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Newman, Conscience and Authority

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Abstract

This paper addresses Newman's understanding of conscience and authority, with the main emphasis on conscience. It asks how central a place conscience holds in his theological understanding? Is the general high esteem in which Newman's perception of conscience is held – and by some even regarded as one of the integral elements of his thinking, providing it with an inner consistency – justified? Finally the relationship between conscience and authority is explored. John Henry Newman's teaching on conscience and authority is a complex but highly pertinent question which continues to enthral many, not least Pope Benedict XVI who has hailed Newman's understanding of conscience as 'an important foundation for theological personalism'. Newman denounced the modern secularized and purely subjective understanding of conscience as he perceived it to be 'the voice of God'. He focused his writings on conscience within the contexts of morality and theology and considered the role that conscience may play in moral decision-making and in establishing a person's belief in God. In Newman's legendary dispute with W. E. Gladstone in the 1870s the Cardinal maintained that there is no contradiction between the conscience of the individual and the authority of the Pope or of the church, as they occupy two different spheres.

Keywords

Newman; conscience; authority; Gladstone

In April 1990 when addressing a symposium in Rome commemorating the first centenary of John Henry Newman's death, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger acknowledged his debt as a theologian to the English convert. Ratzinger was first introduced to the writings of Newman when he was a young seminarian in Bavaria in the 1940s. At the centenary symposium Ratzinger recalled how 'Newman's teaching on conscience became an important foundation for theological personalism, which was drawing us all in its

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sway.'[1] And on the same occasion he proclaimed that 'conscience in its true sense is the bedrock of papal authority.'[2] I shall return to this later.

It is outside the scope of this paper to give a thorough account of the philosophical and theological development of conscience itself, however fascinating, but let me say this much: within a classical understanding of conscience the individual is able to chose and reflect upon past and present choices and, in doing so, rational judgement, responsibility, accountability and self-possession are all part of the decision-making process. The human capacity to know and choose the 'good' or the 'right' may be referred to as conscience.[3] To Augustine any tension between the individual's conscience and the Church was evidence of our fallen nature. Aquinas, although the concept of conscience played but a minor part in his moral theory (and it was only in the early modern period that it began to receive greater attention), regarded *conscientia* as the immediate or proximate norm of morality. This is the last judgement by which a person of right reason seeks to apply an objective moral truth to his own choices.[4] Aquinas was of course influenced by Aristotle.[5]

One of the challenges that presents itself today when speaking of Newman's understanding of conscience is that the perception of what conscience is and what it 'achieves', has been subject to changes. How then is conscience perceived and used today? Generally the right to act in accordance with one's conscience has become a fundamental human right at least in the western part of the world. But there is a plethora of conceptions of conscience in use. In Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* from 1755 conscience is 'the knowledge or faculty by which we judge of the goodness or wickedness of ourselves.' In the current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* one finds the following definition: 'A person's moral sense of right and wrong, viewed as acting as a guide to one's behaviour.' Further, what does the often-used expression 'to follow one's conscience' mean? Does it give a person carte blanche to be guided by any feelings, desires

[1] J. Ratzinger, 'Newman gehört zu den grossen Lehrern der Kirche', in Maria Katharina Strolz and Margarete Binder (eds.), *John Henry Newman. Lover of Truth. Academic Symposium and Celebration of the first Centenary of the Death of John Henry Newman* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, 1991), p.142. Translated from the German by the author.

[2] J. Ratzinger, Op.cit., p. 143.

[3] Anthony Fischer, 'Conscience in Ethics and the Contemporary Crisis of Authority', in E. Sgreccia and J. Laffitte (eds.), *Christian Conscience in Support of the Right to Life* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), pp. 37–70.

[4] Timothy C. Potts, 'Conscience', in N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny & J. Pinborg (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy:* From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100–1600 (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), pp. 687–704.

[5] Aquinas' use of *conscientia* is to be understood within the general concept of *synderesis* and *prudentia*.

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and impulses that may occur? Characteristic for the latter expression is that it denotes an individually based conscience understood as an autonomous and free agent nearly completely separated from a greater whole. Mostly conscience and the submission or obedience to some form of authority are pitted against one another. Authority has largely become a word with negative connotations that represents a threat to freedom of conscience. The phrases 'civil or social courage' or 'integrity' often have a tendency to find their way into this context as well, thereby blurring the picture even further.

