

La coscienza morale e l'innovazione cristiana: elementi per una lettura teologica.

Moral conscience and Christian innovation: elements for a Theological Reading.

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Moral conscience is defined in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* as “. . . a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing or has already completed. In all he says and does man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. (1778) The aim of this article is to answer the question: what are the norms that guide conscience in judging whether a proposed innovation ought to be accepted into the Catholic tradition or not?

For the purposes of this article, we need to integrate conscience into a wider theological context that embraces faith, the Church, the tradition of the Church and authority in the Church. The first step in the argument will be to clarify the nature of conscience and its relationship to the elements that have just been mentioned. The second step will be to explain the notion of tradition and the relation between conscience and tradition. In this context I will seek to establish the structures of tradition in relation to the two most basic innovations: the innovation of Creation and the innovation of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. These, I will suggest, provide the source of the norms for accepting or rejecting other prospective innovations into the tradition.

It would be possible to discuss many innovations in the tradition such as, for example, the acceptance of the doctrine of human rights, or the acceptance of the criterion of death as “brain death.” However, in this article, I will take only one example of a possible innovation, namely

the acceptance of the doctrine of the “freedom of conscience” into the Catholic tradition. Freedom of conscience can be understood in the terms of the “liberal” tradition. This presumed a negative concept of freedom, according to which individual conscience claimed freedom from any external instance, which was seen as imposed or “heteronomous.” This claim would extend to “truth,” where truth itself was seen as the doctrine of another, and therefore as imposed on the individual as alien. Similarly, authority, except when it was accepted by a supposed free contract of individuals, was considered suspect, especially when it sought to enter the field of morality. Again, the suggestion that tradition could have authority would be strongly contested. In our postmodern age, some would argue that conscience should be free even from the domination of “reason.” In short, truth, authority, tradition and reason, were interpreted as forms of domination. How can a Christian, Catholic concept of conscience engage with such notions? The argument of this article will be that certain versions of these have been used as instruments of domination, but, in the Catholic tradition, truth, authority, tradition and reason are understood as gifts that are freely given so as to be freely received. This makes possible a critique of the liberal notion of freedom of conscience and a transformation of that notion that would enable it to be accepted as an innovation into the Catholic tradition.

For a believing Christian, conscience has its original place within the act of faith itself. To conceive of conscience as a zone separate from faith, would imply a division in the person. Faith entails a commitment to the tradition by which the faith is transmitted and to the community that is sustained by and supports that tradition, namely the Church. The act of faith does not replace the judgment of conscience, nor does conscience supplant the act of faith. What needs to be explained are the nature of the act of faith and, based on this, the norms for a

genuine act of faith. We also need to explain the nature of the judgment of conscience and the norms for a genuine judgment of conscience as a judgment of reason.

The relation between faith and conscience needs further explanation. St. Thomas stated that if a person judged in conscience that an act of faith in Jesus Christ was bad, that is morally wrong, then, if a person wills to make the act of faith, the will is directed to a bad or “evil.” From this it would follow that one ought not make such an act of faith. It is not, of course, that faith is bad in itself, but it is presented by reason to the will as bad.¹ For example, reason might judge that an act of faith requires a morally illegitimate renunciation of intellectual integrity and so is bad. The judgment of reason in this case discussed by St. Thomas is erroneous. The judgment could be erroneous because the person who makes the judgment has an erroneous conception of what genuine faith means, as in the case described, or the person could have a correct notion of faith, but reason incorrectly in assessing a particular act. But it would be possible that what a person claimed to be a genuine act of faith, was in fact a bad moral act. For example, one might profess to “believe” a doctrine of faith, but do so to gain some personal advantage, such as a gainful position in an organization. Such would not be a genuine act of faith and reason is capable of discerning this even on purely rational grounds. But reason could also discover what revelation (the Scriptures and Tradition) presents as “faith,” for example as an act of free commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. With this knowledge, reason could then judge that what was claimed to be an act of faith, was not what revelation presented as an act of faith, that is not a free commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. Such judgments would be within the scope of reason, even for one who had not made a personal act of faith himself.

