Religious Education and the Development of Conscience

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WHAT DOES religious education have to say about the role of "Conscience" in child development? Actually in liberal religious education today one hears very little about the subject of conscience. The word is such a sleezy one that it is impossible to define it to the satisfaction of all. Is it something God-given, innate, universal, uniform, infallible?

Conscience is the name given to inner feelings or the sense of right and wrong as these relate to the moral, esthetic and ethical attitudes of the individual. The English derivative comes from the present participle of **consciens,** the Latin verb **con-scire,** to know, or to be conscious of; which in turn is the compound of **con** (with) plus **scire** (to know). Thus, literally, it means a "knowing with," or "knowing within one's own mind." It has come to mean the impulse to do the right, or the unpleasant feeling which comes from doing what one knows to be wrong. Closely allied to conscience is moral judgment or the ability to tell right from wrong. Conscience, however, must be distinguished from the latter which lies in the sphere of the intellect, while conscience is more a function of the will or the motive-power behind human thought and behavior.

There is nothing mystical or mysterious about conscience. The ancients believed that man possessed an "inner spirit" of other worldly origin which spoke to him as a guide to his actions. The "inner light" or the "still small voice" was supposed to be there to help him in decisions of right and wrong. Conscience has so often been confused with "moral consciousness," the latter being the bare possibility of distinguishing between right and wrong. Conscience as a unique determinant of what is right or wrong has been discounted by both liberal church thinkers and by contemporary psychologists. It is only too evident that what is a matter of "conscience" to one person is not the same to another, or even always the same thing to the same person under different circumstances of age, experience, and social mores. Certainly, conscience cannot be instinctive because there is almost no kind of behavior which is judged wrong by one group of people that is not considered right by some other. As the following shows, every one of these items has been roundly condemned by some people, but approved or at least condoned by other people: eating human flesh, putting newborn infants out in a field to die, letting old people starve, whipping children, marrying brother to sister, charging interest for money loaned, drinking tea and coffee, saluting the nation's flag.

It is clear that there is no instinctive scale of moral judgment. Nor is there any intuitive sense of conscience. This view is confirmed by the great variation in strength and the severity of conscience among human beings. Certain people appear to be completely without a conscience. Unless they are watched by a policeman, they obey every impulse toward theft, cruelty, and deceit. Yet they know these things are judged to be wrong by society, and that they will be punished if they are caught. Other people are conscience-ridden. If they make some minor mistake, such as being rude to a friend or forgetting to return a book they have borrowed, they suffer the torments of the damned. Unless we are prepared to make the highly

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improbable assumption that we inherit differences in conscience, much as we inherit eye color, we must face up to the fact that conscience depends upon the experience of a person.

How is a growing child to regulate his life? By what standards shall he govern himself if he is born amoral? We can get a clearer picture of the concept of conscience if we look at the process of human growth. Religion and conscience develop in the child, as all else develops, through the processes of growth, and growth comes through interaction with our environment, including parents, siblings, play groups, neighbors, and other associates. The primary group is, of course, the principle source of conscience formation.

If a child is to develop an effective conscience, we know that two conditions should be met. First, the child should receive intelligent love from his parents or parent-substitutes. Second, he should receive socially appropriate training, or discipline, or prohibitions, or examples from them. The love-relationship seems to be necessary as a basis for the best type of identification and security. Some training even some thwarting and frustration will be necessary before the small child learns to fit into the community. But training, if it proceeds slowly, patiently, and encouragingly, will be helpful rather than otherwise; it will make the world less bewildering and uncertain. The prohibitions are necessary in order that the child may take into himself a warning and censoring voice. As for discipline, it must be consistent. The young child has no way of knowing what is right and what is wrong except through the rewards and punishment meted out by others as he gets involved in a great many experiences. Thus, as the child is able to identify with his parents, he takes both their warning-and-punishing-voice, as well as their approving-and-rewarding voice into himself and so he carries around in his own person the morality of his parents. This moral voice of the parents, which the child takes into himself becomes the basis of his conscience. This is what first steers him on the straight and narrow path of good behavior, even when there is no one around to see him if he wants to misbehave.

Conscience seems hardly to be present in the two or three-year-old child. At this age, the child is controlled largely by the watchful presence of people around him. When he thinks people are not watching him he may try to do things he knows are wrong, without any appearance of feeling guilty about them.

Somewhere during early childhood, the child makes a firm identification with his parents, and after this time, he shows increasing abilty to follow moral principles in the face of temptation and to inhibit impulses toward anti-social behavior even though no one is around to observe him. Still, the process of conscience-formation is by no means completed, say at the age of six. The conscience continues to grow and to become more adult in its content.

Certainly, a child's conscience is not of much use to an adult. If, as an adult, he fears the same punishments which he feared in childhood, and if he fears them in the same degree, he is probably neurotic. As an adult, he cannot live by the admonitions which his father or mother made to him as a child. He has to learn that he is no longer a child, that now moral values are neither so simple nor so explicit as those his parents taught him and that he must act with an adult conscience. Certainly, his early training in his family will serve as a guide to his later learning, but the content and context of his adult learning will be quite different. "When I was a child," said the Apostle Paul, "I spoke as a child, I thought as a child; but now that I am a man, I have put away childish things." We do not believe, in short, that personality is irrevocable; the adult can outgrow his childish fears of his parents, or of God, even his fear that death is a punishment. Man, both as a

helper in society and as an individual, survives and grows by learning new adaptations and meanings.

