

## MEETING A PERSONAL GOD IN CONSCIENCE

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN (1801-1890), literary man, educator, theologian and philosopher, was an intellectual giant of the 19th century whose thoughts are significant for us today. Two remarks, from a philosopher and from a spiritual man, would suffice to show Newman's relevance.

He is acknowledged to be a master in describing the interior world of religion and in doing the work of a modern apologist for his faith. Some readers also turn to him for an account of how deeply the Christian way is involved in the cultural problems of the modern world. In the area of theology, indeed, Newman's position was obscured for many years because of the misuse of his writings by the Modernists and the excessive rigidity of his orthodox defenders. Today, however, we can take the true measure of his theological contributions especially in the areas of act of faith, the developmental nature of the Church and its doctrines, and the modes of Scriptural interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

He, who was convinced of being faithful throughout his life, with all his heart devoted to the light of truth, today becomes an even brighter beacon for all who are seeking an informed orientation and sure guidance amid the uncertainties of the modern world--a world which he himself prophetically foresaw. Many of the problems which he treated with wisdom. . . were the subjects of the discussion and study of the Fathers of this Council, as for example, the question of ecumenism, the relationship between Christianity and the world, the emphasis on the role of the laity in the Church and the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. Not only the Second Vatican Council but also the present time can be considered in a special way as Newman's hour.<sup>2</sup>

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I would like to follow up with you Newman's doctrine of conscience as the way to a "personal" God. Newman was not interested in the "God of inference" of some philosophers, the dry "classroom God" of the schools and the impersonal "textbook God" of the theists. His option for knowledge of a personal God is actually his defense for the belief of the simple people who are never able to express this formally and yet is their very principle of action.

Newman intended to show how we apprehend God as a reality, as a living Being; how "we gain an image of God and give a real assent to the proposition that He exists."<sup>3</sup> He realized his aim through the phenomenon of conscience. I shall elaborate this doctrine under the following headings: (1) Conscience as an assumed and natural source of knowledge, (2) Conscience as a sense of duty, (3) Conscience as the voice of God, and (4) the Image of God in Conscience.

#### AS ASSUMPTION AND NATURAL SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Newman *assumed* the existence of conscience and its role as the proper approach to religious knowledge, preferred to the argument from design. In 1870 he wrote:

I believe in design because I believe in God; not in God because I see design. You will say that the 19th Century does not believe in conscience either--true--but then it does not believe in God at all. *Something I must assume, and in assuming conscience I assume what is least to assume*, and what most will admit. Half the world knows nothing of the argument from design--and, when you have got it you do not prove by it the moral attributes of God--except faintly. Design teaches power, skill, and goodness, not sanctity, not mercy, not a future judgment, which three are the essence of religion.<sup>4</sup>

In assuming conscience we simply affirm something which is actually there. That conscience is real, part of our own selves, is expressed by Newman in various ways:<sup>5</sup> "Their conscience is as part of themselves as their reason is. . .that secret whisper of their heart"; "Conscience is a simple element in our nature;" "Conscience is implanted in the breast by nature;" "What is deepest within us;" "the whisper of a law of moral truth within you."

Newman believed that conscience is a phenomenon recognized even by the so-called idolaters and heathens, and is already present from childhood. He could not say exactly at what age or stage children begin to be aware of the promptings of conscience. But he

was convinced that a child of five or six years old has already a spontaneous reception of religious truths. He described it as "the gift of our first years."<sup>6</sup> Conscience certainly is not obtained by means of formal reasoning because conscience is prior to it. Man did not make conscience, nor can he destroy it. He cannot escape it; he can disobey it; he may refuse to use it; but it remains. "It cannot be created or erased by any form of education, though it can be sharpened or dulled."<sup>7</sup>

That assumption of conscience is a reasonable act is just being realistic. Newman said, "without assumptions no one can prove anything about anything."<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, the attitude of the total sceptic who can never progress because he assumes nothing is the only reasonable act. For Newman, assumed conscience is reasonable because it is a legitimate mental act and valid source of knowledge. It has a place in the normal condition of the human mind, just as memory, reasoning, and imagination, are legitimate acts.<sup>9</sup> The original principle of conscience, wherein lies the material for real apprehension of God's being, is not against formal reasoning. Formal reason, an attempt to analyze it, is therefore not contrary to it.<sup>10</sup>

Newman held that Nature has provided man with three means to acquire knowledge of religious matter: our minds (conscience), the voice of mankind, and the course of the world (the course of human life and affairs). Of these three, our mind is the most authoritative, because it is nearer to us than any other means of knowledge. Conscience, then, is "our great internal teacher of religion."<sup>11</sup>

### AS SENSE OF DUTY

Newman recognized conscience as sense of duty, that is, as sanction of right conduct, "as the dictate of an authoritative monitor bearing upon the details of conduct as they come before us, and complete in its several acts, one by one."<sup>12</sup> Conscience as sense of duty is more basic than as moral sense. Conscience is particular and more personal; moral sense is a generalization, a rule, a deduction from particular instincts of right and wrong. This brings us to Newman's distinction between conscience and taste, and between fear and shame.