However, it is not helpful simply to refer to “reason” without providing some explanation

of what the word reason means. In the response that I offer here, I will follow some suggestions of Alasdair MacIntyre. We reason in tradition, as he has reminded us. Therefore, to understand reason, we need to understand the tradition within which reason emerges.²

At this point in the argument we can turn to a consideration of the first and fundamental “innovation,” that which makes possible the tradition of reason in which we all participate. The first innovation is the radical act of the absolutely gratuitous gift of being by God in creation.³ Contingent being is given being and the givenness is the fundamental guiding point, or horizon, of all our reasoning.⁴ God gives being; we, in our receiving that gift, come to participate in the actuality of God’s being, which is to give. Thus we become capable of giving to others. One basic way of giving to others is by communicating with them through language; such communication constitutes the human tradition of reasoning. Reason thus understands being as given being and thus grasps the basic norms of reason, as the norms of receiving and giving.⁵ Reason without faith in creation might arrive at an intimation that the basic norms of human thinking and living are rooted in the gift, but without faith in creation, there would be an intimation and only that.⁶ With such a belief, however, we can grasp that being is indeed given being, that the norms of reason are based on receiving and giving, because we recognize that we receive being from divine giving, and that divine reason itself is characterized by giving. Perhaps we could conceive of the divinity, not as thought thinking itself, but as giver giving the gift, where the gift is God’s self. We might even say, that divine reason is engaged in contemplating the divine essence so as to discern how a participation in that essence could be given as a gift. Again, because we believe in a free creation, and that the reason by which we participate in the divine reason, is given to us as a free gift, we grasp that reason must be free.

Thus we can see that reason learns from faith, while at the same time remaining distinct from faith.⁷

An account of all the significant instances of receiving and giving that make up human living is needed for an adequate ontology of the human. As Nicholas Boyle has written, the being of each one of us is a gift that we have received from an act of love, the act of love of our parents and ultimately the act of love of God, and any ontology worthy of the name must have a place for that gift.⁸ Being is communicated historically in the gift of life that parents give to their child. The original gift of being by God takes its historical expression in the gift of life to the child by the parents. The original gift and the other gifts by which life is sustained and promoted constitute what we call tradition, and the giving and receiving of these gifts through time constitutes our “historicity.”

Our historicity in this sense means that our receiving and giving of gifts takes place through time, and, indeed, is only possible with time.⁹ We cannot invoke “historicity” to claim that no moral teaching has lasting validity and applies only to certain “historical” periods. This would be to impose on human living a ideological notion of historicity as fragmentary. Historicity only makes sense in reference to the continuous giving and receiving that is tradition.

The argument here is not that reason emerges from “history,” that is as history considered as a series of events, but that reason is to be discovered in the development of tradition, that is, a history which is constructed by the reasoning of those who inhabit the tradition. We discern the structures of reason not primarily by reflecting on the reasoning that goes on in our individual minds, as the philosophers of the modern era proposed, but by reflection on the shared reasoning that constitutes tradition.

MacIntyre has defined tradition thus: “A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”¹⁰ We need a somewhat broader notion of tradition than that provided by MacIntyre: it is not simply an intellectual “argument,” while it will include this. It embraces language, testimonies, doctrines, forms of worship, art, all considered as freely given and received, together with the practical actions, intentions and motives that are ordered to the purposes or goods of the tradition.

Tradition is constituted by testimony before argumentative discourse is engaged. Testimony, as Nicholas Boyle, invoking Paul Ricoeur, has noted, is a communication of truth, through events, and in particular through concrete events of the overcoming of evil.¹¹ Indeed, the great traditions that have survived and have influenced so many people through the ages, are those that have claimed and have been experienced by their members as overcoming evil. This is the case, for example, with the Jewish tradition, with Islam and with the Christian tradition. However, we could say that every human tradition worthy of the name has this basic purpose: overcoming evil, above all in the form of the threat of death. It is in the overcoming of actual evil that the genuine good appears, in particular the good of life.

The norms of practical reason come to light in the acts of free, gratuitous giving and receiving of gifts that constitute tradition. The ideal moral act is the free gratuitous gift of oneself to the other, a gift that makes the other capable of free gratuitous gifts to others again, thus forming a “chain reaction” of giving and receiving that forms human community in a process through time aimed at the goal of the ideal community of giving and receiving. This we call the “common good.” A process of practical reasoning is “right reason” when it accords

with the structures of gift, that is, when it rightly discerns the genuine gift and allows its reception by the receiver, when it guides the receiver in integrating the gift and when it directs the giving on of the free gift to others.

