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## Review of *Writing Conscience and the Nation in Revolutionary England* by Giuseppina Iacono Lobo

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Giuseppina Iacono Lobo. *Writing Conscience and the Nation in Revolutionary England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. x + 253 pp. \$75.00. Review by GEOFFREY VAUGHAN, ASSUMPTION COLLEGE.

Giuseppina Iacono Lobo has taken up the history of conscience in the political, ideological, and theological conflicts of seventeenth-century England. This period is one of the best examples of the problems that arise when people are motivated by their consciences. As she demonstrates through exhaustive archival and textual research, conflicts over the meaning of conscience and the attempts to achieve a “clear” conscience or preserve freedom of conscience weave themselves through all the most contentious theological and political moments of seventeenth-century England.

The Introduction to the book gives a short account of the history of conscience, mostly in the wake of Henry VIII’s break with Rome. This reader found it the weakest part of the book. It is at once too apologetic, trying to justify the point of her study, and too superficial. This would have been the place to address the deep theology underlying the idea of conscience. When the theology changed, conscience took on a different role. Had she done so, there would have been no need for justifying her argument. For instance, in her brief look at one of the most famous engagements of conscience since the early Christian martyrs, she writes, “When faced with the scruples or grudges of their consciences, both Henry and More grounded their interior surety upon the exterior consensus of what they perceived as Christendom” (12). Up to a point. Thomas More described himself as God’s servant first, not a servant to the consensus of Christendom. This is the problem with the idea of conscience, a problem Christianity has struggled with since the beginning. On the one hand, it is a religion of right belief, orthodoxy, unlike Judaism which is a religion of right practice, orthopraxy. As she explains, because Christians were released from the practices of Jewish law, Paul had to introduce the idea of conscience as a means of knowing when one was in the right or the wrong. In other words, where the priest is commanded in Leviticus 1:16 to throw the crop and feathers of a sacrificed bird to the east of the altar, throwing them to the west is clearly wrong. But what does the Christian do?

Even the passage she cites from Paul contains the seeds of the problem: “For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:13–14 KJV). Those “dead works” might be left behind, but service still requires action on the part of the Christian, that is, it requires practice in the world. Some practices will be sinful and others not, presumably, so the distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy is not so clear.

While many cultures, religions and philosophies have adopted the idea of the conscience, or something like the tribunal within the self that we take it to be, it is at root a Christian concept. Even Greek philosophy did not develop a fully formed idea of it as the Christian theologians would do, starting with St. Paul. It is for this reason there is no equivalent of Augustine’s *Confessions* earlier or elsewhere. Historians of ideas have studied the origins of the conscience and its spread. What they have paid less attention to is the question of why anyone would want to import a foreign idea that seems to bring with it nothing but trouble, both individually and politically. Lobo does not try to answer this question of why, but she does give a clear picture of the problems conscience can lead to.

Once one gets past the first chapter, the book and author come into their own. The close reading of the exchanges between Charles I and his advisors is exemplary. These men, and they were all men, truly struggled with their consciences. The fate of the kingdom and the king’s head, ultimately, rested on how they judged their actions or thought God would judge them. Where does responsibility lie? Is it the case, as one of the soldiers Henry V spoke with while disguised on the eve of battle, that if “his [the king’s] cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us” (Henry V 4.i 183–85)? But this puts all the blame on the king, meaning the king alone is responsible for the souls of his soldiers. Henry’s response, “Every subject’s duty is the king’s; but every subject’s soul is his own” (4.i 230–32), is as self-serving in this instance as it is well argued. It is also a literary miniature of what really went on between Charles I and his advisors John Ashburnham, John Culpepper, and Sir Henry Jermyn. As Lobo

shows, their arguments were not realpolitik dressed in theological language. Clearly their positions, lives, and monarchical government itself were at risk, but so was this precious thing called conscience. These men did not separate the two. The author quotes a letter from 1646 in which Charles I writes, "I stick not upon scruples, but undoubted realities, both in relation to conscience and policy" (31). Conscience was as real to him as were the armies massing in the field.

