

# THE GUILTY CONSCIENCE

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**T**HE EXPERIENCE of and response to guilt has been handled for thousands of years by two principal agents of society, the representatives of religion and law. In the last fifty years, psychology and psychiatry have assumed an increasing role in the understanding and handling of this experience. So much so that for a long time these branches of the behavioural sciences came under the general suspicion and condemnation reserved for modern trends in human behaviour. Psychology was seen by the Church to be a threat to man's observance of moral law and therefore detrimental to his well being. On the other hand, and to an increasing extent, man felt intuitively that the concept of sin, christianity's principal means of guiding and preserving human inviolateness, had lost its relevance to his immediate needs.

The widespread loss of faith and its practice was, until very recently, explained away by christianity as the fruit of man's collective badness described in terms of pride, folly, stubbornness, blindness, wilful refusal to see the truth, and other pejorative terms. It is only recently that the truth is slowly dawning, namely that the massive desertion from christianity corresponds far more accurately to the latter's failure to communicate its truths meaningfully in an age of unprecedented opportunity for the growth of human potential. If christianity could not actively foster man's legitimate yearnings, then reliance on the Church as a nurturing mother was inevitably going to decrease; and this is precisely what is happening. But the abandonment of faith, man's rejection of an image of inadequacy as in terms of a legalistic framework of goodness and badness and of infantile dependence on authority, has not in itself produced a satisfactory answer to humanity's longing for human growth and integrity. The innumerable obstacles, difficulties and failings which face each individual's progress to wholeness have not disappeared because the language and implication of sin have been rejected. On the contrary, the perpetual human contradictions remain, but now minus the traditional solutions, particularly the common practice of confession.

This state of confusion, which is reflected and repeated on several

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other fronts of the contemporary scene, has many of the qualities of a tug-of-war. One team stands for conservation and is anxious to return to the security of the familiar practices; the other defiantly opposes the past, even if the future is far from clear. Much energy is spent in this struggle between the old and the new which is only useful if the opposition ceases to be one of blind forces but allows for the emergence of new, clear and valid concepts. As far as guilt is concerned, no other sciences have contributed as much as the psychological ones. The following pages will review the main findings.

### *The role of psychology*

In a recent paper<sup>1</sup> I referred to the presence of two feeling systems operating within all personalities. The first refers to feelings of approval and disapproval in personal and inter-personal terms, and the second to feelings experienced on the basis of acceptance or violation of impersonal laws, civil or ecclesiastical. The christian dilemma is the dramatic and growing indifference to law, and particularly the flouting of the ordinary *magisterium* of the Church. Since the Church's understanding of itself had depended so largely on obedience to authority, it is understandable that the present opposition is creating anxiety which assumes panic proportions in some quarters. On the other hand, if it is accepted – as it is increasingly – that blind obedience, based on a paternalistic authoritarian structure, is inimical to human good, then the roots of human integrity need another frame of reference.

This frame of reference is being built, slowly but with growing authority, by the behavioural sciences of psychology, sociology, anthropology and others, which aim to discover and define with increasing accuracy the nature of man primarily in existential and empirical terms, thus displacing abstract, metaphysical and legalistic concepts as the principal means of description and comprehension of the phenomenon of man.

An element in the tug-of-war previously mentioned is that the body of knowledge and the new direction brought forth by the behavioural sciences is immediately condemned by the conservative side with one word, humanism. The other side replies, correctly, that a christian cannot do justice to the image of God in which he has been created unless he understands as fully as possible the

<sup>1</sup> 'What is Sensitivity?', *The Way*, Vol. 11 No 2 April, 1970.

evolving structure of the human personality. Without this knowledge there is every likelihood of doing injustice to God's plan and, without realizing it, the Church has been doing precisely this.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the major figures of the modern revolution should consciously and deliberately have rejected christianity. In doing so they were unfortunately throwing out the baby with the bath water; but perhaps a critical point had been reached at which the break-through they made could not have been effected in any other way.

One such person was Sigmund Freud, whose genius revolutionized our understanding of the human personality. Even today, some three quarters of a century after his initial writings, most of society – let alone the Church – still remains ignorant of the vital significance of dynamic psychology.

