

# Conscience: Living in Truth

In this article Vincent Twomey SVD who teaches moral theology in Maynooth, asks what is the importance and role of conscience in our world



*Living in Truth* is the title of a collection of writings by Vaclav Havel. The writings date from his time as a dissident under the post-totalitarian Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. They are indispensable reading for anyone trying to understand modern society, since, as he says '... the emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system (is) only an inflated caricature of modern life in general.' The title captures the essence of the book: living in or within the truth is to live according to one's conscience, i.e. not to live within a lie.

The lie is that system of untruths and daily compromises which permeates society. Fear and apathy ensure the continuation of this system: fear of losing one's job, endangering one's promotion or the future of one's children, etc. and apathy due to a deep-rooted demoralisation, stemming from the loss of hope and the loss of belief that life has a meaning. Such a system 'drives each man into a foxhole of purely material existence and offers him deceit as the main form of communication with society.'

This is the *crisis of human identity* which Vaclav Havel calls that tragic aspect of man's status in modern technological civilisation marked by a declining awareness of the absolute. The result, he says, is 'the gradual erosion of all moral standards, the breakdown of all criteria of decency, and the widespread destruction of confidence in the meaning of any such values as truth, adherence to principles, sincerity, altruism, dignity and honour.' In a word, the result is the inability to live within the truth that is one's true self.

In a sense it was easier in the post-totalitarian system of Eastern Europe up to 1989 to distinguish between living within the truth and living within the lie than it is for us in Western Europe. The lie was blatant in the Communist set-up at the time. The dissident was in no doubt as to the price he or she would have to pay. Since external conformity was all that was required, the slightest refusal to comply was taken, rightly, as rejection of the entire system and punished, accordingly, by total ostracism.

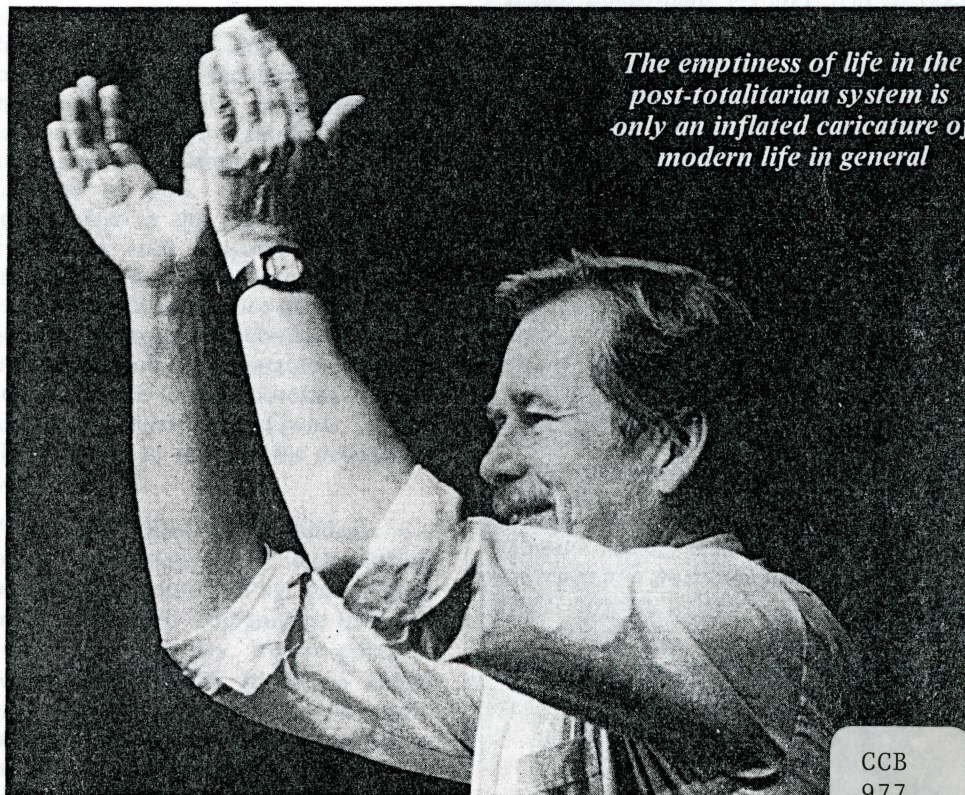
For us in Western Europe, and in particular in Ireland, the lie that is our consumer society is not so obvious, nor is its underlying crisis of human identity,

