatly determines the characterological and psychological traits, emotions, intelligence and, of course, the affectivity of the relationship with parents, as well as the culture in which the man is born. On the other hand, they will emphasize the social conditioning of the person's development, which is able to change the genetically inherited *personality codes*.

In psychology, conscience is primarily treated as a concept of a broad spectrum of moral development. In most modern psychological researches the idea of conscience is found almost only in passing, as one of the dimensions of moral development. This work gives a review of psychological understanding of conscience in different psychological directions, with a special reference to psychoanalytical, behaviouristic, humanistic and cognitive approach. The work also includes contemporary researches focused on the foundations of creating a system of internalized moral principles with children.

Lloyd Baugh, *Ethics, Morality, Conscience and Cinema: A Fruitful Encounter* 173-188
Review

Summary

So, L. Baugh (Rome) shows,

On the basis of an analysis of some artistic and intellectually engaged films shown , the creative exuberance in the film approaches to the phenomenon of conscience, but also the recognizability of various philosophical and religious influences that characterize the discourse on ethics and conscience within the respective film narratives.

Boris Vidović, *Logotherapy and conscience. The role of conscience in man's search for meaning* 189-211
Review

Summary

This article is trying to explain the role of conscience in logotherapy, a psychotherapeutic method of treatment developed by the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Emanuel Frankl. On the basis of existential analysis, aimed at the anthropological studying of man by phenomenological-existential method, Frankl comes to the conclusion that spiritual dimension is the fundamental dimension of human existence, the one that

makes him a man. Just because of that spiritual dimension, the question about the meaning of his own existence imposes to him.

In order to answer the question and to fulfil the meaning of his life, man is directed at the realization of values, which have the character of universal significance that man has to face. Frankl differentiates three categories of values: creative, experiential and the values of attitude. Realizing them in concrete life situations, man fulfils the meaning and realizes his existence. The lack of the fulfilment of meaning causes predispositions for various psychological disturbances.

What helps a man to recognize the meaning is the conscience, which Frankl defines as an organ of meaning. It is a pre-phenomenon which springs from the spiritual dimension and which cannot be analyzed further. Thus, conscience and meaning are inextricably linked and depend on each other. Its characteristics are intuitiveness and creativity, which allows one to guess and recognize a unique meaning that is hidden in a particular situation. That is why the issue of conscience is unavoidable in thoughts about one's mental health and possibilities of treatment.