Despite the diversity of conceptions of conscience currently in use and although the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains the words 'moral sense', 'right' and 'wrong' one crucial element is completely missing: namely the idea that conscience is an echo of the voice of God in man or a manifestation of divine law. This is not, if one is to believe Newman, a recent development. In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* from 1875 he gave the following crushing verdict on late nineteenth-century understanding of conscience:

> When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgement or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one's leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition if he like it, in his own way.[6]

It is interesting to compare Newman's 1875 diagnosis of the perception of conscience commonly held by his contemporaries to that of *Veritatis Splendor*'s, written more than a hundred years later. The similarities in the diagnosis of the way in which conscience largely has been removed from the 'religious' sphere, from having been a duty to becoming merely a prerogative of the individual, is worth noticing:

> The individual conscience is accorded a status of a supreme tribunal or moral judgement, which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgement is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and 'being at peace with oneself', so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivist conception of moral judgement.[7]

[6] J. H. Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* (London: B. M. Pickering 1875), p. 58.

[7] http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG022/P4.HTM; § 32.

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Newman's Understanding of the Nature of Conscience

Newman was the first to admit that he needed a 'call' in order to write.[8] While conscience appears in different disguises all through his oeuvre and while he pondered different aspects of it, he did not actually write a comprehensive systematic treatment of the subject as he did on the development of dogma or the certitude of religious faith. It is in the *Grammar of Assent* from 1870 and in the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* that Newman offered his most substantial analysis of conscience. The preface to the third edition of his *Via Media* from 1877[9] also considers certain aspects of conscience. Although Newman's treatment of the nature of conscience in the *Grammar* is short, it is his most complete exposition of it, while the fourth chapter in the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* remains Newman's most celebrated account of conscience in relation to ecclesiastical authority. And yes indeed, it is at the very end of this chapter that Newman added his, dare I say, almost tongue-in-cheek, flippant and often quoted remark about whom he would first raise his glass to.

Newman can, broadly speaking, be said to have focused his writings on conscience in two main contexts, namely those of morality and theology. Or put more accurately, he considered the role of conscience in moral decision-making and discussed the role which conscience may play in establishing a person's belief in God. As regards the role of conscience in moral decisions and judgements, Newman was interested in understanding how the individual arrives at a conscientious moral judgement, its content and how a possible clash between the judgement of the individual and the view of a given authority can be resolved. Within the realm of theology Newman investigated the role that conscience may play in ascertaining an individual's belief in God and whether conscience can be regarded as being the voice of God.

In the University Sermon 10, *Faith and Reason, Contrasted As Habits Of Mind* from 1839, Newman explained that reason need not be the origin of faith. Of conscience he said: 'No one will say that Conscience is against Reason, or that its dictates cannot be thrown into an argumentative form; yet who will, therefore, maintain that it is not an original principle, but must depend before it acts, upon some previous processes of Reason?'[10] He continued: 'Conscience is a simple element in our nature, yet its operations admit of being

[8] J. H. Newman, *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Henry Tristram (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1957), p. 272.

[9] *The Via Media of the Anglican Church* was originally published in 1837.

[10] J. H. Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before The University of Oxford* (London, New York, Bombay, Calcutta, 1909) p. 183.

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surveyed and scrutinized by Reason; so may Faith be cognisable, and its acts be justified, by Reason, without therefore being, in matter of fact, dependent upon it . . . .'[11]