Two related points differentiate taste from conscience. In the first place, taste is its own evidence because it appeals to nothing beyond its own sense of the beautiful and the ugly. Taste enjoys beautiful things only for their own sake. Conscience, on the contrary, does not rest on itself because it reaches out of itself. It recognizes a sanction higher than itself to which it is responsible for its decisions. Secondly, taste has no special relation to persons. It rather contemplates objects in themselves. Conscience is primarily concerned

with persons, for actions are viewed mainly in their doers. It is a person that conscience recognizes as sanction higher than itself.<sup>13</sup> Newman then pointed out the sad fact of substituting taste for conscience. He called it a "moral malady" since taste bears no orientation towards persons outside of itself.

Conscience elicits both the feelings of shame and fear. When shame prevails the mind misses the very nature and depth of the intimations of conscience. One who only feels shame misinterprets his conscience within his limited round of thoughts. He sees nothing beyond himself. Conscience is recognized as dictate of the mind and nothing more; it becomes mere self-respect. Sin is a transgression against human nature. When shame becomes the rule of conduct there is just taste or ungrounded moral sense. Fear, on the other hand, carries one out of himself. Fear implies a transgression of a law which implies another person as lawgiver and judge. One sees something objective in religion in the sense that he recognizes his conscience as the word of a lawgiver. Sin becomes an offense against a person other than oneself. In fear, one becomes aware of a lively sense of responsibility and guilt, while in shame, one feels self-reproach and self-disgust. "If there is any truth brought home to us by conscience, it is this, that we are personally responsible for what we do, that we have no means of shifting our responsibility, and that dereliction of duty involves punishment."<sup>14</sup>

"Where conscience is, fear must be," Newman wrote.<sup>15</sup> Fear, which carries with it the sense of lawgiver, judge, and retributive justice, is the source of religious knowledge, the very foundation of true religion. This doctrine is in consonance with his criticism of religion based on absolute benevolence. The idea of absolute benevolence in religion is based on an unreal view of human nature. It wishes a convenient religion. It disregards the basic dictate of conscience which is that of retributive justice.<sup>16</sup>

Conscience, therefore, which gives us true religious knowledge, is conscience taken as a sense of duty. It is not a matter of taste, but it should be the foundation of true moral sense which is other-person-oriented. We are not merely ashamed when we transgress the dictates of conscience, but we rather fear because we recognize the presence of another.

### AS THE VOICE OF GOD

It follows from the above considerations that conscience is a connecting principle between the subject/knower and another person. Conscience always involves the recognition of a living object. Fear and

other affections are not stirred by inanimate beings, for our affections are correlative with persons. "If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear." Newman continued, "If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us, on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on our receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away."<sup>17</sup> Conscience is the recognition of a voice which is not our own.

Conscience implies a relation between the soul and a something exterior, and that, moreover, superior to itself; a relation to an excellence which it does not possess, and to a tribunal over which it has no power. And since the more closely this inward monitor is respected and followed, the clearer, the more exalted, and the more varied its dictates become, and the standard of excellence is ever outstripping, while it guides our obedience, a moral conviction is thus at length obtained of the unapproachable nature as well as the supreme authority of That, whatever it is, which is the object of the mind's contemplation. Here, then, at once, we have the elements of religious system; for what is Religion but the system of relations existing between us and a Supreme Power, claiming our habitual obedience.<sup>18</sup>

By the dictate of conscience the mind recognizes an exterior Master. Analogous to the instinctive knowledge of an infant of its mother, we are able to perceive the voice of a Master, who is living, personal and sovereign. In this sense Newman went along with the proverb that conscience is "the voice of God."<sup>19</sup> He also called it God's "representative within us" and God's "representative in our hearts."

## IMAGE OF GOD IN CONSCIENCE

We shall now look into the nature of the reality appropriated by the religious imagination, that is, in what the Image of God in conscience consists: the image which is not arrived at by abstraction, an image "before it was reflected on," "over and above mere notions of God;" the image of God independent of the written records of Revelation, not requiring any knowledge of the Scriptures, nor of history and teaching of the Church; the religious image, therefore, which could possibly be embraced with real assent even by the

unlearned, the young, the busy and the afflicted.

Our image of Him never is one, but broken into numberless partial aspects, independent each of each. As we cannot see the whole starry firmament at once, but have to turn ourselves from east to west, and then round to east again, sighting first one constellation and then another, and losing these in order to gain those, so it is, as much more, with such real apprehensions as we can secure of the Divine Nature.<sup>20</sup>

The complexity of knowing God is to be expected since the idea of God involves the widest development of knowledge, much wider than knowing the whole starry firmament.

We know God in human terms. We know Him by piecemeal and we name Him according to the manner we give names to sensible realities. What God in himself is, is not commensurate with the singular image we have of Him. Further, the image we have of Him is more than the human word we give to that image, or to the word denoting that image. And yet, "No human words indeed are worthy of the Supreme Being, none are adequate; but we have no other words to use but human."<sup>21</sup> The image of God in conscience, therefore, is based on our understanding of the word "person".