Theoretical reasoning then emerges to give meaning and direction to this process. A basic role of theoretical reason is to discern the nature of the human person and the genuine desires of the human person so as to be able to discover what would be a true gift for that person. Further, the role of theoretical reason is to discern the coherence, or lack of it, between more particular acts and the basic norms deriving from free giving and receiving. Thus we have a reasoned basis for judgments that some gifts are true gifts and that some acts of giving and receiving are right acts. They are so because they are acts of giving true gifts.

It is in the context of the tradition and giving and receiving that the notion of truth appears.¹² The primary notion of “truth” attaches to a true gift to another, that is, a gift that enables that other to become a giver of gifts to others and thus find fulfilment. Further, “true” applies to the act of giving that conveys such a gift. The important correspondence is between the gift and the genuine desires of the receiver. Theoretical reason in the form of the ontology of “given being” establishes the coherence between particular gifts and the primary gift, which is the gift of being in creation by God. In the theological reading that I am seeking to provide here, we can argue that faith in creation makes possible reason, and that the structures of creation, that is free gratuitous giving and receiving, in a teleologically ordered tradition, establish the basic norms of right reason. However, there are many human traditions of “reason” and it is only through dialogue and mutual critique they can come to truth. This is not to say that a particular tradition of reason cannot attain truth, but that it cannot do so without dialogue with other

traditions. But there is a form of reason, namely that which takes as its norms free giving and receiving, and so rules out all forms of domination.¹³ This is necessary for any dialogue. This form of reason transcends all differences and so can guide the dialogue towards truth.

A human tradition is a highly complex structure and one that is fraught with tension and disagreement, indeed the more a tradition seeks to achieve and maintain coherence, the more arguments there are likely to be. As MacIntyre has pointed out, an historical tradition will need authority, since without authority there will be no way of resolving the kind of complex disputes that will arise within tradition.¹⁴ If the tradition were unable to deal with these, it would be unable effectively to pursue its goals, namely the fostering of the giving of gifts, and with that the overcoming of evil. Authority is thus a necessary condition for an historical, human tradition.

The philosophers of Gift, in particular Derrida, recognize that the free, gratuitous gift is the ideal act, but claim that while “thinkable” it is impossible.¹⁵ We could grant that such a free gratuitous gift is impossible for human nature in its present sinful condition. This would mean that our “human” traditions can never be the expressions of a truly gratuitous giving, and will always include elements of self-seeking with the urge to dominate and control others for one’s own sake. From this there emerges two needs; a genuine tradition must promote and sustain conversion, in the form of personal conversion from the self-centered desire to dominate, and in the tradition’s being open to change so as to better promote its goals. + Thus tradition requires the development of the virtues and a capacity to discern and overcome vices, especially what St. Augustine called the “lust to dominate.”¹⁶

The second “innovation” that we need to considered is the giving of God’s self,

historically in the self-giving of Jesus, culminating in his death on the Cross and in his Resurrection. This is the particular event, the overcoming of evil, the testimony to which gives rise to the Christian tradition. The risen Jesus is the source of the Spirit, whose proper name is “Gift.”¹⁷ The gift of the Spirit makes possible the act of faith, the act by which Christians freely accept the gift of the Spirit. This received gift enables them to communicate the faith to others through their testimony and thus to participate in the Christian tradition. The Christian and the Catholic traditions take up the human, historical form of traditions as the “body” by which they live in history. Thus the Christian and the Catholic tradition maintain the same basic structures as the human tradition, just as the Word incarnate, in taking to himself human nature assumed the basic structures of human nature. However, while the Christian faith tradition incorporates the structures of human tradition, it would reject any form of tradition that had been distorted so as to become an instrument of domination.

Thus we can show that the structures of the act of faith itself conform to the norms of free giving and receiving that have been explained above. These are the norms, I suggest, by which we can judge on rational grounds, that the act is a genuine act of faith, and a good moral act.