As Conscience is an original principle and 'a messenger from Him who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil . . . '[12] or 'an authoritative monitor'[13], its true notion is simply too subtle for science and too profound for the written word. Without elaborating, Newman rejected the ethical theories of his day, from Hobbes to Utilitarianism, and Kant to Darwin, as moral judgements are not numerically calculable or logically derivable. His main objection to 'scientific ethics', for the lack of a better expression, was its general insistence that scientific accuracy could describe moral life; it was simply not subtle enough to do so in Newman's opinion. He was not prepared, however, to join the chorus which appealed against science *per se* and I am not for one moment suggesting that Newman was anti-intellectual. The real culprit, according to the Cardinal, was the claim to autonomy and independence, which shows no reverence for the Creator at all. 'Scientific ethics' fall short, it seems, on two accounts: Firstly, it subscribes to an accuracy that is simply not nuanced enough - if this is what Newman meant by 'subtle' – to be practically workable and, secondly, it completely disregards the fact that the strength of moral demands derives from God and not from scientific rationalism. Here Newman is walking in the footsteps of Aristotle and Aquinas. Although the elementary or basic ability to make sound judgements is innate in humans, it can only be properly exercised after careful training and experience. Newman's understanding of conscience 'truly so called'[14] is related to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis,* practical wisdom and the ability to make sound moral judgements. But whereas *phronesis* decides what is to be done here and now by this person in these particular circumstances, conscience only does so provided that the person is him- or herself and that the conduct is the person's own. It is also related to Aquinas' dictum that conscience is the practical judgement or dictate of reason, by which we judge what *hic et nunc* is the good to be done and the evil to be avoided.[15]

In the *Grammar of Assent*, at the very beginning of his exploration of the nature of conscience, Newman assumed that conscience 'has a legitimate place among our mental acts; as really so, as the

[11] Ibid.

[12] J. H. Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 57.

[13] J. H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates, and Co., 1870), p. 103.

[14] *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 63.

[15] Thomas Aquinas, *Summae Theologiae*, 1a IIae, Q 19, a. 5. Quoted in *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 62.

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action of memory, of reasoning, of imagination, or as the sense of the beautiful.'[16] He inferred that there are 'things that excite us in approbation or blame, and which we in consequence call right or wrong; and which, experienced in ourselves, kindle in us that specific sense of good or bad conscience.'[17]

Newman stressed that the feeling of conscience is two-fold. It is both a moral sense, and a sense of duty; 'a judgement of the reason and a magisterial dictate.'[18] And conscience has both a critical and judicial office.[19] He adopted the term 'moral sense' which was dominant in the eighteenth-century but, whereas earlier British philosophers had mostly stressed the critical office, Newman was far more preoccupied with the latter. This is conscience as an 'authoritative monitor'.[20] He conceded that half of the world would be puzzled by what is meant by a moral sense, whereas everybody knows what is meant by a good or bad conscience. It is debatable, however, whether the question of what constitutes good or bad is quite so simple a judgement as Newman found, especially viewed within a contemporary context.

To Newman, moral sense, or 'spiritual discernment' as he also referred to it in the wonderfully titled sermon *The Usurpations of Reason*,[21] is the act of the mind which enables it to distinguish between good and evil and between right and wrong and also to understand certain principles that underlie the human reasoning in matters of morality or religion. Right and wrong are the words that Newman mostly used in connection with conscience, with right denoting behaviour that is required and obligatory. The moral sense immediately perceives what is right and wrong and so it follows that one action will be approved and another will be condemned. The perception of what is right and wrong is not purely a matter of personal preference or emotion as the moral sense, through different experiences, provides the first elements of a morality that will develop, via reason, into a moral code.[22]

I stated previously that Newman's second area of exploration is that of the role which conscience may play in grounding a person's belief in God. In some sermons as well as in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, he employed conscience as an argument for the existence of God. And in his novel *Callista* the voice of God reveals itself through the sense of duty in conscience.

[16] *Grammar of Assent*, p. 102.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., p. 103.
[20] Ibid.
[21] *Fifteen Sermons*, p. 55, n. 3.
[22] *Grammar of Assent*, p. 106.

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In a conversation between the heroine of the novel and Polemo, she declares:

> I feel that God within my heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, 'Do this: don't do that.' You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature, as is to joy or to grieve. I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me. Nothing shall persuade me that it does not ultimately proceed from a person external to me. It carries with it its proof of its divine origin. My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness – just like that which I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend. So you see, Polemo, I believe in what is more than a mere 'something'. I believe in what is more real to me than sun, moon, stars, and the fair earth, and the voice of friends . . . An echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and I fear.'[23]