This correspondence would be remarkable enough, were it not that the *Eikon Basilike* was published immediately upon the king's execution. This book was presented as the private meditations of Charles I, a look inside the man and his relation to God. It was not a justification for his actions or retort to his detractors. One could imagine it having no political importance at all. But that was not the case. Quite the opposite. It became one of the most important tracts in the Civil War, going through many printings and distributed widely. As Lobo points out, many of the surviving copies are so worn by obvious signs of use as opposed to neglect, that it is clear the book was read and not simply purchased (37). "It was so popular precisely because it was not designed to look like propaganda; instead it was designed to look like and, as I argue, serve the function of a devotional book" (39–40). She certainly does not overlook the propagandistic elements and uses of the book: "Charles was a king in life, a king in his suffering, and he will be a king in death: his readers could hardly replicate this trajectory" (40). But such a book would have had no purchase with readers if they had not also the same concerns about their own consciences. They might not have the same royal trajectory as Charles I, but as Christians they did have a parallel trajectory. Again, it is this wariness about the theology that holds Lobo back from diving deeper into the subject.

She comes closest to a theological study in her chapter on the Quakers. According to Lobo, they had a peculiar understanding of conscience as an external entity in which we, as individuals, can share. Again, a more theological explanation would serve the reader and her argument. Is this Quaker idea a version of monopsychism, normally attributed to Averroes and roundly criticized by Aquinas in his *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*? It certainly seems similar. Or might it be connected to Justin Martyr's idea of the *logos sperma-*

*tikos?* More to the point, this kind of deep theological problem of conscience that long predates the seventeenth century underlies the arguments. Certainly, not all Quakers were reading Aquinas or Justin Martyr, but there were enough academics upon whom the king could call who were.

One of the more contentious arguments in the book is the author's claim that Thomas Hobbes was trying to use the idea of conscience as a means of bringing peace and obedience to the kingdom. According to Lobo, "Through his creation of the public conscience, then, Hobbes makes conscience itself the very cornerstone of the commonwealth" (117). Earlier she claims that "Conscience is thus a *civilizing force* in the condition of war, inclining the individual to give up his absolute liberty for the security and survival a commonwealth offers" (107). Her argument is that the public conscience developed by civil society replaces any private conscience an individual might have had in mere nature. This is how she explains Hobbes's insistence that it is seditious to claim that anything done against one's conscience is a sin (113). But it could be just as easily, and I think more convincingly, argued that what Hobbes was doing with the idea of conscience was redefining it into oblivion. If conscience were to become this "public" thing outside the individual and lodged in the institutions and laws of the commonwealth, the problem of individual conscience as a legitimate means of resistance to the state disappears. Indeed, conscience disappears into orthopraxy, just as Hobbes would have wanted.

The most interesting chapter of the book is that on Lucy Hutchinson. Where all other major figures Lobo addresses are men, here we have the case of a woman playing a central role in the debates and politics connected to conscience. The episode itself is rather complicated, as it involves Lucy Hutchinson trying to save her husband who had signed the death warrant of Charles I, by allegedly forging his recantation. All of it is ably handled by Lobo and the role of conscience, of both husband and wife, duly explored. As a poet in her own right and the translator of Lucretius, Lucy Hutchinson's thoughts on the matter and role in the politics of the time are a fascinating part of the book.

The final chapter is on Milton and is another strong piece. She reads his works closely and widely and records some impressive finds.

For instance, she tells us that a 1667 copy of *Paradise Lost* contains marginalia precisely on her theme. Someone wrote the words “Horrors of Conscience” beside Sin’s description of her children. It is probably here, in the chapter on Milton, that her thesis that conscience was central to the idea of the nation is at its strongest and may, in fact, be its origin. This reader finds it hard to accept the case for much of the rest of the book. Again, this is because of her allergy to theology. This tendency becomes all the more apparent in her *Afterward* in which she turns to Matthew Arnold. There she notes his distinction between the French Revolution, which pressed the case of rationality, and the English, which relied on conscience. But she seems insensitive to a problem of which Arnold was well aware and, in fact, for which he is famous. His “long, withdrawing roar” on *Dover Beach* was faith slipping away. The French Revolution was the most obvious and violent expression of this. The English Revolution was not that. It might be considered the last (violent) gasp of the wars of religion. Thereafter we had wars of ideology, where conscience spoke not at all.

This is a fine work of scholarship. The criticisms noted here cannot take away from the accomplishment that it is. Lobo has not taken the argument in all the ways this reviewer might have wished, but it makes no less of a contribution for that. Instead, the materials here assembled and the insights provided will be a source of many future debates and disagreements, all of them better because of this work.