Freud and the many other workers who have followed in his footsteps have pushed back our understanding of human nature to the pre-school years, drawing attention to the vital interaction between child and parents as the foundation of the future personality. This is a phase of development which precedes and anticipates the effective intervention of reason, which dominated so much of our thinking until recently. But even when the rudiments of reason have emerged and can be used, namely from the school years onwards, there continues uninterruptedly an inter-personal growth of the individual which is the unending source and dynamism of personal life. This personal life has been illuminated by three separate schools of psychology, freudian, neo-freudians and behaviourists: and also by clinical psychiatry. The guilty conscience will be examined through the findings of these theories.

### *Freudian theory*

As is well known, Freud started his psychological work in his forties, having given up his academic neurological studies. He treated patients with a variety of symptoms that did not yield satisfactorily to the orthodox treatment of the day. In due course he adopted a new approach, which was to encourage the patient to talk about himself. This process gave birth to psychoanalysis, a technique by which the patient could talk about matters that distressed him or caused conflict. Very quickly the genius of Freud spotted that the material which came pouring out had a large component of instinctual content in terms of sexuality and aggression; and that, furthermore, if he preserved a neutral approach,

neither approving nor disapproving of the information, the patient seemed to be able to reach memories of events which had been forgotten. Not only was Freud thus able to identify more clearly than anyone before him the importance of the unconscious and the mechanism of repression, but he soon discovered that very often he himself was treated with the same intensity of feeling as had previously been shown to parental figures. This discovery he labelled 'transference'; and now he had the appropriate means of helping the patient to relive earlier experiences and to reach the past. The experiences in the past which were most frequently relived were precisely those of conflict and guilt, which the individual could not integrate in his life and which continued to exercise a powerful emotional impact on him.

Guilt came to be recognized as an unpleasant feeling associated with the child's experience of itself and in relation to its parents. These are primarily bodily sensations, instinctual experiences of infantile sexuality and aggression and are registered through the infant's experience of itself at the very dawn of life. Freud postulated a hypothetical site of the human psyche called the 'id', within which reside these primitive instinctual drives seeking constant gratification. Life thus commences with the pleasure principle in the ascendant. But opposed to this primitive desire for instinctual fulfilment is the presence of the prohibitions and the limitations of the fulfilling, gratifying source, principally the mother. The mother's attitude and, later on, the paternal attitude to instinctual gratification will determine the child's attitude to its own body. Here is a prominent, recurrent and elementary source of conflict between the child's desire and the parental response. Given the traditional fears of society towards bodily pleasure in general and sexual pleasure in particular, it is not surprising that Freud associated guilt feelings with a whole array of forbidden, prohibited and repressed instinctual experiences. Repression is a technical term describing a psychological mechanism which removes conflicting, painful, guilt-ridden experiences from the conscious to the unconscious point of the human psyche. Here they continue to exert a real influence on the person, often through the presence of marked and uninterrupted guilt feelings which cannot be traced consciously to any particular event. The technique of psychoanalysis helped the individual to reach precisely this unconscious, repressed material and allowed it to be handled by the 'ego', the conscious, directing part of the self.

superegos, subject to relentless guilt feelings, are people who have suffered the combined adverse impact of a general cultural paternalism coupled with a strong expression of it in their own family setting.

Part of the current withdrawal from christianity is due, not only to the Church's failure to meet man's needs adequately, but also to the realization that the sense of badness, the burden of guilt experienced by many, was not always justified. The awakening which saw the Church as failing in its role of fostering growth and development was bad enough. But the recognition that the Church had invested man with an unwarranted sense of badness was too much, and the abandonment of the practice of faith with a consequent reduction of guilt feelings has been experienced by many as truly liberating, particularly in the matter of sexuality, one of the two principal freudian instincts.