Emotions representing conscience such as fear, remorse, inner peace or lightness of heart in particular, are not feelings in the ordinary sense of the word.[24] They represent a Person towards whom the subject feels responsible. These images imprint in the self the image of a 'Supreme Governor' and a 'holy and just Judge.'[25] The image in Newman's understanding represents in the mind concrete things and facts, the 'real' as opposed to the 'notional' which is a mere abstraction and generalisation.[26] Hence, the experience of conscience is instrumental in securing a real and concrete experience of the living and creating God. This relationship with God, established through conscience, will influence the whole moral and religious development of the person. It follows that the person who is faithful to the voice of conscience and who finds in it the voice of God, such as Callista, will be more receptive to the commandments and injunctions of his or her own conscience. Not only will it pave the way for welcoming what God reveals of himself, it will also prepare for welcoming Revelation and the words of God as expressed in scripture and tradition.[27]

Although one can choose to ignore the voice that makes itself heard in his conscience or to muffle, bend or disobey it, he cannot destroy it, as it does not come from him. The sense of duty is common to all, even though the moral sense, the distinction between right and wrong, can differ from one person to the next. And everybody can have either a good or bad conscience. One could ask how the sense

[23] J. H. Newman, *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century* (Longmans, Green, and Co, 1890), pp. 314–315.
[24] *Grammar of Assent*, p. 105.
[25] Ibid., p. 107.
[26] Ibid., pp. 9–12.
[27] Ibid., pp. 114–115.

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of obligation can be retained if the moral sense is no longer there. How is it possible for the individual to regard some acts as being morally forbidden, if they are not perceived as morally bad?

According to Gerard J. Hughes, Newman attempted to harmonize the following claims: 'Conscience is nuanced and subtle rather than rigorous, scientific and governed by the laws' of theories of morals.[28] Conscience only works in its proper function if it is nurtured to do so and requires proper education, emotional equilibrium and intellectual logic. Conscience 'truly so called'[29] is an expression within man of the demands of God. And finally, conscience can both perceive an action to be right or wrong or merely infer it.[30]

The philosopher S. A. Grave is very critical of Neman's idea of conscience as he finds it too confused and too contradictory. He draws a clear distinction between conscience as a moral sense (judging what is right and wrong) and conscience as the moral imperative of doing what we believe to be right – whatever that may be. Grave maintains that to regard conscience as being a simple element in our nature without qualifying it as Newman does in the sermon *Faith and Reason* from which I quoted the passage containing this particular element earlier, is a serious lacuna in Newman's understanding of conscience.[31] I earlier said that Newman rejected Kantian ethics in general but Gerard J. Hughes makes an interesting observation that Newman exhibits an almost Kantian streak insofar as Kant 'argues that it is a central feature of our moral experience that we believe it to be somehow morally offensive that virtue and happiness so often fail to coincide in our world and he goes on to suggest that we cannot make any satisfying sense of our moral experience unless we see it as pointing beyond our world to God, the guarantor and vindicator of morality.'[32]

Conscience and Authority

Setting aside a full discussion of authority in the church, I will only address those elements relating to authority that are relevant in order to understand Newman's views on different aspects of the relationship between conscience and authority. Newman was convinced, however, of the importance of authority in the church and he never doubted that it was by divine institution that the government of the church was hierarchical and that it was responsible for defining doctrine.

[28] G. J. Hughes, 'Conscience', in I. Ker & T. Merrigan (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman* (Cambridge: CUP 2009), pp. 189–220; here p. 194.
[29] *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 63.
[30] Hughes, p. 190.
[31] S. A. Grave, *Conscience in Newman's Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 179–189.
[32] Hughes, p. 207.

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He thought all members of the church should submit to authority. In the *Development of Christian Doctrine*, he argued for the antecedent probability of an infallible authority on the grounds that there must be some living body able to distinguish true developments from false, and this authority had to be external to the developments themselves.

In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Newman's treatment of conscience and ecclesiastical authority, and of conscience and civil allegiance is a remarkable testimony to the Cardinal answering a call to write. The *Letter* is illustrative of the conflict between the civil power and the church, which finds its classic statement in Matthew 22 when Jesus tells the Pharisees and Herodians to 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's'. A simple, but deeply problematic statement as evidenced in a great many classic church-state conflicts.

The *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* was actually a book of 156 pages that Newman wrote in an absolute frenzy of three months. He and W. E. Gladstone, the erstwhile British Prime minister who took a great interest in religious matters, (then politicians actually 'did God') became embroiled in one of the most remarkable state-church controversies of the late nineteenth-century. Each combatant was fighting with a sharpened pen. The circumstances which led Newman to write his *Letter* are not without relevance to a full understanding of his arguments, so the most important steps of the escalating conflict will be traced here.

