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On Conscience.

From an article entitled "Psychology according to the Bible,"
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Conscience (*συνείδησις*) is derived from the Latin *conscientia* (*con*, together, and *scio*, to know). As the etymology indicates, it signifies "joint knowledge" with either a thing or a person. Conscience is attributed to the human soul in the New Testament 31 times: Rom. 2, 15; John 8, 9; Rom. 9, 1; 13, 5; 1 Cor. 8, 7; 10, 25. 27. 28. 29 (twice); 2 Cor. 1, 12; 4, 3; 5, 11; 1 Pet. 2, 19; Heb. 9, 9. 14; 1 Tim. 1, 5 (good). 19 (good); 1 Tim. 3, 9 (pure); Acts 24, 16 (void of offense); 2 Tim. 1, 3 (pure); 1 Pet. 3, 16 (good). 3, 21 (good); Heb. 13, 18 (good); 1 Cor. 8, 10. 12 (wounded, weak); 1 Tim. 4, 2 (seared); Titus 1, 15 (defiled); Heb. 10, 22 (evil); 10, 2; Acts 23, 1 (good).

Modern psychologies largely neglect and ignore the doctrine of conscience; even Christian psychology often pays little attention to it. But from the Bible, especially the New Testament, we learn that conscience is an innate aptitude of every human soul. According to Rom. 2, 15 it is a witness found in every man. St. Paul here says of the Gentiles that their conscience "bears witness." This is an important passage for us when we seek to establish what the Bible designates as conscience. We see here that the testimony of man's conscience must be distinguished from the "work of the Law written in his heart" or soul. Conscience, therefore, is not identical with the moral norm, the divine Law, or any other law. It bears witness to the divine Law and its demands, its authoritativeness and sternness. Conscience in man, then, must be defined as the natural aptitude and faculty of the human soul whereby the ethical relation between his disposition or conduct and an acknowledged moral norm is spontaneously suggested to man's consciousness. The primary function of the conscience is this, that it applies the Law in its statements concerning the moral quality of an act contemplated or committed. It places every act in its ethical category, according to the divine Law "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt

not," so that man not only can know a certain act to be right or wrong, having in himself the norm whereby he may determine the ethical nature of his deeds, but actually does know this act to be either in conformity or at variance with that norm. This is the primary function of conscience, upon which all its other functions are based. When a man is about to do, or has done, that which is according to the Law, his conscience will raise its approving voice and say, This is good and right. And when he has done, or is about to do, what is contrary to the Law, his conscience will raise its voice of disapproval and say, This is evil, this is sin.

That conscience, in its primary function, is not the voice of God, but the voice of the human soul, is obvious because conscience often approves what is sinful or disapproves what is good. St. Paul declares that he had served God from his forefathers with pure conscience, and yet, with approving conscience, he did many things that were wrong, thinking that he did God service, 2 Tim. 1, 3; Acts 26, 9. 10. Many honest men, temperance fanatics, for instance, brand as sinful what is not forbidden by God. Since conscience often errs, it cannot be the voice of God or of His Law, for He cannot err or lie. It will be observed that the erring conscience performs its functions according to a false norm, false moral standards, false doctrines, false traditions, prejudices, or man-made laws, which are contrary to the will of God, but arrogate to themselves superior and often divine authority. It follows that the only cure for an erring conscience consists in displacing the wrong standards by such as are right. Until such cure has been wrought, the voice of conscience, though erring, must be respected. The cause of the erring conscience is simply the lack of proper knowledge. The Bible in such a case describes conscience as "weak." St. Paul writes: "There is not in every man that knowledge; for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled." 1 Cor. 8, 7. Thus also the apostle distinguishes between him who has the knowledge and him whose conscience is weak. 1 Cor. 8, 10. 12. Cf. also 1 Cor. 10, 29: "Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other; for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?" 1 Cor. 10, 29; Rom. 13, 1—6. 20—23. This weakness is a consequence of sin, a deterioration of the human mind by the evil power which has darkened the understanding and puts the will under constraint where it should be free, or emancipates it where it should be ruled by the Law of God, and by this norm only. But the reader will have noticed that St. Paul consistently urges

Christians to treat the "weak" consciences of their brethren with loving consideration.

In distinction from the function of conscience as a witness we may ascribe to it several other functions, which are of a secondary nature. The first one of these is the obligatory function of conscience, according to which it insists that the Moral Law is binding for man. Here, too, conscience operates spontaneously and persistently, never leaving it an open question whether an act which it has put down as sinful should, or should not, be performed. This secondary function is also exercised by the erring conscience. The false norm having once established itself in the place of the true one, conscience will not only determine the ethical character of an act according to this norm, but will also assert the authoritativeness of the false norm, making its dictates binding upon the soul, imposing upon the subject the duty of doing that which is wrong and of abstaining from that which is right. And this is the fearful predicament of a man with an erring conscience, that under its influence he will sin, whatever he may do or forbear, according to the false statements of his erring conscience or in spite of them. For by obeying his conscience when it makes sin a duty, he certainly sins; and again, if he refuses to follow his conscience, he also sins, inasmuch as to act against the voice of conscience is reprehensible.