The other instinct is that of aggression, and Freud postulated that the whole personality was shaped by the way these two instincts, innately present in human beings, developed and were handled by the child and its parents. The presence of aggression, which Freud interpreted as existing very early on, in the first year of life (Melanie Klein, one of his followers, identifies its presence in the first few months), has the capacity of hurting, damaging or destroying its object. Oral aggression, the baby sucking and biting mother's breast, becomes the earliest sensation of this instinct and inevitably it is intimately related in this situation with gratification, the assuagement of hunger. The fusion of these two instincts, aggression and oral sexuality, indeed all forms of sexuality, is described as sadism and has its origin, in freudian theory, in these early months. Be that as it may, the expression of aggression causes pain, hurt and damage in a loved person and evokes in the offender the other recurrent and powerful sensation of guilt. The degree of this guilt-feeling depends on three elements. There is the intensity and frequency of the aggressive act, which varies from child to child. Some children are born with a tendency to overactivity and aggressive behaviour, others are more placid. Guilt feelings will also correspond to the degree of sensitivity and the intensity of angry and primitive responses on the part of mother and, later on, father. Melanie Klein, working with young children, has postulated that at this early stage the child may have a grossly exaggerated phantasy of the damage inflicted, living in its imagination untold terrors of having torn mother to pieces and being unable to restore her to

With increasing experience Freud traced the origin of guilt to what he considered a universal event, namely the oedipus complex. Here the little boy's instincts are directed towards mother. Bodily, social gratification of an infantile nature seeks fulfilment with her. But the father is present and is visualized by the son to be forbidding this desire under pain of castration. The resolution of this complex leads to the boy's abandonment of incestuous desires and the acceptance of the paternal values and outlook; in technical language he identifies with the masculine role and gives up the competitive stance. Or, in very simple terms, the boy says: 'if I can't push you away and win mother for myself alone, I will join forces, become like you and one day I too will enjoy what you have now'. The failure to resolve this primitive triangular situation is given as a persistent source of guilt feelings.

Still later on, in fact in 1923,<sup>2</sup> Freud developed his theory further and saw guilt feelings as arising not only from the unresolved oedipus complex but from the presence of a superego, the part of the psyche in which reside not only all the ideal qualities which the boy should imitate from the father but, in addition, the collected 'dos' and 'don'ts' from father, mother, teachers and other figures of authority. Thus the superego has come to be seen as, and equated with, the primitive conscience. A word of warning is needed against this formulation. First of all the superego is a term derived from freudian psychology and cannot be considered to include all the dimensions appropriate to the human psyche. Indeed, there is an undue emphasis on instinctual drives in this system which leaves other vital factors out of consideration. Even when these considerations are added, the superego is an entity which excludes the reality of God, considered by Freud to be a phantasy.

Nevertheless, the term superego is a most useful descriptive term for the presence in human beings of forces partly conscious and partly unconscious which express the collective ideals and prohibited patterns of behaviour; and failure to conform with these directives produces guilt feelings. In some individuals, brought up in an authoritative, restrictive environment, the pressures exerted by the superego are particularly powerful; and the christian tradition, with its strong emphasis on law, obedience and submission to authority – be it parental, scholastic or hierarchical, reinforced and added its own distinctive contribution. Those with powerful

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<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund: *The Ego and the Id*. (Standard English Edition, Vol XIX).

wholeness. These phantasies persist for some in the unconscious, finding their way into horrific dreams. Aggression evokes not only powerful guilt feelings but equally intense feelings of misery, sadness and depression; and these can be seen clearly both in children and adults. Guilt and misery cry out for reparation and restoration to a previous harmony through forgiveness. A theme so familiar to the gospels is dealt with, no less powerfully, by Melanie Klein, an orthodox freudian, in describing the earliest origins of these events. The cycle of aggression, guilt, depression, reparation and forgiveness is identified in the first year of life and lays the foundation for these processes subsequently.

To recapitulate, excessive guilt may result from one or more of the following three reasons. The child may be constitutionally, that is to say in its make up, prone to morbid aggressivity; the mother or both parents may be unduly sensitive to this, and most important of all, the latter may be unable to foster an appropriate atmosphere of forgiveness.

#### *Neo - Freudian theories*

Freudian theory took as its foundation the instinctual bodily experiences, and as such has a powerful and universal basis which cannot be ignored or dismissed. What can and has been severely criticized is the limitation and narrow vision of seeing the personality as entirely shaped by these biological drives. The human personality develops through a much wider exchange of human characteristics; and these factors were identified and elaborated, both by those of Freud's contemporaries who ceased to be his disciples, and by the next generation of psychoanalysts.