In October 1874 an obviously frustrated Gladstone, smarting from the defeat of his Irish University Bill and the lost political election not to mention the outcome of the First Vatican Council, howled in the *Contemporary Review* that 'no one can become Rome's Convert without renouncing his moral and mental freedom, and placing his civil loyalty and duty at the mercy of another, and when she has equally repudiated modern thought and ancient history.'[33] Gladstone was here thinking not merely of the Vatican Decrees but also of the *Syllabus of Errors* from 1864. All through the month of October Newman tried, albeit without success, to write a response to Gladstone's claims. Gladstone had no such problem and his *The Vatican Decrees in their Bearing on Civil Allegiance: A Political Expostulation* was published, not without a certain symbolic irony, on 5 November 1874. Upon receiving a proof copy from Gladstone, with whom Newman was acquainted, he at once set to work on his *Letter*. Newman's choice of addressee, the Duke of Norfolk, was 'a pre-emptive *coup de grace*' as John T. Ford termed it.[34] In this way

[33] W. E. Gladstone, 'Ritualism and Ritual', in *Contemporary Review* (October 1874), pp. 663–81, here p. 674.

[34] John T. Ford, 'Country, Church and Conscience: John Henry Newman versus William Ewart Gladstone', in John T. Ford, Robert A. Destro, Charles R. Dechert (eds.), *Religion*

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Newman silenced both Gladstone and Manning at the outset. The former could hardly push his argument that the loyalty of British Roman Catholics was questionable without attacking Henry Fitzalan-Howard, a prominent peer. And Manning could not question Newman's orthodoxy without indirectly also questioning the Duke of Norfolk, the leading Roman Catholic layman of his day and a former pupil of Newman's at the Oratory. This was Newman at his strategic, worldly best.

In his pamphlet, which sold over 145,000 copies, Gladstone directed a number of accusations towards Rome. Among the 'propositions' condemned by Rome according to Gladstone were liberty of conscience and the demand that philosophical and civil matters should cease to be guided by Roman ecclesiastical authority.[35] The pamphlet was a catalogue of diffuse and rather emotional accusations which made it somewhat difficult to give a coherent answer to it. Newman considered Gladstone's main question to be whether or not Catholics can be trustworthy subjects of the state, i.e. of a Protestant state.[36] He focused his attention on three issues: civil allegiance, papal authority, and the responsibility of the individual. Or put differently, Newman addressed questions of citizenship, church and conscience. As these themes are interrelated and have bearings on Newman's specific treatment of conscience in the *Letter*, they will be addressed as a whole.

Newman was adamant that there was no contradiction in his being at once a good Catholic and a loyal Englishman. Against Gladstone's allegation that a Catholic would be caught between the demands of church and state respectively, Newman wondered if 'there is then such a duty at all as obedience to ecclesiastical authority now? or is it one of those obsolete ideas, which are swept away, as unsightly cobwebs, by the New Civilization?'[37] Gladstone thought that the authority of the Pope was either enslaving his subjects or functioning as a menace to the civil power. Newman completely dismissed this accusation and claimed that the influence that the Pope had over the ordinary individual (British) citizen was very little indeed. Newman pointed out that the law has an identical role in both state and church:

in Public Life, vol. II. *Religion and Political Structures. From Fundamentalism to Public Service* (Washington D. C.: *The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy*, 2005), pp. 85–100, here, p. 86.

[35] The correspondence between Gladstone and the by then ex-communicated German church historian Ignaz von Döllinger at the beginning of the 1870s is testimony to their common frustration with Newman's argumentation in matters of intellectual freedom and ecclesiastical authority.

[36] *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 6.

[37] Ibid., p. 39.

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> The State, as well as the Church, has the power at its will of imposing laws upon us, laws bearing on our moral duties, our daily conduct, affecting our actions in various ways, and circumscribing our liberties; yet no one would say that the Law, after all, with all its power in the abstract and executive vigour in fact, interferes either with our comfort or our conscience.[38]

The law may have an identical role in state as in church but they are two very different entities. Although the church has the features of a human society, it is completely different in its origins, purposes and means. The state is not committed to any substantive set of beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality and it is not a society of faith and witness. One may object to Newman's method of deduction here and ask if it is logically stringent to put state and church on a par.