We can now indicate the ways in which the Christian tradition is an innovation with respect to purely human tradition. The Christian tradition has as its constitutive act, not simply the gift of being in creation, but the gift of God’s self in the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. What is given in this tradition is not merely the fruit of human experiences and the results of reflection expressed in stories, doctrines, rites etc, and in philosophy (ontology) but the experience of the absolutely gratuitous gift of the Spirit, given as “revelation” communicated in the tradition and given formal expression in the Scriptures.¹⁸ The innovation in the Christian

tradition is that it has as its goal, not merely the formation of the ideal community of receiving and giving, but the community of receiving and giving that flows from the gift of divine giving, or grace, that is, the Church. The Eucharist is the paradigm form of such gratuitous receiving and giving, and the Eucharistic community is the “ideal community” of this tradition.¹⁹

Further, the Christian tradition has as its goal not only the overcoming of evil in general, but the overcoming of the rebellion against God in the attempt to dominate, and the spiritual death that followed on this. Again since the Christian tradition takes up the structures of the human tradition, it is concerned with promoting the good of life, including a good life on this earth, but, beyond this, the attainment of eternal life in the Resurrection.

A key element of the innovation that comes about through the free gratuitous gift of God’s self in Jesus, is that a gratuitous gift now becomes actual, in the case of the God-man, Jesus. It is no longer impossible. We cannot give as God gives, but by the gift of grace, we can participate in God’s giving, seeking to purify our giving by continual conversion of heart. Thus emerges another norm for innovation into the Christian tradition: it must be such as to stimulate and sustain continual conversion. Here conversion entails not only a break with all forms of self-serving and domination of others, but an abandonment of the self-sufficiency that would oppose the reception of God’s gifts and that form of domination that would follow from an attempt to take over from God the role of giver of gifts. It is by reasoned reflection on the structures of giving and receiving in the faith tradition, that we can discover the structures of genuine faith, and thus the norms of the act of faith.

Further, in the human tradition, the way to truth is by following the norms of giving and receiving, in dialogue between traditions of reason. But with the tradition of faith, the ultimate

or absolute is the absolutely gratuitous free gift, not only of being, but of God's self. 20 It is this gift that now becomes the norm of truth. The truth that is given is the divine person who is truth. We can understand the meaning of "truth" here in the framework of Gift: because he "corresponds" by nature to the Giver, because he is the gift, and as God-man, he is the primary receiver. Because it is founded on ultimate truth, the faith tradition can critique the errors and forms of partial truth that arise in the human traditions. This is the basis of faith's capacity to purify reason.

It is by reflection on the process of giving that constitutes this innovation, that we can discern the norms of genuine innovation in the Catholic tradition. Such an innovation must be coherent with the norms of genuine human tradition and with the norms of the faith tradition, which takes up the norms of the former but goes beyond them. We would need to ask the following questions. Is the proposed innovation offered as a free gift that can be freely received? Can it be received in such a way as to enable the receiver, either the individual or the community, to integrate that gift, so as to become more fully a giver of gifts to others? Can it be received in such a way as to promote human community as the human community of receiving and giving, and the faith community of believers? Is it a genuine gift, and not a form of domination and control? Does it promote conversion and genuine transformation of the person and of the tradition, that is by promoting more possibilities of giving and receiving and moving it closer to the ideal community, thus making it a more adequate symbol of the ideal community of the Kingdom? Does it constitute a further step in the overcoming of evil, both physical evil and the spiritual evil of sin?

We can understand doctrines as interpretations of the divine giving and the community's

(that is the Church's) receiving. Some of these interpretations express the nature of that giving and receiving in an authentic way, and have been recognized as such by the authority of the Church as a norm for all future interpretations. Thus we would have to ask whether the proposed innovation could be considered a positive gift in respect to the accepted doctrines or whether it would be incoherent with those doctrines. These considerations would provide the norms that conscience ought to follow in its judgment on the acceptability or non-acceptability of a proposed innovation.

Could the liberal doctrine of "freedom of conscience" be accepted as a valid innovation? This doctrine, as has been indicated earlier, would seem to presuppose a negative freedom that would imply not only a freedom from the Church's authority and tradition, but even from the requirements of truth itself. In the light of the arguments developed here, this could not be acceptable as an innovation into the Catholic tradition. According to the arguments that have been developed here, conscience cannot be interpreted adequately apart from a commitment to a human tradition and so apart from a commitment to truth and reason, and for a Catholic believer, apart from a commitment to the Catholic tradition as embodied in the Catholic community, the Church. Thus, the doctrine of freedom of conscience could not be accepted if it were understood in the liberal form.