No one denies that the body is the foundation-stone on which other feelings develop; but gradually psychologists came to realize that these feelings were just as important. Reference was made to a selection of these in my previous paper 'What is sensitivity?', in which I mentioned feelings of trust, autonomy, initiative and self-esteem. Some of these are of particular importance to the generation of guilt feelings.

Perhaps the single most important process for human growth is the ability of the child to develop at the appropriate time the characteristics and qualities which will accumulatively allow it, in the second half of the second decade, to separate successfully from parents and lead an individual self-sufficient and independent life of its own. Within these fifteen years the child will discover sufficient

confidence, competence and anxiety-free self-awareness to cope with being alone, and to take the initiative to establish the balance between closeness without loss of its separate identity and distance without alienation, above all to learn the sense of its own self-esteem so as to feel worthy of the trust and love of others as well as able to return these feelings. In short, these are the critical years for the balanced development of its intellectual, social and emotional characteristics, the last being of primary importance for inter-personal relationships and the one most severely neglected by traditional christian education which emphasized intellectual growth at the expense of instinctual and emotional development.

For all this to take place the child needs an adequate constitutional make-up: that is to say, sufficient innate potential largely genetically determined, and a facilitating environment, which means parents principally, and teachers later on, who will respond with sufficient sensitivity to the unfolding needs of the child at the right time and in the correct way, so as to allow the maximum human potential to develop. This is the ideal, and each family will approximate to this. It is necessary, however, to ensure that the values of a culture and the individual characteristics of a family do not threaten this process of growth.

Now the emphasis on authority as an end in itself is extremely inimical to this process of growth. The child is small, helpless, incompetent and severely limited in comparison with its parents. Their primary task is to act as a source of protection, offering assistance, support and security for the child's growth. Their role is not to appear as a rock of strength, wisdom, infallibility and majesty which the child looks up to, watches at a distance and cannot hope to imitate, feeling that it can only be right insofar as it agrees with this source of all wisdom and strength. Such a relationship is in fact a collision course, at the end of which the only appropriate solution for the child is to overcome, defeat and take over, holding this position until in turn someone stronger supervenes. This rather exaggerated picture has been the prototype of parent/child, Church/children relationships for centuries. The present confusion is due to the failure to notice that the good news is an invitation to become one in the Son in a relationship of intimacy, love and oneness with the Father, the very antithesis of the pattern of the Church we are leaving behind.

Clearly, guilty feelings abound in the relationship that has existed up to now. The dependent, helpless child is seeking personal

growth; he relies on the understanding, goodwill, care and security of the parents in a service of love. If this is not available, the appropriate goals of growth become forbidden, guilt-laden aspirations lying in a false self buried in an obedient, submissive, appropriately minusculed external self living in fear. The mantle of fear and submission may, in fact, be abandoned in a large scale revolt, as is happening at present; but the underlying layer of insecurity, uncertainty and guilt, in taking the initiative and asserting oneself confidently, is less easily reached. Much of the currently exaggerated, angry response is coming forth precisely from those individuals who have released themselves from the social shackles of the past, but who have yet to find the peace and inner certainty of their newly-discovered selves. If the foundations were not laid at the appropriate stage of development, acquisition of initiative, self-direction, self-assertion and self-acceptance are much more difficult later on, particularly as psychologically these characteristics may be felt emotionally as forbidden, guilt-laden experiences. What applies to the Church in particular applies to society in general, which is emerging from the same paternalistic structures. Part of the reaction is, of course, to dismiss all authority in the hope that such a liberation will solve the problem. Unfortunately, this is not the answer, because man needs values to grow and to sustain himself; and these values are largely handed down and cannot be perfunctorily dismissed, ignored or supplanted overnight. Independent man without values regarding his humanity is like a rudderless ship. The ensuing chaos is echoed in large scale uncertainty, anxiety, guilt and the despair of purposelessness. The answer, however, is not a return to the past but the creation of new and valid orientations. This is dealt with at the end of the article; but before doing so we have to return to two other psychological entities, behaviourism and psychological illness.

