

THE FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

HOW DO YOU tell a small child that he is human? How do you show someone that he is a christian? The two questions are related, and both concern the formation of conscience. It would obviously be insufficient to answer in terms of some preconceived blueprint of either a human being or of a christian. It is, however, extraordinary how often such superficial and inadequate answers are given. To err is human; but when a child errs we try to persuade him, in childish terms of course, that he is somehow acting against his true nature. To love one's enemies is claimed as the hallmark of christianity; but history can show multiple examples of non-christians who have done precisely this. We may call them anonymous christians; but so often such a phrase makes no more sense than to call someone an anonymous human being. Monogamy is a firm christian precept; but Abraham, 'the father of those who believe', was contentedly polygamous. St Bernard, a mystic, and St Louis, King of France, were both canonized and rightly; but today their attitudes about war against the 'infidel' would be termed downright unchristian. To live as St Benedict Joseph Labre lived, unwashed, homeless, covered with vermin, feeding off scraps of garbage, would be judged by many as a less than human existence. Yet he was a man who loved others as he knew Christ loved him, a man of transcendent faith and hope. All of which leads one to reflect that the question, how to form conscience, admits of no facile, recipe-type answer.

In these times, civilization stands at a crossroads. The unspoken presuppositions on which society has been founded for the past few centuries are now being called in question. What were considered as bedrock principles now seem to be shifting sands. We are learning again, in our own painful way, the fallacy of judging and defining people by their exterior appearances and actions. The mirror which we thought reflected the true image of the human and the christian is seen by many as merely an out-of-date portrait, if not in many ways a caricature. Humanity is searching for a new image

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of itself; and the christian is again searching for the face of Christ.

We cannot stand still at the crossroads; but faced as we are with the insecurity of the unknown we can all too easily yield to the insidious temptation to turn back. We can retrace with nostalgic or bitter steps the familiar and comforting road we have always known. We can embalm our memories and enshrine them in monuments as massively impregnable and as sterile as the pyramids that stand, symbolically, in the barren desert sands. We can make of the past a graveyard in which we live in peaceful sadness, but where signs of life and joy seem sacrilegious. We can consume ourselves in mourning over the corpse of the dead mother and forget the child to whom she has given life. But if we search for the risen Christ in the empty tomb, for the living amongst the dead, we shall be inconsolable and without faith. Formed we shall be, but in the image and likeness of the dead Christ.

The alternative is to move forward along the road of the unknown, the hidden, the mysterious, bearing our memories not as a burden but as a source of creative energy that drives us onward. Here the temptation is to reject the past. But to attempt to obliterate the past is as futile as the attempt to dictate or to deny the future. Authentic progress necessarily implies continuity with a past that has brought us to this new point of departure. The furrow behind us may be crooked; but we cannot straighten it by pretending it is not there, any more than we can rectify our mistakes by looking back over our shoulders. To deny history is to deny an essential constituent of our humanity; it is also to repudiate the christian God whom we know only through our history, social and personal. Whilst not denying the symbolic value of the gesture so many make today when they drop out of the plastic society and attempt to live in communes, it is curious to note that many of them are attempting to live a myth of the american frontier that never existed.

The symbolic value of that gesture is that it points up the truth that genuine continuity always involves a search for depth, a laying hold of the very tap-root whence true humanity and true christianity are nourished. The fallacy is to imagine that this can be done by a literal living of the past. Not that the past has not to be relived. But it can only be relived in terms of the present and in terms of religious symbolism – ‘Do this (relive this) in memory of me’. But the Christ in whom we relive the eucharist is not someone in the past; he is here with us all days, even to the end of the world. What he asks of us is not to go back to the life-style of the

early church in Jerusalem, but to live out the meaning of his life in terms of the year 1971. This in turn implies a much more radical ability to change than many people envisage. In terms of education, it implies that formation of conscience can never be the literal imitation of a certain series of gestures; it must ever be a thing of depth. A person's conscience is not formed by getting him to accept blindly that certain things are right and others wrong. Rather is it a matter of leading him to the point where he is capable of accepting and rejecting things from the heart, the inner core of his being. A christian is one whose 'Amen' to the body and blood of Christ is the expression of his whole self.

When we are talking about the formation of conscience we are really talking about opening people up to those possibilities of being christian that are within their reach here and now. We are also talking about helping them to grasp the opportunities for growing here and now as human beings. In this process we inevitably come up against the personal mystery of each individual. Our response to this may be either fear and rejection or respect and loving acceptance. This depends on whether we regard the mystery of the other person as a threat or a challenge. The great defect of institutions, which are needed to give an original inspiration a structure, is that they tend to replace inspiration by patterns of behaviour. Hence their constant need for reform and renewal. An institution that has hardened in its structures will breed an institutional conscience which will be content to measure itself uniquely against the institutional pattern of behaviour; it will be quite unable to accept anyone who deviates from that norm. The more sacred the institution, the more violent the reaction against anyone who seems to threaten its structures.