Newman observed that "personal" is a word in common use. It is among the most popular, simplest, and most intelligible words to be found in language. Though "personal" cannot mean precisely the same when used of God as when used of man, "yet it is sufficiently explained by that common use, to allow its being intelligibly applied to the Divine Nature."<sup>22</sup>

"Conscience is the *voice* of God" is a proverb recognized as such by the great mass both of the young and the uneducated, by the religious few and the irreligious many. We all know that a voice is from a person who speaks, and a person who is presently speaking to us. We attribute voice to the One we meet in conscience because we have previously encountered in ordinary life persons who speak to us. Thus we claim God speaking to us, His voice being heard, because we acknowledge His presence and personality. As we do not prove the existence of a friend when he speaks to us, so we do not prove the existence of God but we become aware of His presence to us in conscience. "It is said that one can never prove but meets a person. In Newman's argument we do meet God as a Person in our conscience; there is no question of an abstract notion, but of a real presence within us, which at the same time transcends us infinitely."<sup>23</sup>

Newman illustrated this fundamental knowledge with the case of an ordinary child. He supposed a child who, having offended his

parents, places himself as if the most natural of acts, in the presence of God and begs Him to set him right with his parents. In this simple act Newman held that the child recognizes the image of Somebody. The child apprehends Somebody who is present to him, who threatens and rewards. In that simple and early mental act, the child recognizes the presence of Someone, of an unseen Being with whom nevertheless he has immediate relations,

that relation so familiar that he can address Him whenever he himself chooses; next, of One whose goodwill towards him he is assured of, and can take for granted-- nay, who loves him better, and is nearer to him, than his parents; further, of One who can hear him, wherever he happens to be, and who can read his thoughts, for his prayer need not be vocal; lastly, of One who can effect a critical change in the state of feeling of others towards him.<sup>24</sup>

Such is the essential character of the Personal--His presence and involvement in the life of the knower. This knowledge is not the prerogative of the child alone, as it is not the child's prerogative to hear the voice of conscience. The voice is present to those who are willing to listen.

Thus is the teaching of natural religion: There is a Personal God. This image of God, when apprehended in conscience by the religious imagination, is the object of a strong energetic adhesion, which works a revolution in the mind. Newman advocated that we should rather contemplate the God of our conscience as a living Being, as one Object and Reality; rather than confine ourselves to abstractions and merely comparing notion with notion. Abstractions and deductions should rather flow from the Image presented to us in conscience. Otherwise, the God-proposition would be but coldly and ineffectively accepted. Lamentably, Newman observed, "such in its character is the assent of thousands, whose imaginations are not at all kindled, nor their hearts inflamed, nor their conduct affected, by the most august of all conceivable truths."<sup>25</sup> On the contrary,

When men begin all their works with the thought of God, acting for His sake, and to fulfill His will, when they ask His blessing on themselves and their life, pray to Him for the objects they desire, and see Him in the event, whether it be according to their prayers or not, they will find everything that happens tends to confirm them in the truths about Him which live in their imagination, varied and unearthly as those truths may be. Then they are brought into His presence as that of a Living Person, and are able to hold converse with Him, and that with a directness and simplicity, with a confidence and

intimacy, *mutatis mutandis*, which we use towards an earthly superior; so that it is doubtful whether we realize the company of our fellowmen with greater keenness than these favoured minds are able to contemplate and adore the Unseen, Incomprehensible Creator.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the Person revealed to us in conscience is not our own, and must not therefore lead us to preposterous self-adoration. The Personal God, the content of religious knowledge, is a concretely-Other and yet we have a living knowledge of Him who is involved in our life.



## NOTES

1. James Collins, ed., *Philosophical Readings in Cardinal Newman* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), 1.
2. An excerpt of Pope Paul VI's address in the audience given to the participants of the Cardinal Newman Academic Symposium held in Rome, April 3-8, 1975.
3. John Henry Newman, *Grammar of Assent* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1955), 97, 108.
4. *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. XXV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 97.
5. Respectively: *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. I (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, Inc., 1966), 200; *University Sermons*, X (London: SPCK, 1970), 183; *The Idea of a University* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), 202; *Ibid.*, 211; *Ibid.*, 461.
6. *Grammar of Assent*, 102-3, 110.
7. Thomas Vargish, *Newman: The Contemplation of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 56.
8. *Grammar of Assent*, 319.
9. *Ibid.*, 98, 190.
10. *University Sermons*, X, 183.
11. *Grammar of Assent*, 303-4.
12. *Ibid.*, 98-9.
13. *Ibid.*, 99.
14. *Ibid.*, 307.
15. *Ibid.*, 331.
16. *University Sermons*, VI, 99-119.
17. *Grammar of Assent*, 101.

18. *University Sermons*, II, 18-9.
19. *Grammar of Assent*, 110.
20. *Ibid.*, 116.
21. *Ibid.*, 113.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Adrian Boekraad, "Newman's Argument to the Existence of God" in *Philosophical Studies*, VI (December 1956), 68.
24. *Grammar of Assent*, 103.
25. *Ibid.*, 112.
26. *Ibid.*, 106-7.