### *Behaviourism*

Important as the dynamic schools of psychology have been in the past three-quarters of a century, their theories have not passed unchallenged. Another school, namely the behaviourists, led by the american J. B. Watson, and using the principles of conditioned reflexes discovered by Pavlov, eschewed the whole range of introspective experiences identified by psychoanalysts. Behaviour was strictly described in terms of stimulus and the spontaneous response of the person. The famous example is the spontaneous salivation

of dogs at the sight of food. Thousands of experiments have been carried out in laboratories all over the world ever since, both on animals and on human beings, exploring the principles of learning now to be understood simply in terms of blind, conditioned responses.

Man shares with animals a variety of spontaneous physiological responses to food, water, sex, reproduction and fear; but he clearly has an immensely wider range of intervening and effective action. If behaviourism is not interpreted with the blind faith of its adherents, who reject the valid contributions of dynamic psychology and introspection, it provides an immensely valuable range of theoretical and practical understanding of human behaviour. Essentially it shows that a great deal of our everyday conduct is a matter of habit, the non-technical word for a conditioned reflex or an S-R bond (Stimulus-Response).

Now guilt has been described in this article as an unpleasant feeling associated with the child's experience of itself or with the parents with respect to its instinctual and other feelings. It can be described more accurately as a sensation made up on the one hand of anxiety and fear leading on to the anticipation of retribution, and on the other of pain, a compound of mental and physical anguish. The pain which specifically expresses the human response is the characteristic of ambivalence. This refers to the conflict between love and hate, which is central in human development, since parents, who are the source of all love, are also the source of frustration and punishment.

Now if guilt feelings arise most clearly in the early years of life, in the relationship between child and parents, certain vital consequences result. First of all guilt is an experience which, on the basis of habit formation, has a very long period of development and consolidation or, in technical terms, of reinforcement. Guilt now becomes a conditioned reflex which is easily aroused, and both societies and certain individuals can become special victims of this experience. Now, whenever fear has a prominent central role in establishing the norms of a society, there will be a tendency for guilt feelings to be prominent, since anxiety plays such a large part in the establishment of guilt feelings. When such social norms impinge in turn on particularly sensitive and vulnerable individuals, then the combination leads to the presence of morbid or pathological guilt feelings.

Future historians will have to ascertain to what extent conditions

in the Church have approximated to this situation since the Reformation, and how far the core of christianity has been removed from the words of St John:

In love there can be no fear,  
but fear is driven out by perfect love:  
because to fear is to expect punishment,  
and anyone who is afraid  
is still imperfect in love.<sup>3</sup>

A further consequence, of even greater importance, is that the value of guilt lies in its ability to act as a signal for reparation and for the restoration of a loving relationship with God and one's neighbour, who for the christian have primacy of importance. Guilt feelings generated in an inter-personal exchange are infinitely more important than those based on the infringement of impersonal laws. Hence the significance hitherto attached to a legalistic, authoritarian system as the most conducive to personal spiritual growth has been fundamentally wrong; and the most cursory attention to the scriptures, which place inter-personal love at the centre and law at the periphery, would affirm the insights from psychology.

Not only in the matter of sexuality but in general, men and women have rejected a system which has stressed guilt and has deprived individuals of the possibility of personal growth.

### *Neurosis*

Psychoanalysis, behaviourism and ultimately the every-day clinical experience of psychiatrists provide the combined sources of information regarding morbid guilt. The word neurosis is used by all with a variety of meanings. Essentially, dynamic psychology refers to neurosis in terms of conflict and failure of personal maturation, and behaviourism in terms of conditioned reflexes mediated by anxiety. The meeting point of these two theories will be found in what psychiatrists call obsessional neurosis, and what lay language describes as scrupulosity. There can be no doubt whatsoever that scrupulosity is identical with obsessional features in the personality.

The obsessional personality is one in which anxiety is prominent and takes the form of compulsive attention to detail, which becomes increasingly detached from normative values. Correct behaviour

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Jn 4, 18.

for its own sake rather than for its intrinsic significance becomes by stages a frantic preoccupation with right and wrong unconnected with objective normality and practice. In fact the person is no longer free to exercise his conscience, because the whole personality is driven by a morbid anxiety which totally controls behaviour. It is the relief of this anxiety, rather than the pursuance of a particular course, thought or action, that dominates behaviour. This, however, is not recognized by the person, who sincerely believes that failure to carry out some practice in a particular way will have dire consequences for themselves.