Obviously such institutions, when they are religious, will form people of great moral uprightness with a profound sense of duty, but often with a terrifying narrowness of vision and even a complete blindness to any good outside the institution. Even worse, there can also be a complete blindness to the very real limitations of the institution itself. For if conscience is to be measured against it how can it be defective? And even when such institutions are renewed, they tend to carry with them the inertia of the patterns of the past and to impose reform in terms of another (perhaps more liberal) uniformity, when the situation calls for creative experimentation for those who desire this, whilst not disturbing directly those who are too fixed in their ways to support change. The attempt in

recent years to form a liturgical conscience in the Church illustrates this admirably. The law of the liturgy had been uniformity. When reform came, it came in the same way of uniformity. We were to have a new liturgy; but it was still to be the same for everybody and experimentation was severely limited. Those who were unable to accept change felt that the source of their spiritual life was being stifled; whilst those who felt the need for reform were often frustrated in their attempts to be truly creative.

Once we broaden our concept of conscience beyond that of conformity even to a good institution and its laws, we have to start thinking in terms of the mystery of each human person in himself. Here we must move with great circumspection. It is all too easy to write someone off because their life-style seems to be in flagrant contradiction with much that we hold as absolute and sacred for ourselves. But if we do this we shall be shutting our eyes to the very real values which such a person has in his life and from which we ourselves could learn much. The history of christian missions is full of examples of this sort. Efforts were made to uproot pagan practices, which in effect would have provided admirable grafts for christianity. Each person has his very real values; for no man can live without some sort of value. Even the drug addict has his 'fix' as an absolute, and the alcoholic his bottle. Twisted values? Yes, but not to the addict and the alcoholic. Does not their very addiction indicate a misguided search for a transcendent value? The point is that the process of formation can only begin from where each individual stands here and now. Formation begins with a search for the person as he is, and a complete and unpossessive acceptance of him as he is. How many children rebel against parents who wish to form them in their own image and likeness? How many adults are stunted as human beings because they did not rebel against such parental possessiveness? It is also sadly true that the formation of religious was often in terms of living up to an abstract and unrealizable ideal of 'the perfect religious'. The result was that young novices would incarnate this ideal in the director of novices, and model themselves on him or her; and the inevitable reaction later on was a complete rejection of the model.

Each of us emerges from the womb with a potential which should be brought to realization in the process of a lifetime. There will never be a time when our conscience is fully mature and formed. If there were, life would simply be the dull repetition of certain attitudes and experiences which have nothing further to offer. It is

a sad judgement on a certain type of formation of moral conscience to find adults who still confess themselves as if they were children: even to the point of unconsciously adopting a childish tone of voice. We are formed not by being told to do things but by being led into an experience. And, just as important, we are formed by being led to reflect on our experiences. Brute experience can never form anyone, if indeed it can be had; for we reflect either consciously or subconsciously on everything that happens to us. The whole point of formation of conscience is to help people to integrate into their lives their own experience, and to call into consciousness the sub-conscious reflection.

Ideally, a person's conscience is formed by leading him into the particular experience that is just right for him at any given moment. But this demands such great discernment and such ideal conditions that it is practically impossible. But it is the reason why Ignatius of Loyola was so insistent about not permitting a person to enter into the experience of the Spiritual Exercises unless and until he was ready for it. It is also the reason why he incorporated into the novices' formation a whole series of what were called 'experiments': a better term would be 'experience'. But to lead someone into an experience demands great unselfishness. It is their experience; and we must not attempt in any way to programme their reactions as the reactions of astronauts are programmed. Fly to the moon: but when this and this happens you are to react in this and this particular way. Nor is it going to help to become impatient when someone reacts either childishly or in an adolescent way to some experience. As far as this particular experience is concerned, the person is at a childish or an adolescent stage and the process of maturing can only begin from there. We must then be patient enough to allow that person to live out a childhood or adolescence, perhaps even in middle age. We can only begin, as they say, 'where it's at'. Each of us assimilates our experiences according to our own rhythms and capacities; in this each of us is unique. We can learn to recognize joy and love and sorrow; but we can never circumscribe or define them, or understand fully what they mean to someone else.

The difficulty is that there are good and bad fish in life's net. We do have bad experiences thrust upon us in all our vulnerable unreadiness. We can also fail to appreciate a good experience because it comes too soon or too late. Here the problem of formation is to help people to assimilate and integrate the bad experiences into

their total lives. What has happened, has happened. A wound has been left; and we must learn not to pick at its scab so that it never heals, and to live with the scar it will inevitably leave. Sterile regrets will only re-open old sores. We cannot live in terms of what might or might not have been, of what should have happened or what should not. Nor can we pretend that something never happened or attempt so to rationalize about the bad that it seems inevitable. We have to remain open enough and peaceful enough with ourselves so that we can go forward with the process of living and be ready to learn later what is good and what is bad. To do otherwise means running the appalling risk of uprooting the wheat with the cockle. We have to accept ourselves as all of a piece, and not make premature judgements or attempts at self-justification.