Another secondary function of conscience consists in the imputation of the guilt of one's transgressions. Of course, this phase of the activity of conscience is also based upon the exercise of its primary function. Conscience will not impute guilt where it knows of no sin committed. But having once stamped an act as sinful, it will proceed to assess the guilt of such sinful act upon the sinner in due consideration of his responsibility. And as there are degrees of responsibility and, correspondingly, degrees of guilt, the assessment of conscience, its rating of the sinner's guilt, may be higher or lower, according to the degree of his responsibility. For these reasons the pangs of conscience will be more severe when a deed has been committed with the full knowledge of its sinfulness or after unheeded warnings and in absence of extenuating circumstances. And here, again, it must be remarked that this function of conscience is performed whether conscience is erring or not. It is but natural that man, when thus accused by his conscience, will endeavor to exonerate himself, at least in a measure, by various pleas in extenuation of his guilt, such as ignorance and evil influences from without. His own better judgment, however, will

frequently declare such excuses invalid, and thus it is that, as St. Paul says, man's thoughts will accuse or excuse one another when his conscience has borne, or still is bearing, witness in his heart. Rom. 2, 15.

That the Law must be enforced, and that punishment must follow the transgression of the Law, is also recognized by man's conscience, and this leads to still another secondary function of conscience. The Law demands that the transgressor be punished, a demand which is also sustained by conscience, wherever in the exercise of its primary function it has placed its ethical estimate upon an act performed or about to be performed. This is, on the one hand, the warning or menacing voice of conscience, which threatens the sinner with the penalty consequent upon the commission of a sin. Hence it is that "the wicked flee when no man pursueth." Prov. 28, 1. Moses describes the troubled conscience in Deut. 28, 66. 67. This is owing to the nature of the Law, which asserts itself as the will of an omniscient and almighty God, and to the nature of conscience, which bears witness to the full extent of the Law. And inasmuch as the Law is a norm permanently inscribed in man's soul, it is applied by the human conscience also in imaginary cases or under the mere contemplation of a sinful act, and thus the menacing conscience is a warner, crying with upraised finger, "Beware, beware! The eye of the Lawgiver is upon thee! Woe to the transgressor!" Hence the sigh of relief when the warning has been heeded and the shudder at the thought of past peril averted by the fearful warner's timely call.

On the other hand, God has also promised grace and every blessing to all that keep His commandments, and to these promises, too, conscience bears witness. Ex. 20, 6; Deut. 5, 10; Luke 10, 28; 1 Tim. 4, 8. This spontaneous testimony is again the voice of conscience sustaining and applying the Law in its whole compass. Hence the feeling of gratification connected with the performance of every good deed, even in the absence of human witnesses or of rewards. It is under the approval of conscience that virtue is its own reward. But the deteriorating influence of sin upon the human conscience is here also apparent. For even in the exercise of its most impressive and majestic secondary functions, conscience is liable to err, and, as an erring conscience, to menace and to promise without justification.

Another lamentable result of sin must be mentioned, namely, that at times conscience is silent when it should speak. Conscience, under influence of sin, becomes callous or hardened. Its functions,

as we have seen, are performed spontaneously, without, and even in spite of, the promptings of the will. It is true that conscience urges its testimony even upon the unwilling mind and persists in its judgment even when it is being, or has been, overruled by the will. Yet it is equally true that under the influence of sin the spontaneous action of conscience is variously restricted and reduced. St. Paul speaks of the heathen of his time as "having the understanding darkened . . . through ignorance, . . . because of the blindness of their heart, . . . being past feeling." Eph. 4, 18. 19. This blindness of heart is also, and largely, blindness of conscience, a diseased, deteriorated state, or condition, of the sense of moral vision, whereby conscience often fails to perceive what it should. What in the English Bible is rendered "being past feeling" is in the original text *ἀπηληγηκότες*, a "most significant word," made up of a form of *ἀλγέω*, to feel pain, and *ἀπό*. By persistent contact with particular sins, conscience, in a measure, becomes insensible to pain, that is, callous. The continual intercourse with the dregs of society or with degenerate people, such as is incidental to the calling of police officers and missionaries, is apt to blunt the moral sense. As in an individual, so also in an entire community or nation, the callousness of conscience with regard to certain prevalent sins may become characteristic. There is smuggling and bootlegging; and such illicit trade is often carried on without fear of a higher power than that of the officers. Throughout the Roman world certain vices were not only prevalent, but looked upon as genteel and perfectly proper in polite society, and the most repulsive lewdness was, in the name of religion, shamelessly practised in the very sanctuaries of the gods. In our day certain abominations of the theatrical stage, usurious and aleatory transactions in business, crookedness in politics, and other sinful ways of modern life are so commonly witnessed that they are very generally, even by members of the churches, looked upon as ethically indifferent or even proper and conducive to the well-being of society and its members. Conscience has widely ceased to react against these violations of the Moral Law, and those who raise their voice against them are stared at in wonderment or rebuked as endeavoring to lay an arbitrary yoke upon the people's necks. Thus a deeply deplorable state of things has come to exist, which brings upon churches and nations a multitude of sins and their fearful consequences.