Obsessional behaviour is clearly a neuro-physiological pattern controlled by a specific mode of anxiety. The contents of obsessional thoughts and practices will vary with the inner experience of the individual. If christian teaching and practices predominate, then these will feature prominently and be labelled as scruples. In the absence of specific christian teaching, anxiety will still predominate, but the actual contents of the patient's morbid preoccupation will be related to anxiety and guilt, with non-christian experiences predominating.

Guilt associated with obsessional neurosis is a severely incapacitating handicap, which is far removed from the freely chosen actions and consequences of normal individuals. While neurosis affects a few, obsessional tendencies are common; and a distinction has constantly to be made between the appropriate response of an individual in moral decisions and the influence of anxiety which restricts authentic freedom, although camouflaging as over-conscientiousness.

#### *Guilt and christianity*

Throughout this article there is a severe criticism of the outlook and practice of the catholic Church, which formerly placed so much emphasis on a legalistic, mechanistic and paternalistic framework of reference for much of its spiritual structure. It is incumbent on those who criticize to suggest valid alternative concepts. In their absence we have the current familiar scene of large sections of western society which have rejected traditional outlooks and values, searching aimlessly for new ones, lost in transitional religions and in a plethora of fleeting visions of salvation.

The behavioural sciences have a valid contribution to make, and none more than the psychological sciences. Decade by decade there is a slow but certain advancement of knowledge regarding the

basic structure of growth of human beings. In the midst of many and contradictory new theories, opinions have to be reached with care and circumspection, avoiding hasty conclusions. But inevitably man is discovering the multiple springs that provide the waters of life. Attention will have to be given to minute details which were not even recognized a short while ago. Man is complex; and this should not surprise christians, who believe that nothing less than the infinite possibility of the image of God is unfolding.

All the valid discoveries of the behavioural sciences should be received with gratitude and acclamation; for, with this enlightenment, man will be able to realize more fully his potential. *This must become christianity's primary concern.* Nothing has damaged christianity more than man's conviction that the Church is not concerned with his well-being which, visualized in spiritual terms, had a separate and independent existence. Saving one's soul at the expense of one's humanity is a meaningless concept justifiably rejected by one and all. Salvation is a relationship of love of the whole person with God and neighbour. It is initiated and sustained by God, requiring in turn the inviolateness of human beings; and for this, personal growth assumes a significance second to none. The principal value of guilt must be its ability to assist and facilitate personal growth, which achieves by degrees the greater realization of the human potential. To the charge of humanism the reply must be that the full realization of the human potential implies a searching for God and a response to him when he is found. C. G. Jung would assert that man's seeking of God is part and parcel of the human psyche, a tendency present in the collective unconscious. Be that as it may, man without God raises fundamental questions concerning humanity which cannot be ignored, so there is little fundamental risk that the pursuance of man's growth and inviolateness will plunge humanity into the morass of materialism.

On the contrary, christianity must restore within itself the meaning of the incarnation in which Christ, living the fulness of his personality, could respond to himself and to others with a richness of love that has no equal. The Church within which Christ lives must seek to advance this same fulness of being in its own people. Its immediate task is to help people reach their inner selves, their true humanity, and be freed from the cumbersome layers of legalism which detract from human integrity.

When guilt is experienced, the appropriate response is the seeking of personal growth, emotionally, socially and intellectually, which

will increase the likelihood of a loving response to self and others now and on the next occasion. In loving our neighbour as ourselves we are of course loving God; but the clarity, intensity and perseverance with which this is likely to be pursued depends on an awareness of his existence and participation in his grace. This is where faith makes its unique contribution.

Both priest and psychiatrist aim to heal and contribute towards human wholeness, which is akin to holiness. The psychiatrist, if he does his job properly, allows the patient to experience himself or herself with greater freedom, insight and self-awareness; and to the extent to which he has facilitated human growth he has enriched God's image in man. The encounter between psychiatrist and patient may or may not specifically refer to God, but the healing exchange undoubtedly contributes towards spiritual growth, with overt or covert awareness of the meaning of God; who is Love.

The encounter between priest and penitent assumes the existence and meaning of God; but it does not enhance either unless it permits personal growth which frees and mobilizes love.