to use Vaclav Havel's phrase. For example we assume that we are living in a democracy, but in fact there is little or no participatory democracy in any community in Ireland. To make matters more complicated, the very real conformity demanded by modern, liberal or pluralistic societies is defended as though it were an expression of personal freedom. Those who defend moral standards are called reactionaries. It is worth remembering that Havel and his fellow dissidents - priests included - were described by the powers-that-be and the media as 'reactionaries' because they said 'no' to the system.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the general trend in moral philosophy and theology today is to deny in effect any moral absolutes, to reduce morality either to a refined form of utility or to personal preference and call it acting according to one's conscience. Here moral theology is reflecting and confirming the underlying trend in modern society, from which it derives its persuasive force. It is thus part of the modern establishment. One may ask, to what extent it is also contributing to the underlying crisis of demoralisation in society?

To live according to one's conscience is to do what one knows one ought to do, as distinct from what one would like to do, or indeed what one wants to do. It is to risk almost everything this world holds dear. To live according to the truth in business or politics is to risk one's profit or one's popularity. To live up to the demands of one's promises and remain faithful to the unfaithful partner is to risk loneliness and searing pain. To demand that the objective moral law is binding on everyone no matter what position he finds himself in life is to be ridiculed as being out of touch with 'the real world'.

'The real world' is the world of empirical sociology, statistics and opinion polls: in other words the *status quo* of the moment to which morality, and each one, must conform if he or she is to 'survive'. This is the world of ruthlessness in the market-place and permissiveness everywhere else. It is the world of the party whip and power politics. It is the world where virtue, integrity, principles, fidelity are no longer demanded but rather are ridiculed. It is the world where the teaching of the Church truly sounds unreal, an echo of a bygone era, 'out-of-touch'.



*The emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system is only an inflated caricature of modern life in general*



'The real world' thus understood is a world without any ultimate meaning, any sense of the transcendent, of the absolute. Conscience then becomes the best one can do in his own situation, provided his intention is good and the minimum of hurt is inflicted on others. It is no longer the voice of God, disturbing, challenging, summoning us to rise from our torpor and face up to the dignity of what we are and what we are to become. A moral philosophy or theology that refuses to recognise moral absolutes – few though they are and mostly of a negative kind – refuses to recognise either the real dignity of the human person or the capacity each one has to transcend himself and realise that dignity: to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

One version of moral theology describes itself as a theology of compromise or of the practical ideal. It holds that there are certain types of people in certain situations who cannot be expected to live up to the full demands of the moral law. It is very appealing and sounds compassionate. But is it not a form of condescension? Does it not create two types of human beings, the superior who can fulfil the moral law and the inferior who can't? Does it not blunt the challenge of the moral law and promote apathy, moral compromise? More seriously, does it not deny God's offer of grace to all? It seems to me that it fails to recognise the drama that is enacted in the heart of each individual and each society where nothing less than salvation or damnation is at stake.

Much contemporary moral theology must be seen as a reaction to a legalistic approach which characterised moral theology before the Second Vatican Council, with its excessive stress on the objective moral law. As such the general trend or reaction can only be seen as healthy. However we may well ask, have we gone too far?

Conscience, understood as one's subjective judgement as to the moral demands of a particular situation, now seems to be the only absolute and so effectively relativises all moral norms. Thus it undermines the courage to search for (objective) truth and the perseverance needed to live in truth, the truth that alone makes us free.

The truth that alone makes us free is God's truth revealed ultimately in Christ, the Word of God made flesh, whose voice extends throughout the world down through the ages. The authoritative teaching of the Church is the ultimate objective expression of that voice, just as conscience is the ultimate subjective expression. Since nothing less than salvation is at stake, the authoritative voice of the Church cannot lead us astray. Her

purpose is precisely this: to give us the appropriate degree of certainty, to strengthen the weak voice of conscience, weakened by personal and 'social' sin (the false values of society), by apathy and intimidation. The Church's teaching appeals to conscience, 'binds' conscience in various degrees, challenges each one to the utmost.