It is the grave defect of a certain legalistic type of formation of moral conscience that it states things brutally in terms of good and evil. This can lead one who has been so formed to judge or justify himself in the same crude fashion. But life and those who live it are not as rough hewn as that, and no healthy and adequate formation can result from such an attitude. There is need here of a moral formation in terms of values and of the priority of values. No law can enshrine a value: the best it can do is to point to a value which has to be sought and found, often by trial and error. Formation of conscience demands that judgment be left to God and justification as well; which means that our human judgment has to remain open-ended, that we accept justification as gift, not as a good conduct medal.

For those who are responsible for the formation of others, there is need for a profound attitude of non-judgmental availability. People will want to be told whether they are right or wrong; and this is the last thing that they should be told. If they are going to be formed as mature persons and christians, they must learn to take up their own responsibilities towards their actions and evaluate them in terms of themselves. There can be that dependence on a 'guru' of one type or another which prolongs spiritual infantilism into ripe old age. The role of a director is to help broaden the individual point of view, to suggest a larger context and hint that there may be other values to be taken into consideration.

In this way, the individual has the opportunity to understand that his personal conscience can be formed only in reference to the community. In reality this is the normal context for the formation of conscience. We are formed or deformed to begin with by the community of family, which carries with it its own interpretation of

history. Even when this family community is rejected, the rejection usually takes place in the name of another type of community. Here again the phenomenon of the commune has its message. The development of conscience is authentic when it leads man to open himself more and more to others. One can suspect any sort of development that leads to the almost paranoid exclusion of certain types of people. Indeed one of the gravest symptoms of the present religious and political revolution is that of the polarization of certain groups who refuse resolutely to have any openness towards each other. The desire for approval and the fear of disapproval have to be overcome before any constructive dialogue can begin between people whose life-styles and principles are literally poles apart on the surface, but who are often searching for the same values.

Each of us dances to our own individual music; and those who do not hear the music to which I am dancing will be unable to make sense of my movements and gestures. This thought, from a spanish mystic, contains a deep truth. It expresses poetically the content of the christian precept that we love our enemies. Love is nothing without trust; and we must trust that others are dancing to their own tune even when we are deaf to it. We shall never form people until we make a very serious act of faith in their sincerity, especially when that sincerity expresses itself in ways that are nonsense to us or that violate our personal moral standards. Whatever community may be (and no one has yet found out its meaning), one certain element is a wholehearted and loving acceptance of others, 'warts and all'. Only in this way will the diversity of harmonies be eventually blended into a symphony. We shall be able to do this only in the measure in which we learn gradually to dance to our own music without fear of disapproval from others, or desire for their approval.

This is not the same as simply 'doing our own thing'. That phrase implies a disregard and an exclusion of others. It is not the following of conscience but the pursuit of individuality. Human conscience necessarily implies a growing openness to humanity in all its aspects and varieties. Only in this way can we ever situate our own experience in the context of the human history in which it happens. We are enriched by the lives of others in the measure in which we are open to what they have to teach us. Some things may not appeal; but that is no reason for excluding them from our awareness. It took Peter some time to understand what the washing of his feet signified; and have we, as christians, yet understood the meaning of the crucifixion?

But are there no absolutes, no unquestionable criteria against which to measure the formation of conscience? For the christian there are, and they are in the precepts of the gospel. 'If you would be perfect . . .', 'Unless a man . . .', 'He that loves his life . . .', and many others. These are the laws of Christ; they do not give a facile measure of conduct, but rather put each of us before the question of the values on which we are building our lives. Time and again the gospel brings the christian back to his own responsibility for his way of life. Time and again it teaches him to see his life as a whole and to search after the values which concern that life as a whole, which he must choose by personal decision. The God who is the source of our freedom is pleased with nothing less than a free service. The God who is gift can only be attained in the gift of self.

The formation of conscience concerns the growth and development of the whole person to the full stature of Christ. It can only be effected by one who is prepared to take the risk of living to the full all the rich capacities of human nature. It is so easy to settle for less, to fabricate a life out of what brings a sense of well-being and security and comfort. But such a life is a pure fabrication, as is any life that seeks to establish on earth a security which belongs to heaven. Formation of conscience implies that we put an end to playing games with ourselves, with others and with God, and seek to be who we are, in faith and hope and love.

There is no easy recipe for attaining this. It is obviously a whole attitude to life that is either total or not at all. But it is also a thing that grows as we grow, bringing us up against what was long ago called 'the sacrament of the present moment'. Formation of conscience involves an increasing awareness of the manifold aspects of life and the patience to reflect constantly on their wonder and meaning. Surely this is the real sense of any examination of conscience, which, instead of being a sort of moral accounting, should be rather a means of reflecting on experience and transforming instinctive reactions into true human responses. The whole of life is a process of formation; no particular age is privileged. We can, at any stage, refuse to go on and try to live off our capital gains; but these will soon deteriorate. The only time when formation will cease is when we have exhausted our capacity to grow in love; and who but God can set limits to that? We grow as more and more we slough off that evil possessiveness which stunts our development, and learn to lose ourselves in trust and love of our world and all it contains, and find in it the presence of Christ, our true conscience.