The content of *Pastor Aeternus* from 1870, the constitution issued by The First Vatican Council, had reinforced Gladstone's belief that English Catholics were at the mercy of the Pope as it stated that papal authority extended not only to 'faith and morals' but also to 'the discipline and regimen of the Church.'[39] Newman regarded papal authority concerning the discipline and ordering of the church to be a purely inner-ecclesiastical matter and therefore a collision between church and state, although theoretically possible, was not likely, and even if it did happen, then it would only be indirectly and accidentally. To Gladstone the issue was largely political, his pamphlet did after all bear the sub-title *A Political Expostulation*, whereas to Newman it was a question of ecclesiology.

Newman thought that Gladstone fabricated unlikely scenarios and obscure potential conflicts, not least in the case of a potential conflict between state and church.

> When, then, Mr. Gladstone asks Catholics how they can obey the Queen and yet obey the Pope, since it may happen that the commands of the two authorities may clash, I answer that it is my rule, both to obey the one and to obey the other, but that there is no rule in this world without exceptions, and if either the Pope or the Queen demanded of me an "Absolute Obedience", he or she would be transgressing the laws of human nature and human society. I give an absolute obedience to neither. Further, if ever this double allegiance pulled me in contrary ways, which in this age of the world I think it never will, then I should decide according to the particular case, which is beyond all rule, and must be decided on its on merits.[40]

But, if such a dilemma as just described were to occur, he would consult the *Schola Theologorum* and friends and if he found himself in

[38] Ibid., p. 41.
[39] Ibid., p. 38.
[40] *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 53.

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disagreement with either, he would ultimately rule by his own judgement and own conscience.'[41] By drawing anew on both Augustine and Aquinas, Newman declared conscience to be:

> the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even, though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.[42]

By referring to conscience as 'the aboriginal vicar of Christ' Thomas J. Norris points out that Newman operated within a 'christological context of conscience', which insofar as it is a component of human nature belongs to creation, but in virtue of the incarnation and resurrection belongs to Christ.[43] However, conscience in contemporary philosophy had been superseded by the 'right of self-will' as expressed in Newman's scathing diagnosis of the nineteenth century understanding of conscience referred to earlier.

Newman could not recognise Gladstone's assertion that papal authority was absolute and that it violated the liberty of conscience in the individual. Conscience was to Newman primarily a dutiful obedience to what presents itself as a divine voice, speaking within each human being and, secondly, in the understanding of Aquinas, the practical judgement or dictate of judgement of what is to be done in the here and now. This means that, insofar as conscience is a 'practical dictate', a collision between it and the authority of the Pope is only possible when the Pope gives particular orders. Such a collision seemed highly unlikely to Newman in practice as the Pope is not infallible in his laws, commands, acts of state, administration or public policy.[44] However, Newman made it abundantly clear that in case of doubt, obedience should be given to the Pope.

How then is Newman's celebrated remark about the after dinner toast to be understood? He says that if he were obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, he would drink to conscience first and then to the Pope.[45] Clearly he did not believe that conscience is a better guide to Catholic truth than is the teaching of the Pope, as this would constitute the heresy of 'private judgement'. Are the implications suggested by the toast actually to be drawn from it or is it merely clever rhetoric? Either way the remark has been given

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., p. 57.

[43] T. J. Norris, *Cardinal Newman for Today* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), p. 151.

[44] *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 62.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

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far more attention than it merits, but I cannot help thinking that this would not have been entirely unwelcome to Newman.

Did Newman answer Gladstone? One could say that Newman concentrated on explaining Papal Infallibility rather than on the Vatican Decrees that so disturbed Gladstone. Newman focused on Papal Infallibility to such an extent that Gladstone was to pen another pamphlet on Vaticanism.