Akin to the callous conscience is the torpid, or sleeping, conscience of those who, under the influence of sin, have accustomed themselves to disregard the voice of conscience, not only concerning

certain prevalent or habitual sins, but in general, and in whom, as a consequence, conscience has, in a measure, retired from active service. When a man has adopted materialism as his religion and the maxim, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," 1 Cor. 15, 32, as his creed, his conscience, under the influence of materialism, becomes loath to perform functions which, when viewed in the light of this philosophy, are void of sense and consequence. If any man had ever become a thorough and fully consistent materialist, conscience in that man would have become totally dormant. But this is impossible in a rational being, and hence even the most torpid conscience is apt to be roused into very energetic activity, as in days of adversity or in the throes of death. In many cases, however, the torpor of conscience continues to the end, and this accounts for the seemingly serene and peaceful death of men and women who have lived for this world only and die without hope of a life beyond. Such worldlings have, in this respect, degenerated far lower in the moral scale than the uncivilized heathen who dies with all the anguish of soul that a troubled conscience can engender. But since the worldling as such is unwilling to be disturbed in his carnal repose, he hails with a warm welcome the works of materialist literature which may afford a Law and a Gospel and a Psalter for the religion of the flesh and render his sin-ridden conscience unwilling to perform its duty. On the other hand, such men are careful to avoid every opportunity of being enlightened by the power of truth, since that might disturb the slumbers of their conscience. Thus when Paul "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come," Felix trembled and answered: "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." Acts 24, 25. This form of deteriorated conscience is evidently a grievous thing, which has led multitudes to eternal perdition.

With this state of conscience must not be confounded another condition under which, though the conscience is wide awake, the voice of the witness is unheard because other voices and noises subdue the voice of the witness in man's heart. The din and turmoil of dissipation, the mad clamor of passion, the loud clatter of ambitious or avaricious pursuits, may, while they last, drown the testimony of conscience. When the competing and, for a time, prevailing voices have subsided; when the storm of passion is over; when fair or foul means have failed or have succeeded in the acquisition of honor or wealth; when the carousals have ended and music and laughter have died away, — then the voice in man's

bosom will testify, and the sinner will hear it as Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day. Gen. 3, 8. And the sinner fears this voice. Hence those who contemplate atrocious crimes often inflame their passions by resorting to intoxicating drink and by other means; they will seek round after round of pleasure or the excitement of wild speculation; hence also the frequency of suicides, either subsequent to the commission of crimes or after days and nights of profligacy and protracted dissipation. Thus Judas, in spite of his Master's warnings, failed to hear the voice of his conscience while his soul was filled with greed and the wild excitement of what he probably considered an adventure. But when the foul deed had been accomplished and he saw what it signified, and when he had in vain endeavored to rid himself of "the price of blood" in a way that he hoped would ease or silence his clamoring conscience, he went and hanged himself. Matt. 27, 3—5.

All these deteriorations of conscience, though in various ways, result in its failure to achieve its proper purposes and are not only due to sin, but also lead to sin, either *in defectu* or *in excessu*. Yet conscience, even in its deteriorated state, is essentially conscience and must be so respected. There is, however, a difference between the consideration every man owes to his own conscience and that which one man owes to the conscience of another. The dictates of conscience, being ethical in their nature, promptings to do right in a particular instance, must in each instance be obeyed by him whose conscience so dictates. Again, every man is bound to respect every other man's conscience, but only as far as his own conscience will permit, and no man is bound or free to violate his own conscience in order to satisfy that of another. Paul was ready and willing to yield his liberty, but not his conscience, to a weak brother whose conscience, though without sufficient cause, objected to certain articles of food. Rom. 14, 15. 20—23; 1 Cor. 8, 7. 8. 12. 13. "Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other; for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?" 1 Cor. 10, 29. For the right of being, under the blessing of God, what God made us also includes the right of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. God made man a religious being, endowed with a knowledge of right and wrong and conscious of his responsibility to God and of his duty to love and fear God and to trust in Him and worship Him. Religion is a relation between God and man. Hence in matters of religion and conscience no man is free to dictate to his fellow-man. Viewed in this light, religious oppression

and persecution and constraint in matters of conscience are infringements of the personal right vouchsafed to every man by his Maker. Even the exercise of a false religion and the vagaries of a misguided conscience are not subject to correction by human authority, and no man is morally free to force his own religious convictions or moral norms on any other man. Interference on the part of the state in matters of religion against the will of the subject is tyranny, an infringement of moral rights, which, though it may be suffered to a certain extent, can never be morally justified. The decree of Darius under which Daniel was prohibited from praying to his God was tyrannical, not only in its execution, but in principle. Again, religious liberty and freedom of conscience cannot be claimed at the hand of, or granted by, the state absolutely and without any restriction. The rights of one citizen must cease where those of another begin. *Sic utere tuo, ut non laedas alienum*, is a fundamental principle of civil jusice. And when the lawful interests of the few collide with the lawful interests of the many, the former must yield, and the latter must prevail. According to these principles, questions of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, like all other civil rights, must be equitably adjusted.