The issue of freedom of conscience is often stated, in a popular version, in the following way. There are certain matters that are settled by Church authority, and thus are not "left" to a free judgment of conscience. But there are other matters that are "left to one's conscience." However, to say that something is settled by Church authority and so is *not* a matter of conscience, does not make any sense, at least in the framework of tradition and gift that has been

explained here. The act of faith includes an act of conscience as has been explained above. The act of faith cannot be a purely individual act but must be an act of commitment to a tradition, and for one who has committed herself or himself to the Catholic tradition, to the Catholic Church. It does not make sense to say that certain matters of Church life are withdrawn from conscience, or to use the popular expression, not “left to conscience.” All human choices that engage reason and will are matters of conscience and do not cease to be so when Church authority has laid down certain moral norms. We could say that such matters are not left to conscience, in the sense of arbitrary individual conscience. But conscience here does not mean isolated, autonomous conscience. It means conscience that has judged that commitment to the Church, its tradition and its teaching, is a good act, a commitment that ought to be made. More particular judgments of conscience presuppose this basic judgment of conscience. One cannot make judgments of conscience independently of the tradition of the Church while, at the same time, claiming to maintain that basic judgment of conscience.

The acceptance of authoritative teachings either on “faith” or “morals” by the Church does not exclude conscience, but necessarily involves conscience. But conscience is involved in a judgment on this act because I have committed myself, following a judgment of conscience, to the tradition of which the authority of the Church is the authentic interpreter.

Even if one retracts completely the commitment to the tradition of the Church, one still has to fall back on the human tradition of reason, as has been explained earlier. Here conscience must be governed by a commitment to the rationally attainable truth available in that tradition or at least proposed as a goal by that tradition. If one wants to abandon even the commitment to truth in tradition, then one elects to be utterly alone and to reason alone. But one simply cannot

reason alone. We can think “for ourselves” but we cannot think by ourselves.

What of the proposal that conscience should be free of the requirements of reason itself? Certain versions of “reason” have been used as instruments of domination, that is, as ideology. But reason, as understood in the framework of gift, is itself freely given, to be freely received, by which one can, in freedom, discern true gifts and give them freely to others. Reason does not cease to be free even when it requires a commitment to a tradition and to a community, or to a faith tradition and to the community of the Church.

Conclusion.

In this article I have sought to set out the norms for a judgment of conscience on the acceptability of non-acceptability of a proposed innovation in the Catholic tradition. Some of these norms derive from reason, understood as reason in tradition. The criteria of right reason are developed within the framework of receiving and giving, this being the ultimate framework within which we can understand human living. There are other criteria that derive from faith. But faith also is to be understood in terms of receiving and giving. Thus the requirements of faith can integrate the requirements of reason, without either denying the validity of reason or distorting the nature of faith. I have suggested that the relationship between faith and reason can be best explained in terms of a philosophy and a theology of gift.

Notes

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 19, 5.

² MacIntyre, A., *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988: 349.

³ Davies, O., *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition*, Gand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001: 50.

⁴ See Jean-Luc Marion's account in Caputo J.D. and Scanlon M. J., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999: 56.

⁵ For these reflections I am indebted to the stimulus of the thought of Claude Bruaire. I do claim to represent his own thinking here. See López, A., *Spirit's Gift: The Metaphysical Insight of Claude Bruaire*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006: 114.

⁶ It would seem that this was the case with Derrida himself. He is reported to have said, "I rightly pass for an atheist." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/free/2004/10/2004101102n.htm>. (Consulted, December 3, 2006).

⁷ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, (14th. Sept. 1988) n. 43.

⁸ Boyle, N., *Who are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market*, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999: 198.

⁹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 11.

¹⁰ MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue*, 2nd. ed., Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984: 222.

¹¹ Boyle, N., *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004: 72.

¹² Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 24.

¹³ This would be an example of the "critical purification" of the tradition of reason by faith. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Lecture of the Holy Father, Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg*, Tuesday, 12 September 2006, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections." http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html. (Consulted December 3, 2006).

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 354.

¹⁵ A summary of his views is provided by Derrida himself in, Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift*, 59.

¹⁶ *Contra Faustum*, XXII, 74.

¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, q. 38, a. 2.

¹⁸ *Fides et Ratio*, n. 16

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 13.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 7.