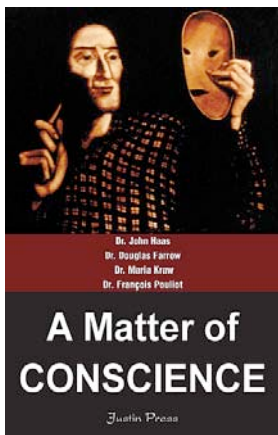


Symposium looks at conscience



A Matter of Conscience by John Haas, Douglas Farrow, Francois Pouliot, and Maria Kraw

(Justin Press, \$17.95, 117 pages)

Review

Leeda Crawford

The book *A Matter of Conscience* shows how dissent from God as the bearer of truth has led to the primacy of conscience being determined under the utilitarian principal of seeking happiness and avoiding pain – a “felicific calculus” in order to achieve “the greatest pleasure for the greatest number.” The book is comprised of four brilliantly written papers presented at the first annual meeting of the Canadian Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Societies held in Ottawa in May 2009 by physicians from across Canada under the “auspices of His Excellency Archbishop Terence Prendergast of Ottawa.”

When a faithful Catholic reads the three tenants of the Guild presented in the introduction by Dr. Timothy E. Lau, the president, they are immediately heartened by the spirit of hope in what this Physician’s Guild was formed to accomplish:

- To promote, through educational activities and other means, the teachings of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church as applied to the provision of health care;
- To contribute to the development of public policy in relation to medical ethics and health care;
- To support the growth and foster the creation of Catholic Physicians’ Associations, Guilds and Societies in Canada.

Dr. John M. Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, begins his paper “The Nature of Conscience,” by presenting a comprehensive depiction of a well-formed conscience. He includes an essential excerpt from *Gaudium et Spes*, 16: “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, and shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.” Haas explains how conscience constitutes a person’s very being, a guide which must be followed. For to “violate conscience means a willingness not to love, a willingness not to do what is good.”

In reflecting on how a physician’s conscience would respond to God’s call to seek the good -- *Primum non nocere*, “First, do no harm” -- Haas recalls when “good medicine was moral medicine and moral medicine was good medicine.” In fact, not so long ago abortion and contraception were both criminal acts and considered a “violation of the good that physicians were committed to fostering.”

Haas gives a formidable account of the demise of true conscience and how the faithful have been influenced by the personal concept of conscience between God and oneself. Finally, Haas explains how we must strive to bring the true nature of conscience back into being through a willingness to imitate Christ Crucified.

Douglas Farrow, professor of Christian Thought McGill University, gives an in depth depiction of how utilitarianism claims to be able to accurately calculate the consequences of acts (which is not possible) and how it lacks a real definition of happiness (which he describes as "the Achilles heel of utilitarianism") in a chapter entitled, "Doctors without borders: Excising the conscience, emasculating medicine." The Hippocratic Oath, which forbade abortion and euthanasia, is no longer taken. "It is the right of access to service (that is, to relief) that becomes paramount in medicine," says Farrow. "Physicians and druggists will not be allowed to let their own personal scruples, the pain they may feel at the thought of doing something they deem wrong to stand in the way of providing the desired service."

Farrow then relates how pressure to change conscientious objection is being applied through new regulations that give a "strictly instrumental view of medicine." The governing bodies established to protect the integrity of the medical profession in Canada, the United States, and Australia have imposed restrictions on conscientious objection. He notes how the "aggrandizement of politics and of secular authority," is "steadily encroaching on basic human liberties, including freedom of conscience and freedom of religion."

One is left saddened by the demise of right reason and God's great gift of conscience described Farrow's essay, but enlightened by his treatment of the subject. Fortunately, he finishes by recalling the "Great Physician" and a prescription for a course of treatment that entails five excellent points.

"Prudential Judgment and Cooperation with Evil in Medical Practice by Dr. François Pouliot, director of the Centre d'études Noël-Mailloux en éthique et en psychologie Québec, gives an insightful analysis on how the content and tone in the college of physicians and surgeons in both Ontario and Quebec fail to defend the interests of its members. Instead these governing bodies use intimidation tactics in an attempt to force physicians to comply with acts they consider evil. Pouliot reviews some of the consequences to physicians when considered mere agents who are expected to perform every kind of immoral service imaginable. He then discusses specific determinants of culpability when either formal or material cooperation is involved in immoral acts.

On "misdeed and erroneous conscience," Pouliot is very concise on culpability. He finishes with an outline of the role of the Canadian Federation of Catholic Physicians Guilds and four excellent points that have as their intention to bring medicine back to its founding ethos of do no harm.

'*Humanae Vitae* at Forty Plus' by Dr. Maria Kraw, an endocrinologist and assistant professor of medicine University of Toronto, demonstrates clearly how Pope Paul VI hoped medical practitioners would respond to his encyclical. Her review of the document recalls specifically that every "marriage act" must be between a married man and woman and open to the "transmission of life." Pope Paul VI stated any attempts to fracture this inseparable connection either permanently (sterilization) or temporary (artificial birth control) are condemned as incompatible with God's design for conjugal love and the transmission of life.

Kraw reviews the section on natural means of regulating births, especially the importance of seeking spiritual direction. The section on why the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* was rejected by many Catholics and some theologians will be extremely informative for those who are unaware of the vast use of contraception by Catholics at the time and the conflicting suggestion by the Papal Birth Control Commission which "suggested that married couples could use artificial contraception as long as the reasons for doing so were

good and as long as the marriage was generally open to conception.” In July 1968, two years after the commission’s report, Pope Paul VI confirmed the long held teachings of the church. Some Catholics rejected *Humanae Vitae* and encouraged dissent by suggesting the teaching was not infallible.

Kraw outlines the effects of the dissent. She reiterates how all of Pope Paul VI’s predictions of immorality and demise of the family have come true. In fact, there are countless additional consequences, some of which are explained with very disturbing statistics. The loss of reverence for the historical teachings of the church and a well-formed conscience must be added to the casualties of this immorality, as well.

Kraw, who specialty is hormonal-reproduction, offers profound insights in “What is the Solution.” This is evident in her ability to explain in great detail, the natural and artificial means of birth control. She refers to the Church’s response to ethical problems in *Donum Vitae* (1987) and *Dignitatis Personae* (2008) then directs us back to *Humanae Vitae*’s appeal to physicians.

A Matter of Conscience is a must read. It will inform, inspire and direct us to hope and become well versed in bringing society back to an understanding that for conscience to be well-formed it must be subject to the will of God.

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