Today in Western society, hers is often the lone voice witnessing to the transcendence that alone gives ultimate meaning to life and so to the existence of objective moral standards.

However, at the foundation of much modern moral theology is the breaching of moral absolutes. Despite protests to the contrary, human actions thereby lose their intrinsic significance and ultimately their significance for our relationship with God, our final end. And it is the absence of this ultimate significance of human actions that promotes the loss of hope and the loss of belief that life has a meaning, which Vaclav Havel describes as being at the root of demoralisation in society. Suicide is but the most extreme manifestation of this demoralisation, whether it be personal or collective. Another is widespread contraception within marriage which expresses a lack of confidence in the future as well as denying the intrinsic sacral significance of each conjugal act and the possibility of life itself. It is simplistic to call it selfishness.

The Church's moral teaching is only comprehensible against the background of the staggering destiny to which each individual human being and humankind as a whole is called. What eye has not seen, nor ear heard nor the heart of man conceived, this God has prepared for those who love him. And to love him is to launch out into the deep, to walk on the rough waters of a tempestuous sea, not to count the cost or the consequences, to be sent out as lambs among wolves – but also to work wonders simply by holding fast to the truth by living the truth. One word of truth, be it spoken or lived in silent witness, can cause the whole intimidating edifice of the modern world to collapse, as Vaclav Havel and his fellow dissidents demonstrated in Central Europe. This is to live according to one's conscience. It is to love Christ. To love Christ is also to share in his destiny (cf Rom 8, 14-17).

We are now called to be dissidents in a society dominated by the technological mentality and motivated by consumerism that has banished God and the things of God to the periphery. We are called to live in the truth (cf. Jn 4), no matter what our position in life may be, and if necessary to pay the price demanded by the world for nonconformity to its system.

## SOUVENIRS OF NAGASAKI

Fr Pat Deighan, Co. Meath

August 1945

*Sun-fused, the Nagasaki Peace Garden shimmers in vibrant, sweeping grass-rolls woven by Pacific zephyrs into a quiet symphony of whispering greenness on the very bomb target-spot of yesterdayear. A recuperation haven for many, who trace unwitting footsteps on the ashes of interrupted lives. Yet, a prayerless rendezvous, conjuring up fearsome images of a past holocaust, stored long on the ledges of memory by grateful survivors. Or culled by many from casual perusal of narratives illustrated by photo-images of the mushroom shame-cloud, captured by safe sky-camera, that metamorphose into a deafening roar, petering out in dying echo, giving evil birth to a poison-silence that seems to kiss, in slow ascent, with symmetry spurious, the very ether that mocks the unwanted disturbance of universe order.*

*It seems as if the park's living laughter flourished on yesterday's dead, and the thousands, stripped of life in a worse-than-death fate of survival in sulphur-smell and ash-taste, preferred to be silent, lest some happy spell be broken! The bomb-museum, though, nearby, offers other imagery – almost too terrible to assimilate or live with. No art gallery or waxworks here! Rather, a grotesque reliquary of some unnatural world! Myriad timepieces hang in mute arrest in hideous mutilation their fingers frozen at suspended time – horror souvenir of the radiation-blast; captured on a wall, as on a giant screen diaphanous, tragic silhouettes of passers-by, in weird projection caught, give their silent cry. And in a glass case, a human hand, with bottle mangled in static fusion from simple dinner-table gestures, tells of the tears of things, and loses voice.*

*Freedom in the museum and park – yet in bond-places elsewhere, sinister fences enclose innocent grass-mounds concealing silos of lethal weaponry ready for unleashing! Do these whisper, in common protest with Nagasaki flowers and human voice: 'The evil is not in the missile, but in the simmering atoms in man's volcanic heart!?' Or is sanity swallowed up in a power-roar that echoes back from some future time, when other museums will rise as monuments to mad power-dreams come true? Nagasaki greenery, silo grass – your sap-thrust needs no museum to enhance your mystery-beauty – your energy was unlocked long before Time's computing by the atom's source! Happy therapy in the Dance at the heart of things! In the bomb-museum, only souvenirs of a great diminishment.*

PEACE  
BE TO YOU