Coda

The late Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote the following on the relationship between conscience and authority:

> In the normal case conscience and authority are not opposed. Conscience is not a law unto itself, but seeks by its very nature to be conformed to the law of God. Conscience therefore bids one to recognize authority, and authority, in turn educates ones' conscience. Only through a perversion of speech does conscience come to be coupled with dissent and authority with abuse. Conscience and authority normally concur because both are given by the same God as help for knowing what is to be believed and done.[46]

Cardinal Dulles' statement strikes me as being a concise encapsulation of Newman's understanding of the relationship between conscience and authority. This is equally applicable in the case of evaluating the strength of the authority of conscience itself in decision-making processes or moral choices or in cases of conscience being pitted against Authority (with a capital A). But how is Newman's teaching on conscience and understanding of authority to be regarded today? If he were to make his appeal to conscience as being 'the voice of God' and the 'aboriginal Vicar of Christ' within a contemporary setting, how would this be received by Christians?

Most would probably concede with Newman that conscience is the connecting principle between God and man, between Creator and creature. Some would subsequently perceive conscience as an invitation from God to embrace his law as free subjects, whereas others would see it as a radical invitation to make free choices. In an increasingly fragmented society in which individualism and subjectivism have seemingly become the "norm", conscience suggests freedom to judge God's law according to our own personal preferences and not out of duty to an external voice that we fear, be it God or indeed the *Magisterium*. In this sense the personalism that Pope Benedict was referring to has been replaced by individualism. Anthony Fischer has said that 'the Catholic view of conscience

[46] Avery Dulles, 'Authority & Conscience', in *Church*, Fall 1986, pp. 8–15.

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presupposes an optimistic view of human capacities to discern the good and ultimately . . . a theological position on the way man discerns God's will even after the Fall. The reason for this optimism is that God is the creator of the human mind and the origin of the 'natural law' of human beings.'[47] But if conscience is reduced from objective God-given principles to subjective choices or from shared God-given principles to private principles, then 'to act in accordance with one's conscience' becomes merely a given right or a prerogative, and not a duty to the Creator. And the danger is that Newman's view of conscience is susceptible to being considered too great a challenge: a call for hard work rather than the more comfortable route of individual preference. Newman's words that his whole life was a fight against 'liberalism in religion' come to mind in this context.

Personally I'm not convinced that Newman's understanding of conscience should be elevated to being the cornerstone of his thinking nor be proclaimed the 'bedrock of papal authority' as Pope Benedict would have it, regardless of its immense importance in Newman's thinking.[48] Would it not be more accurate to say that conscience requires authority as its counterpoint?[49] Despite the vast research already undertaken into Newman's understanding of conscience, it seems to me that further probing of the relationship between conscience and authority has to be carried out. Newman's thinking is at once far too complex (in the sense of fragmented and differentiated) and far too pragmatic and inductive (and sometimes frustratingly so) for conscience alone to be regarded as giving his writings an inner consistency, or to constitute the bedrock of papal authority.

Let me finish with the words of that other nineteenth-century master of irony, Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote – in a way which is highly reminiscent of Newman's view of conscience as the voice of God – that conscience forms the connection between man and God.

> A man could not have anything upon his conscience if God did not exist, for the relationship between the individual and God, the

[47] Fischer, Op.cit., p. 6.

[48] I acknowledge the fact that Pope Benedict has contributed to a 'rediscovery of' the ontological level of conscience and has painstakingly attempted to pull it away from a mere Scholastic reading that had largely ignored this aspect of conscience. The ontological level is to be distinguished from the level of practical reason and, more specifically, from the exercise of the virtue of prudence. Although both levels of conscience interrelate, the more significant level is the ontological one which Pope Benedict refers to as *Ur-Gewissen* (according to Josef Pieper). The Pope also prefers to use the Platonic term *anamnesis* rather than *synderesis* as this has sacramental connotations; being a memory of the good that enables us to recognize the good.

[49] J. Derek Holmes, 'Personal Influence and Religious Conviction - Newman and Controversy' in *Newman Studien,* H. Fries & W. Becker (eds), (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1948ff), vol. X (1978), pp. 26–46.

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God-relationship, is the conscience, and that is why it is so terrible to have even the least thing upon one's conscience, because one is immediately conscious of the infinite weight of God.[50]

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[50] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*. Edited and translated with introduction and notes by H. V. Hong & E. Hong (Princeton, N. J: Princeton University Press, 1995), III B: *Love is a Matter of Conscience*, pp. 135–153; here at p. 143. I have translated the quotation from the original Danish and this translation differs slightly from the Hong version. I am grateful to Dr John McDade for referring me to George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as another nineteenth-century representation of the understanding of conscience as 'the voice of God'.

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