Conscience should be distinguished from what Freud called the "super-ego." Conscience is that part of the super-ego and its standards with which we are consciously asquainted—the promptings which we are prepared to acknowledge. The difference lies in the fact that the power and what one might call the "extent" of the super-ego is much greater and wider than what we associate with conscience. And many of the judgments of the super-ego are so deeply unconscious that we know them, not as conscience at all, but only as an unaccountable but very disturbing sense of guilt. Freud's word "super-ego" never referred to reasonable, objective ego judgments but covered all the unconsciously working, repressing forces of the mind.

What are the values of conscience? Conscience is that part of us which makes us human or different from the other animals. The processes of life, until man came and put upon them the stamp of his own value, were and are non-personal and amoral, with the tiger as innocent as the lamb. Much of what we call conscience is just a practical way of living, such as proper toilet training and sex education. Much of it adds beauty and dignity to life.

Man, for his survival, no longer seems to have to worry so far as food and shelter are concerned. We can produce more than enough, so that he could devote himself to more than animal behavior. He could bring into play increased aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual experience and satisfactions which, again, are more the concerns of conscience and consciousness, as Julian Huxley states. Man's capacity for compassionate behavior is hardly part of his animal nature. The waste of nature does not matter to the natural processes, such as the million of eggs that never hatched into cod-fish; millions of acorns that never grew into oaks. However, it does matter when the waste is unnecessary human infant mortality, unnecessary under-nourishment of children; unnecessary unfulfillment of thousands of talents and graces; unnecessary slaughter of youths in war—it matters because we human beings have a conscience.

One cannot imagine in the dog, as one knows in man, the sense of being a complete self, the knowedlge of good and evil, the dream of canine brotherhood, the proud assumption of eternal life. Conscience became man's blessing.

When two bears fight for the same female and one male is killed, there are no morals involved—it is just a natural situation. The female accepts the victor, she may even prefer him, but with human beings the situation is different; there is a question of good or evil. Why? Because in human beings there is a need to be liked as well as to like. Men want their actions to be acceptable because they want to be liked. This means that conscience is coming into play. What may be neutral in the animal world can be unacceptable in the human world—both to the individual involved and to others. The end of human life is relatedness, interrelatedness, or love.

Man has to deal more consciously and skillfully with the external world than animals have to do. Because of dealing with others he must develop some sense of right and wrong. It is out of this need for relatedness, for love, that morality, that is, the capacity to assess conduct as good or evil, that the desire to be good, is born. Love is primary, morality secondary. Freud takes this up in **Civilization, War and Death.** Good is what is approved and accepted in any family or group; "bad" is what is disapproved in the family and the group. J. H. Breasted of Chicago University in his **Dawn of Conscience** equates "conscience" with the dawn of "humanity." Excellent conduct was at first that which won the love of the family group.

Some psychiatrists have been said to look upon only the negative aspects

of conscience, namely, the intense guilt feelings accompanying the workings of conscience, whereas religious educators also see many values in the euphoric feelings that one can derive when the person is doing what is right, or the time saved, or the enhancement to personality when one is doing what is good. The religious educator sees the utter practicality to society and to the individual when this conscience is operating properly. Religious education believes that the area of conscience helps to make each person a distinct individual. Also, religion speaks of forgiveness and renewal when one feels a sense of guilt.

Now there are certain problems connected with conscience. Conscience can become pathological (a) when it functions too rigidly or too automatically so that the person cannot make rational judgments, or (b) when the breakdown toward constant "panic" occurs and to a great degree a complete sense of annihilation is experienced instead of a warning signal, so that the person is totally disabilitated or, at least, cannot function in a productive fashion either for himself or for society.

Another problem connected with overstressing a bad conscience is that it is apt not to tell what is good about life and human behavior, thus resulting in undue self-condemnation, self-punishment, and undue repression. As a corrective, we need to stress our human capacity for good and to tell people what can be done.

A further problem grows out of the last one, namely, the voice of conscience is apt to aim only at expedient conduct. Its job is to make us good enough to be acceptable to our self and to our own group, but it cannot make us good in any final sense. Conscience does not aim at any absolute morality but only as a means to such modes of conduct as shall win the support, liking, and approval necessary to human existence.

As to the tests for conscience, one can trust his conscience as a guide only when it is tested by valid norms derived from the past experience of the human race and present social, religious experiences, and not the isolated norms of an inner and intuitive self. Where there is little or no drive to the good, little or no intelligence, little or no feeling or relatedness to others, there can be little or no conscience. When conscience seems to dictate that we do something we might try to examine it without fear or favor in this fashion: "My conscience tells me to do this." Yes, but do I really think it is a good thing to do? Or, "I should like to do that, but I feel guilty when I think of doing it." Yes, but why do I feel guilty? Is it destructive of anyone else's freedom, happiness, or personality? If not, then why not do it? Does the guilt mean that your parents would not have liked it? Your parents were good people but were they **right** about this? Were they happy, well-adjusted people? Are you sure their standards are good ones for you? You feel guilty if you are not busy all the time. Who said you were to be busy? Who said that busyness was good? What particular good will this particular busyness achieve? The conscience of the group might well be examined, too. "They say." Who exactly are "they?" And where did they get their standards? Do such standards make for growth, justice, and happiness?

In some such way one can check his own conscience and, thus, become more human, more dignified, more productive, more loving and lovable, more wholesome and healthy.